
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHURCH-PLANTING CHURCH?

As a “diverse, global family” Acts 29 is all about church planting. We believe that the biblical case for church planting is robust, if not actually incontrovertible. But there is always the danger of rhetoric outstripping reality, and to such a degree that it becomes not only unhelpful, but also dishonest. The primary growth of Acts 29 should not be from churches joining the network, but churches being planted by existing Acts 29 churches. If that is the case, new churches will join Acts 29 because it will be clear how we bring substantial added value in terms of helping them become churches that plant church-planting churches.

The aim of this short paper is to identify some of the primary features of a church-planting church. The emphasis is going to be on practicalities rather than theory. The case for church planting is assumed; how we become churches that plant churches is what is analysed. To that end, both key markers and critical steps towards becoming a fully-fledged, highly-fruitful church-planting church have been identified.

AVOIDING THE DAUNT!

To go from being a church plant to a church-planting church can seem daunting, if not overwhelming. It is a tired cliché for sure, but nonetheless true for that: a journey of a thousand miles does begin with one step. Every cathedral began by someone digging a hole!

So it is with church planting. Don't look toward the moment when you send out a planter with a group of members as his core team. That will seem too remote and unattainable. There will be too many obstacles in the way, too much uncertainty. Even the idea that you might, one day, have a church planter to send out seems totally absurd.

Keep the dream of course, but walk back from that gospel-fuelled ambition and identify what it is you need to do to realise it.

The most critical aspect of becoming a church-planting church is to create a culture of planting. Yet the most important thing to appreciate about planting is that it does not require a specific culture. It is not something peculiar or extraordinary. Rather it is an indispensable and inevitable aspect of a well-rounded and richly-textured gospel culture.

Leaders are culture creators, and here are five means to that end. These not only help the creation of a gospel-centred culture, but are on-going features of one.

1. *Preach & Teach*

The melodic line of the gospel should run throughout all the preaching and teaching of the church, from the very beginning. Not only in the sense of all that God has done for us in Christ, but also in the over-arching Bible story in which we see the plan of God to bless all the nations of the earth. Such a narrative compels you to build church planting into your DNA.

2. *Pray & Sing*

Both of these aspects of the corporate life of the church are not only means by which we engage with God, but by which we stir our affections and address one another. So build your prayer meetings around the glory of Christ through the spread of the gospel in the planting of churches. Choose the songs you sing well so that the Saviour is cherished, the gospel celebrated and its advance declared.

3. *Model & Mentor*

As a church planter, model what it means to be a church planter. Let people into your life, so that they see your labours, your passions, your struggles. Show them how church planting is not merely a strategy for church growth, but a core ambition you invest in for the glory of God. Right from the beginning of your plant, invite someone onto the core team who could very well be a lead planter in the future. Invest in them to that end. As the work grows, find other younger men, married or single, you can mentor and disciple so they grow as both men and leaders. It is from this number that future church planters will be nurtured. Identify younger men and women, married or single, who you can mentor and disciple as a married couple or staff team. It is from this number that your future church planting team will be grown.

4. Structure & Resource

Healthy church planting is not something that will happen accidentally. Ordinarily, it is not something you will stumble into. From Day 1, structure the young church plant around it. Start putting money aside in the budget for it, even if it's only a tithe of your personal tithe! Build out a residency programme a long time ahead of being in a position to run one. Invest in training your team. Run them through Porterbrook Learning, which is an Acts 29 resource or some similar tried and tested training programme. Develop them so they share your convictions about church planting. Look for other churches to collaborate with, and invest in their plant. Not for ownership, but to demonstrate tangibly your commitment to planting. Ensure that your missions budget is primarily geared to church planting, to reflect the conviction that *"the best way to sink a well is to plant a church"*.

5. Repeat

This is the critical piece of the process. Whatever stage or life-phase your church is at, keep running these culture-shapers. But they are much more than that. They will not only help you become a church-planting church, they are critical indicators that you are already a church-planting church.

Intentionally creating culture like this helps avoid a recurring danger. There can be unhelpful pressure on immature churches to plant before they have sustainable infrastructure to do so. The best thing a new church plant can do to plant lots of churches in the future is to get off the ground and to be healthy and self-sustaining.

