Initial Steps in Becoming a Church Planting Congregation

I’m sometimes asked by pastors and leaders of congregations, “How do we become a church planting congregation?” On the surface, the answer seems obvious, “Plant a church!” However, experience tells me the answer is much more nuanced. Here are a few considerations to help you get started:

1. Discern your congregation.

Some congregations have church planting built into their vision, values, and structure. Others have church planting on a short wish-list and still others don’t even have it on a long list. Obviously, depending upon which scenario describes your congregation, will dictate where you need to begin. For our purposes, let’s assume that at this point, church planting hasn’t been a topic of consideration in your congregation.

2. Plan exposure.

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a. Begin conversations about evangelism and church planting with your leaders and parishioners.

b. Consider prayer walks in the neighborhood surrounding your place of worship and and/or in the neighborhoods of your parishioners.

c. Make the same part of your prayer during weekly worship.

d. Utilize statistics to educate your congregation on the alarming rate of church closures in the US and therefore, the strategic priority of church planting. Believe it or not, we are living in the most unreached culture in the world. If something is not done in the arena of domestic missions, funds for international missions will eventually dry up. For many congregations, this reality will require a paradigm shift and reallocation of funds.

e. Consider reading a book with your leaders that highlights the urgent need in the US to plant churches.

f. Invite a church planter or regional leader in church planting to speak with your session, and if you have one, your mission’s conference.

g. Pray.

3. Do the necessary and hard work to create “buy-in”.

Don’t be surprised when you discover this is more difficult than you might have imagined! The natural tendency of the local church is centripetal---meaning to spin inward on itself. Usually, there is more congregational zeal and support for plans and programs that feather the nests of the gathered sheep rather than seeking lost sheep. The Gospel is by nature, centrifugal, it spins outward claiming new territory in our own hearts, our congregations, and in the world. Like DNA, the Gospel replicates and grows. So, pay attention to, implement, and seek to grow “gospel renewal dynamics” within your congregation. This will by nature, create buy-in. Consider small group studies like “The Gospel Centered Life” or doing “Sonship” with your leaders. Gospel live begets gospel life!

4. Realign your vision, values, and plans to include local and regional church planting.

Again, this must be a deliberate process that doesn’t fudge on the steps above. Once you have the necessary “buy-in” incorporate church planting into your vision statement and core values and begin to budget accordingly. Don’t be discouraged by small steps in the right direction. Church budgets are persnickety beasts, but you must begin somewhere. Once church planting is included in your budget, consider deliberate yearly incremental increases. Note: If your congregation is smaller, don’t be derailed by the price tag. Consider partnering with other churches in your region or a church planting network in order realize your vision of seeing new churches planted.

5. Take advantage of local, regional, and national expertise. Church-planting in the current cultural climate is difficult and can be volatile. So be cautious, informed, and discerning before you allocate resources. Get help vetting potential church planting candidates. After all the hard work above, you need an initial win.

Shane Sunn

Aspen Grove Church Planting Network

[shane@agcpn.com](http://shane@agcpn.com)

Suggested Reading:

Barna: State of the Church, www.barna.com

Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal, Richard F. Lovelace, Intervarsity Press Outgrowing the Ingrown Church, C. John Miller, Zondervan Publishing

Reappearing Church, Mark Sayers

Sonship Manual, Serge 3rd Edition, Jack Miller, New Growth Press

The Gospel Centered Life: Study Guide with Leader’s Notes, Robert Thune, Will Walker, New Growth Press

Winning on Purpose: How to Organize Congregations to Succeed in Their Mission, John Edmund Kaiser, Abingdon Press