

# WHY PLANT CHURCHES

Tim Keller  
Redeemer Presbyterian  
Church

Feb. 2002

## Introduction

The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for

1) the numerical growth of the Body of Christ in any city, and  
2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else--not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes--will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow raising statement. But to those who have done any study at all, it is not even controversial.

The normal response to discussions about church planting is something like this:

A. 'We already have plenty of churches that have lots and lots of room for all the new people who have come to the area. Let's get *them* filled before we go off building any new ones.'

B. 'Every church in this community used to be more full than it is now. The churchgoing public is a 'shrinking pie'. A new church here will just take people from churches already hurting and weaken everyone.'

C. 'Help the churches that are struggling first. A new church doesn't help the ones we have that are just keeping their nose above water. We need *better* churches, not more churches.'

These statements appear to be 'common sense' to many people, but they rest on several wrong assumptions. The error of this thinking will become clear if we ask '*Why is church planting so crucially important?*' Because--

## A. We want to be true to THE BIBLICAL MANDATE

**1. *Jesus' essential call was to plant churches.*** Virtually all the great evangelistic challenges of the New Testament are basically calls to plant churches, not simply to share the faith. The 'Great Commission' (Matt.28: 18-20) is not just a call to '*make disciples*' but to '*baptize*'. In Acts and elsewhere, it is clear that baptism means incorporation into a worshipping community with accountability and boundaries (cf. Acts 2:41-47). The only way to be truly sure you are increasing the number of Christians in a town is to increase the number of churches. Why? Much traditional evangelism aims to get a "decision" for Christ. Experience, however, shows us that many of these 'decisions' disappear and never result in changed lives. Why? Many, many decisions are not really conversions, but often only the beginning of a journey of seeking God. (Other decisions are very definitely the moment of a 'new birth', but this differs from person to person.) Only a person who is being 'evangelized' in the context of an on-going worshipping and shepherding community can be sure of finally coming home into vital, saving faith. This is why a leading missiologist like C.Peter Wagner can say, "*Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven.*"<sup>1</sup>

**2. *Paul's whole strategy was to plant urban churches.*** The greatest missionary in history, St.Paul, had a rather simple, two-fold strategy. First, he went into the largest

city of the region (cf. Acts 16:9,12), and second, he planted churches in each city (cf. Titus 1:5-

<sup>1</sup> C.Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Growth* (Glendale: Regal, 1987), p. 168.

"appoint elders in every town"). Once Paul had done that, he could say that he had 'fully preached' the gospel in a region and that he had 'no more work' to do there (cf. Romans

15:19,23). This means Paul had two controlling assumptions: a) that the way to most permanently influence a country was through its chief cities, and b) the way to most permanently influence a city was to plant churches in it. Once he had accomplished this in a city, he moved on. He knew that the rest that needed to happen would follow.

**Response:** 'But,' many people say, 'that was in the beginning. Now the country (at least our country) is filled with churches. Why is church planting important now?' We also plant churches because--

**B. We want to be true to THE GREAT COMMISSION.** Some facts--

**1. New churches best reach a) new generations, b) new residents, and c) new people groups.** First (a) younger adults have always been disproportionately found in newer congregations. Long-established congregations develop traditions (such as time of worship, length of service, emotional responsiveness, sermon topics, leadership-style, emotional atmosphere, and thousands of other tiny customs and mores), which reflect the sensibilities of long-time leaders from the older generations who have the influence and money to control the church life. This does not reach younger generations. Second, (b) new residents are almost always reached better by new congregations. In older congregations, it may require tenure of 10 years before you are allowed into places of leadership and influence, but in a new church, new residents tend to have equal power with long-time area residents.

Last, (c) new socio-cultural groups in a community are always reached better by new congregations. For example, if new white-collar commuters move into an area where the older residents were farmers, it is likely that a new church will be more receptive to the myriad of needs of the new residents, while the older churches will continue to be oriented to the original social group. And new racial groups in a community are best reached by a new church that is intentionally multi-ethnic from the start. For example: if an all-Anglo neighborhood becomes 33% Hispanic, a new, deliberately bi-racial church will be far more likely to create 'cultural space' for newcomers than will an older church in town. Finally, brand new immigrant groups nearly always can only be reached by churches ministering in their own language. If we wait until a new group is assimilated into American culture enough to come to our church, we will wait for years without reaching out to them.

[Note: Often, a new congregation for a new people-group can be planted *within* the overall structure of an existing church. It may be a new Sunday service at another time, or a new network of house churches that are connected to a larger, already existing congregation. Nevertheless, though it may technically not be a new independent congregation, it serves the same function.]

In summary, new congregations *empower* new people and new peoples much more quickly and readily than can older churches. Thus they always have and always will reach them with greater facility than long-established bodies. This means, of course, that church planting is not only for 'frontier regions' or 'pagan' countries that we are trying to see *become* Christian. Christian countries will have to maintain vigorous, extensive church planting simply to *stay* Christian!