Which involves investing money and developing a "sending DNA" from the very beginning.

SIMPLE STEPS

Here are a number of simple steps your church can take to commit resources and attention to church planting based on the life stage of your congregation. Life stage is a better barometer than attendance because numbers of people can vary radically from church to church, city to city, and context to context. For instance, a suburban church plant of a large metropolitan area is going to have more numbers at each life stage than a rural church plant in a small town.

1. Infancy

As a new plant, it is important to have an ambition to be a “church-planting church.” For this to happen, you will need to develop habits right from the start to make sure you realise that. Each of these will take time and intentionality, but will keep your church focused on multiplication.

- Get involved with local / regional church planting efforts. This can be as simple as meeting quarterly with other church planters for encouragement and prayer
- Pray during your team meetings and gatherings for other church plants in your area and region
- Be aware of what God is doing outside of your church, your tribe, and your denomination. Make it your mission to be the first to know when a new church is getting started in your community
- Give a portion (working towards 10% is a good guideline) of your internal finances to church planting from the start

2. Adolescence

At this stage, things are really exciting. You may have experienced significant growth, which has outpaced your expectations and even your capacity. It is easy to be derailed by a couple of significant obstacles on the line:

(1) The Myopia Derailer

You can get so excited about what God is doing in your church that you forget about planting other churches or you begin to believe you have church planting covered for your city. It can easily become all about you, what God is doing among you, and how your project is God’s next big thing!

(2) The Delusion Derailer

Because of the connectedness of our world, news travels fast, and it is easy to get a reputation as a dynamic leader without having to go to the trouble of actually earning that reputation. Invitations to speak at other churches or conferences, offers of articles and even books, requests for consultations. You soon find yourself spending so much time outside your church because of your newfound success and influence.

To navigate these deadly derailers, remember the simple gospel truth that it is the Lord who gives the increase. It might also be worth working out how many of your growing numbers are actual, honest-to-goodness new converts. Many, many church plants are grown through transfer rather than new life. Whilst that is not altogether invalid, it should temper our tendency towards self-congratulation.

Don't forget at this stage that you must plant your own church first, with an eye to the future. Ensure you don't lose ground. The keyword is "*begin*": begin the doing of a range of initiatives or activities.

- Begin seriously talking about the next plant with your team
- Begin devoting a percentage of key leaders' time to church planting. This may look like 10% of the Lead Pastor's time, 5% of other leaders' time or whatever works in your context
- Begin writing down ideas you are experimenting with that may be working, along with ideas that crashed and burned
- Begin giving away a little of who you are to others to help them win. Be the most enthusiastic advocate of the new church plant down the road, even though it's not your church plant
- Begin coaching or mentoring those who are just getting started. This can be accomplished simply by buying a church planter lunch once a month
- Begin thinking of who from your church you could encourage to join another church plant because it is closer to where they live, or because they could make a significant contribution, e.g. music, tech etc.

3. Adulthood

Saying "things are solid" is a moving target, but here's a simple test: *if you are still creating systems rather than tweaking the ones you have, you aren't yet there!* At this stage there should be enough traction, staff and finances that your church can move into actively planting a church.

- Devote key leaders' time to church planting. This will mean saying "no" to a lot of other great ministry opportunities, but that is a necessary restriction. You have to

say 'no' to the good in order to invest in the better. This is a piece of wisdom far too often ignored. Church planting all too easily gets buried under many good projects. The vision and resolve to plant often dies by a thousand well intentioned, but ultimately fatal cuts. But staying the course will often prove to be a great use of the gifts God has given us because it will produce broader gospel impact in the long-term

- Implement a thought-through church planting strategy. It can't be haphazard. If you aren't intentional, clear and organised, it almost certainly won't happen
- Enthusiastically support church plants - those inside Acts 29 for sure, but also those outside of it. You could host a monthly lunch for every church planter in your area, regardless of denomination or tribe
- Profile Acts 29 as the church-planting family of which you are part, and wax eloquent about how it is helping you be a better church-planting church

Having identified the features necessary to create the appropriate culture, and then outlined specific steps which can be taken at different life-stages of a church, what follows is a more detailed plan for becoming a church-planting church in which we further unpack points already made.

