

SECOND LOOK: Church Planting 101

by Gary Corwin

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There are few phrases more frequently spoken in church and mission circles than 'church planting.' It's what an overwhelming number of ministries want to be known for (as a secondary outcome at least), even when their primary passion and burden may be for something else – like leadership training, media, or mercy ministry. Considering the Christian public's relative attraction to the subject, the reasons are not hard to imagine.

In similar fashion, there are few subjects around which ministry experts work harder to be distinctive. New 'keys' are being presented with great regularity. Some tout methods of value but contextually limited scope, while some, like David Garrison's *Church Planting Movements* (2004), seem to capture broad-based and essential elements.

One of the really interesting things about the new methods, and even about very helpful research-based analyses like Garrison's, is how 'back to the future' so much of it is. Roughly a century ago people like Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, and John Nevius became the modern apostles of 'indigenous principles' of church planting, perhaps better known today as the 'three-self principles'. In spite of many significant twentieth century successes for these principles (places like Korea and Ethiopia come quickly to mind), this idea that new churches ought to be established that are self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating has not received good press in recent years. There are at least several reasons why this is so.

The principles have suffered in the minds of at least some because of their negative association with the Communist Chinese adaptation of the term for their government-approved brand of Christianity – the 'Three-Self Patriotic Movement'. They have also commonly been accused of promoting a self-focus at the expense of a Christ-focus. (This is unfair, I think, because the real converse to self-initiative was foreign-initiative.)

On the other hand, the principles have been criticized for not going far enough, most notably for neglecting self-theologizing. While there are clearly grounds for this concern, it is also fair to say that many proponents envisioned at least some of this in what it means to be self-governing and self-propagating.

Perhaps more telling than any of these criticisms, though, has been that received as a result of widespread misapplication of the principles themselves. This occurred because the principles were applied too tightly, particularly in the area of finance. Not only were local churches expected to be 'self-supporting' (a time-tested assumption proven applicable even among the poorest peoples of the world), but too often, even broad-based and strategic ministry, mercy and training opportunities were left to fend for

themselves. The principles were thus made to appear contrary to biblical teaching on the interdependence of the various parts of the Body, and simply an excuse for rich Christians internationally to withhold essential and appropriate assistance to their less fortunate brothers and sisters. This was indeed a misapplication, and while the best church-planting endeavours managed to avoid it, too many others did not. In any case, the 'indigenous principles' are largely out of favour today as a result.

One of the things I most like about Garrison's work is that it uses well-documented research to point us back to what God has used to accomplish his purposes in earlier days and in a wide variety of contexts. These proven methods were true in the first century, true during the heyday of the 'indigenous principles' and are still true today.

While the following list is by no means exhaustive, key principles like the following are ones that no church planter should miss:

1. All ethno-linguistic peoples need churches that feel like home to them.
2. The same is true for people divided by all kinds of barriers, at least to the extent that a missiological breakthrough among them requires it.
3. There should be a linkage as much as possible of all local congregations in a national fellowship. People need connectedness to God's people beyond their local context.
4. There should be an inculcation of an outreach mentality from the very beginning. 'As the Father has sent me ... I send you' (John 20:21).
5. There should be indigenous leadership of each local church from the beginning. It is, after all, Jesus' church first and the local people's church second. In most local congregations, that should consist of a plurality of leaders.
6. House churches or other easily reproducible meeting places should be the rule rather than the exception.
7. There should be a high commitment to financial self-sustainability and to the reproducibility of congregations. Foreign funds should not be used in dependency creating ways, but should be used creatively for Kingdom extension, mercy and to strengthen the churches.
8. There should be cooperation with other missions and churches to the extent that the above principles are not compromised. That which can be done better together should not be done alone.

As intimated above, these principles are neither new nor radical, though they were largely both when introduced into the Roman Empire of the first century. Given the perspective of two millennia of practice, however, it can be said that they are time tested. The question that remains then is whether Great Commission Christians

(particularly those of the West) will more consistently and vigorously pursue these time-tested methods or continue to scurry along down familiar rabbit trails.

Whether it is the high hurdle of formally-trained paid clergy as an essential prerequisite for 'real' church on the one hand, or the seemingly endless search for newer and better models to create and paradigms to shift on the other hand, the opportunities to get sidetracked are legion. The better option is to recognize essential biblical patterns that God has blessed through the centuries and to redouble our efforts to see them universally applied among all the unreached peoples of the earth.

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