**2. New churches best reach the unchurched--period.** 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.<sup>2</sup> This means that the average new congregation will bring 6-8 times more new people into the life of the Body of Christ than an older congregation of the same size.

So though established congregations provide many things that newer churches often cannot, older churches in general will never be able to match the effectiveness of new bodies in reaching people for the kingdom. Why would this be? As a congregation ages, powerful internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of its resources and energy toward the concerns of its members and constituents, rather than toward those outside its walls. This is natural and to a great degree desirable. Older congregations therefore have a stability and steadiness that many people thrive on and need. This does not mean that established churches cannot win new people. In fact, many non-Christians will only be reached by churches with long roots in the community and the trappings of stability and respectability.

However, new congregations, in general, are forced to focus on the needs of its *non*-members, simply in order to get off the ground. So many of its leaders have come very recently from the ranks of the un-churched, that the congregation is far more sensitive to the concerns of the non-believer. Also, in the first two years of our Christian walk, we have far more close, face-to-face relationships with non-Christians than we do later. Thus a congregation filled with people fresh from the ranks of the un-churched will have the power to invite and attract many more non-believers into the events and life of the church than will the members of the typical established body.

What does this mean practically? If we want to reach our city--should we try to renew older congregations to make them more evangelistic, or should we plant lots of new churches? But that question is surely a false either-or dichotomy. We should do both! Nevertheless, all we have been saying proves that, despite the occasional exceptions, the only widescale way to bring in lots of new Christians to the Body of Christ in a permanent way is to plant new churches.

To throw this into relief, imagine Town-A and Town-B and Town-C are the same size, and they each have 100 churches of 100 persons each. But in Town-A, all the churches are over 15 years old, and then the overall number of active Christian churchgoers in that town will be shrinking, even if four or five of the churches get very 'hot' and double in attendance. In Town-B, 5 of the churches are under 15 years old, and they along with several older congregations are winning new people to Christ, but this only offsets the normal declines of the older churches. Thus the overall number of active Christian churchgoers in that town will be staying the same. Finally, in Town-C, 30 of the churches are under 15 years old. In this town, the overall number of active Christian churchgoers will be on a path to grow 50% in a generation.<sup>3</sup>

**Response:** *'But,'* many people say, *'what about all the existing churches that need help? You seem to be ignoring them.'* Not at all. We also plant churches because--

### **C. We want to continually RENEW THE WHOLE BODY OF CHRIST.**

It is a great mistake to think that we have to choose *between* church planting and church renewal. Strange as it may seem, the planting of new churches in a city is one of the very best

<sup>2</sup> Lyle Schaller, quoted in D.McGavran and G.Hunter, *Church Growth: Strategies that Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 100. See C.Kirk Hadaway, *New Churches and Church Growth in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> See Lyle Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), p.12. Schaller talks about 'The 1% Rule'. Each year any association of churches should plant new congregations at the rate of 1% of their existing total--otherwise, that association will be in decline. That is just 'maintenance'. If an association wants to grow 50%+, it must plant 2-3% per year.

ways to revitalize many older churches in the vicinity and renew the whole Body of Christ. Why?

**1. First, the new churches bring new ideas to the whole Body.** There is plenty of resistance to the idea that we need to plant new churches to reach the constant stream of 'new' groups and generations and residents. Many congregations insist that all available resources should be used to find ways of helping existing churches reach them. However, there is no better way to teach older congregations about new skills and methods for reaching new people groups than by planting new churches. It is the new churches that will have freedom to be innovative and they become the 'Research and Development' department for the whole Body in the city. Often the older congregations were too timid to try a particular approach or were absolutely sure it would 'not work here'. But when the new church in town succeeds wildly with some new method, the other churches eventually take notice and get the courage to try it themselves.

**2. Second, new churches are one of the best ways to surface creative, strong leaders for the whole Body.** In older congregations, leaders emphasize tradition, tenure, routine, and kinship ties. New congregations, on the other hand, attract a higher percentage of venturesome people who value creativity, risk, innovation and future orientation. Many of these men and women would never be attracted or compelled into significant ministry apart from the appearance of these new bodies. Often older churches 'box out' many people with strong leadership skills who cannot work in more traditional settings. New churches thus attract and harness many people in the city whose gifts would otherwise not be utilized in the work of the Body. These new leaders benefit the whole city-Body eventually.

**3. Third, the new churches challenge other churches to self-examination.** The "success" of new churches often challenges older congregations in general to evaluate themselves in substantial ways. Sometimes it is only in contrast with a new church that older churches can finally define their *own* vision, specialties, and identity. Often the growth of the new congregation gives the older churches hope that 'it can be done', and may even bring about humility and repentance for defeatist and pessimistic attitudes. Sometimes, new congregations can partner with older churches to mount ministries that neither could do by themselves.