YEAR 1

1. Assess and Re-Define Your Church Missions Strategy/Philosophy

Many churches do overseas missions well. Other churches do local outreach well. But few churches model their missions strategy after the expansive pattern of Acts 1:8: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

Here we see three contexts where we are called to be perpetual witnesses of Christ:

- Local: Ministry to your city, mercy ministries, local outreach, etc.
- Domestic: Church planting within your context or country
- Global: Beyond your borders to the far corners of the world

Many churches participate in various parts of these three aspects, but few churches have combined them under one holistic strategy and are committed to prioritising each. Analyse what your church prioritises. All three should involve church planting in some shape or form, because as a church-planting church you are convinced that church planting is God's primary mission strategy. In order to become a church-planting church, you must believe that church planting is an essential part of the call to missions. As we have already seen, if you are committed to becoming a church like this, you must emphasise church planting as an integral part of your overall strategy.

If this is not currently the case, take time with your team, co-workers and wider membership if you have one, to re-align your church strategy to include all three geographical foci of Acts 1:8.

But there is another dimension worth noting. Missiologist Tim Tennent argues that there is an important ethnic dimension to the Jerusalem - Judea/Samaria - ends of the earth progression. This is partly because of who lived there, but also because Luke's version of the Great Commission in Luke 24:47 uses a phrase which reiterates the people group emphasis of Matthew 28:19. So there is both a geographic and an *ethnic progression*: "Jerusalem" = ethnic Jews; "Samaria" = an ethnically mixed bag, half Jewish and half Gentile; "Ends of the earth" = Gentile ethnic groups to the furthest corners of the earth.

If this is accurate, it means we should be looking to plant churches which cross cultural boundaries, even though they are in the same geographic location.

2. Allocate a certain percentage of your annual budget for church planting

Once the decision has been made to emphasise an investment in all three contexts, the next step is to allocate resources for each. Answering the following questions will help move you toward becoming a church-planting church:

- What percentage of your annual budget will you allocate to missions?
- How will you divide your missions budget among local, domestic and international mission?

One example could be to allocate 15% of your overall budgets to missions - 5% to each of these three areas. But whatever you decide, keep in mind that there is no such thing

as a church-planting church that does not allocate a significant amount of financial resources for church planting.

If you accomplish these first two goals in **Year 1**, you have made major progress, and should intentionally gear-up for Years 2-5.

YEARS 2-5

3. Collaborate with other churches in supporting church planters

What should you do with your newly freed up church planting resources? Because of the developmental nature of becoming a church-planting church, the most effective way is to collaborate with others in supporting a church planter or planters. This could include:

- A few churches collaborating to fund a church planter fully
- Actively investing in your Acts 29 Network where you can work together to support a specific church planter or planters

Think of this as a church planting mutual fund. Rather than trying to fund a church planter by yourself, look to partner with others in doing so. This is where your Acts 29 family comes into its own. You can go into a partnership with one or more churches confident of theological alignment, clear focus and even shared values. All of this means you can invest into a church plant even if there is not total cultural alignment. This is a huge win.

4. Adopt and support an existing church planter

Alongside Step 3 above, your church could adopt and build a relationship with an existing church planter. Here are some tangible suggestions:

- Choose a church planter to get behind
- Offer financial support to that planter
- Build a relationship with him
- Look for ways to bless him and his family
- Invite him to preach at your church a couple of times per year

- Keep the church plant in front of your church as a part of your missions commitment

5. Allow five years to build a church-planting ethos in your church

If your church has not had involvement in church planting in the past, it is difficult to become a church-planting church in a year. Many church members have had no previous exposure to church planting. It takes time to build or change the culture. The features of culture creation outlined at the beginning of this document are very helpful in identifying what is necessary to do this. Give your church and people time to make this transition.

During this first 5 years, the key word is consistency:

- Consistency in your financial commitment
- Consistency in your communications
- Consistency in your resolve

If you follow these first few steps over a five-year period, your church will have included church planting in your overall missions strategy, supported church planters, learned about church planting and helped launch one or more new churches. The congregation has seen your commitment to church planting for several years. Now you are ready to move into Year 6 and beyond.

YEAR 6 AND BEYOND

6. Do a church-planting residency with a future church planter

- 12-24 month period where a planter is prepared and sent out
- This may be a person from inside your congregation or someone who you bring in from outside.