**4. Fourth, the new church may be an 'evangelistic feeder' for a whole community.** The new church often produces many converts who end up in older churches for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the new church is very exciting and outward facing but is also very unstable or immature in its leadership. Thus some converts cannot stand the tumultuous changes that regularly come through the new church and they move to an existing church. Sometimes the new church reaches a person for Christ, but the new convert quickly discovers that he or she does not 'fit' the socio-economic make up of the new congregation, and gravitates to an established congregation where the customs and culture feels more familiar. Ordinarily, the new churches of a city produce new people not only for themselves, but for the older bodies as well.

Sum: Vigorous church planting is one of the best ways to *renew* the existing churches of a city, as well as the best single way to *grow* the whole Body of Christ in a city.

There is one more reason why it is good for the existing churches of the region to initiate or at least support the planting of churches in a given area. We plant churches—

#### **D. As an exercise in KINGDOM-MINDEDNESS**

All in all, church planting helps an existing church the best when the new congregation is voluntarily 'birthed' by an older 'mother' congregation. Often the excitement and new leaders and new ministries and additional members and income 'washes back' into the mother church in various ways and strengthens and renews it. Though there is some pain in seeing good friends and some leaders go away to form a new church, the mother church usually experiences a surge of high self-esteem and an influx of new enthusiastic leaders and members.

However, a new church in the community usually confronts churches with a major issue--the issue of 'kingdom-mindedness'. New churches, as we have seen, draw most of their new members (up to 80%) from the ranks of the unchurched, but they *will* always attract some people out of existing churches. That is inevitable. At this point, the existing churches, in a sense, have a question posed to them: "Are we going to rejoice in the 80%--the new people that the kingdom has gained through this new church, or are we going to bemoan and resent the three families we lost to it?" In other words, our attitude to new church development is a test of whether our mindset is geared to our own institutional turf, or to the overall health and prosperity of the kingdom of God in the city.

Any church that is more upset by their own small losses rather than the kingdom's large gains is betraying its narrow interests. Yet, as we have seen, the benefits of new church planting to older congregations is very great, even if that may not be obvious initially.

#### **SUMMARY**

If we briefly glance at the objections to church planting in the introduction, we can now see the false premises beneath the statements. **A.** Assumes that older congregations can reach newcomers as well as new congregations. But to reach new generations and people groups will require *both* renewed older churches and lots of new churches. **B.** Assumes that new congregations will only reach current active churchgoers. But new churches do far better at reaching the unchurched, and thus they are the only way to *increase* the 'churchgoing pie'. **C.** Assumes that new church planting will only discourage older churches. There is a prospect of this, but new churches for a variety of ways, are one of the best ways to renew and revitalize older churches. **D.** Assumes that new churches only work where the population is growing. Actually, they reach people wherever the population is *changing*. If new people are coming in to replace former residents, or new groups of people are coming in--even though the net pop figure is stagnant--new churches are needed.

New church planting is the only way that we can be sure we are going to increase the number of believers in a city and one of the best ways to renew the whole Body of Christ. The evidence for this statement is strong--Biblically, sociologically, and historically. In the end, a lack of kingdom-mindedness may simply blind us to all this evidence. We must beware of that.

## APPENDIX A- HISTORICAL LESSONS

If all this is true, there should be lots of evidence for these principles in church history--and there is.

In 1820, there was one Christian church for every 875 U.S. residents. But from 1860-1906, U.S. Protestant churches planted one new church for increase of 350 in the population, bringing the ratio by the start of WWI to just 1 church for every 430 persons. In 1906 over a third of all the congregations in the country were less than 25 years old.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the percentage of the U.S. population involved in the life of the church rose steadily. For example, in 1776, 17% of the U.S. population was 'religious adherents', but that rose to 53% by 1916.<sup>5</sup>

However, after WWI, especially among mainline Protestants, church planting plummeted, for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons was the issue of 'turf'. Once the continental U.S. was covered by towns and settlements and churches and church buildings in each one, there was strong resistance from older churches to any new churches being planted in 'our neighborhood'. As we have seen above, new churches are commonly very effective at reaching new people and growing for its first couple of decades. But the vast majority of U.S. congregations reaches their peak in size during the first two or three decades of their existence and then remain on a plateau or slowly shrink.<sup>6</sup> This is due to the factors mentioned above. They cannot assimilate well new people or groups of people as well as new churches. However, older churches have feared the competition from new churches. Mainline church congregations, with their centralized government, were the most effective in blocking new church development in their towns. As a result, however, the mainline churches have shrunk remarkably in the last 20-30 years.<sup>7</sup>

What are the historical lessons? Church attendance and adherence overall in the United States is in decline and decreasing. This cannot be reversed in any other way than in the way it originally had been so remarkably *increasing*. We must plant churches at such a rate that the number of churches per 1,000 population begins to grow again, rather than decline, as it has since WWI.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp.14-26.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992) p.16.

<sup>6</sup> Schaller, *44 Questions*, p.23.

<sup>7</sup> See Schaller's case that it is a lack of church planting that is one major cause of the decline of mainline Protestantism. *Ibid*, p.24-26. Finke and Stark show how independent churches, such as the Baptists, who have had freedom to plant churches without interference, have proliferated their numbers.

*Churching*, p.248.