7. Hire staff with the aim of sending them out to plant after 3-5 years

- Build a culture as a sending church
- Recruit staff with this incentive

8. Work with the support of Acts 29 for assessment, training and coaching.

CONCLUSION

What does it mean to be a church-planting church? In the simplest of terms, it means your church plants churches! But there is no “one size fits all”, no “perfect picture”:

- It may mean you send out the planter, or the planter and the core team
- It may mean you relocate, maybe 30% of your congregation
- It may mean you work with other churches in your vicinity to plant a church
- It may mean you allocate a portion of your budget to fund one or more planters in different parts of the world.

In other words, how we are involved in church planting is multi-dimensional and circumstantial. In the life cycle of any church, there will be different expressions of that commitment to, and passion for, church planting.

The critical issue is that church planting is visibly on your corporate agenda, an accepted part of your shared language, and a specific vision with a measurable and sacrificial investment.

Which leads to the final point. Church planting involves sacrifice. Put in its simplest terms, church planting costs. It costs money, for sure. It also costs friendships. Saying goodbye to good friends never gets easy, and in some ways actually gets harder. But be willing to sacrifice for the glory of God and the reputation of the Saviour. Knowing that whatever the nature of our suffering here, it is not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us (Rom 8:18).

Is our church a church-planting church? Is our church expressing global and local diversity in church-planting?

10 VISION QUESTIONS:

Avoiding The Daunt!

1. Has our church defined its next step to becoming a church-planting church?
2. Has our church created a joyfully optimistic and ambitious culture of church-planting?

Preach & Teach

3. Are evangelistic/ missional/ church-planting applications regularly present in our teaching, both at an individual and corporate level?

Pray & Sing

4. Do our songs & prayer times reflect the glory of Christ and our desire to see his glory fill the earth as the waters cover the sea?

Model & Mentor

5. As a planter, am I mentoring someone into the vision I have for church-planting?
Who?

Structure & Resource

6. Does our budget reflect our commitment to church-planting? How?
7. Do we have a training pipeline for church-planters and church-plant team-members?

Repeat

8. If I were to leave tomorrow, would this vision stick?
9. Who would carry it on?
10. Are rhythms in place that allow us to maintain the vision?

12 LIFE-STAGE QUESTIONS:

Infancy

1. Are we expressing our commitment to local church-planting efforts through meeting with like-minded planters?
2. Are we praying for church-planting in our region and country in our prayer-meetings and services?
3. Do we know what is going on outside our tribe in church-planting?
4. Are we giving a portion of our internal budget to church-planting?

Adolescence

5. Have I become myopic and too focussed on my local success?
6. Have I become delusional and entrapped by the big stage so as to forget local faithfulness and effectiveness?
7. If I asked my team where and when the next plant was being planned would they know?
8. If I looked at my diary would I see evidence of a church-planting vision and priority (4 ½-days per month)?
9. Do I have a file on my computer with ideas that work and don't work for church-planting?
10. Do the other church-planters around know I am rooting for them? How?
11. Am I encouraging the members of my church to join the nearest like-minded church-plant to where they live?

Adulthood

12. Do we have a clearly defined, costed vision and strategy for church-planting?

10 questions for established churches moving towards a church-planting vision:

Year 1

1. Have I assessed and re-defined our church missions strategy/philosophy to include local, domestic and global church-planting? If not, why not?
2. Have I assessed and re-defined our church missions strategy/philosophy to include different ethnicities present in our locality? If not, why not?
3. Have I allocated a certain percentage of your annual budget for church planting? If not, why not?

Years 2-5

4. Am I collaborating with other churches in supporting church planters? If not, why not?
5. Have we adopted and supported an existing church planter? If not, why not?
6. Are we being consistent in building a church-planting ethos in your church through financial commitment, communications and resolve ? If not, why not?

Year 6 and Beyond

7. Do we have a church-planting residency with a future church planter? If not, why not?
8. Does our hiring of staff reflect the aim of sending them out to plant after 3-5 years? If not, why not?
9. Are we making use of the support of Acts 29 for assessment, training and coaching? If not, why not?
10. Have we planted a new church (by sending a planter, a planter & team, by sending out a multisite congregation or by sending a substantial number of people)? If not, why not?