

Ten Reasons to Plant Churches Now

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Church planting is a means of spreading the gospel as old as spreading the gospel. There is a church in Albuquerque, NM because believers preached the gospel and established local congregations from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. In this article, I hope to show the biblical and strategic rationale for planting churches in order that Desert Springs Church might be busy spreading God's glory broader and deeper through church planting.

Lessons from a Frenzy of Missional Activity

In the book of Acts we see a frenzy of sending, going, proclaiming, saving, forming, discipling, and communicating, and rejoicing. People believed the gospel, established churches and went out to establish more of them. What we see in the book of Acts, and Acts 11-14 in particular, is a frenzy of missional activity.

As we consider the challenge of church planting in our time, there are at least three takeaways from a reflection on the book of Acts.

First, *church planting is the result of gospel-seeding*. The gospel is what the first local churches had in common. They were born of the gospel and they proclaimed the gospel. On several occasions in his ministry, Jesus linked the gospel to a seed and the kingdom to a seed's growth. In Mark 4, Jesus compares the kingdom to a small, mysteriously growing seed: "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how" (26-27, 30-32). It's mysterious.

The gospel is like a seed, and those that do seeding are like farmers. It makes good sense to get seeders in as many places as possible. You don't have to be a farmer to agree that piling up seed in one place is counterproductive. Seed are meant to be scattered. You want seeders all over the place. You want planters out as far as you can go. You want seed spread for a wide and broad crop.

This seed imagery also pictures the kind of sacrifice that Jesus and his disciples make in spreading the gospel: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25). Jesus' death is like a seed going into the ground in order to bear fruit. And Jesus' disciples, likewise, are to die to themselves in order to bear much fruit as well.

This is actually not so far from talking about church planting. There's nothing about church planting in John 12. Neither is it explicit in Mark 4. But we know where the story is

going. We know the plan is gospel churches. The plan is to plant churches, not just believers.

So, a church needs to die to itself to birth and plant other churches. It needs to go into the ground so that God might bless that church with the growth of a new gospel church.

Second, *church planting is tough*. Church planting means that a planting church sends some of its best people out. Imagine having Paul and Barnabas in our church and losing them. But the text tells us that they were “sent out by the Holy Spirit” (13:4). Church planting is also tough because there’s often serious opposition to church planting. While the fruit of gospel spreading can bring opposition, that same opposition can redirect the church’s efforts in a way that would never have happened otherwise.

Third, *church planting is the plan*. Church planting, after all, is assumed within the great commission. In a sense, the great commission is a mission to plant churches, not just make disciples. The plan all along was that these new disciples would grow in discipleship and partner for the mission in groups called churches. The book of Acts is the story of Jesus’ disciples fulfilling his great commission and doing so by planting churches. And Paul’s letters in the New Testament are letters written to churches.

Ten Reasons to Plant More Churches Now

In 2010 Desert Springs Church committed to continue this work of planting churches, and to do so locally and globally. Just like the earliest churches, we want to be a church that plants churches that plant churches.

Some could ask, haven’t enough churches already been planted here in the US by the twenty-first century? I believe there are ten strategic reasons for gospel believing churches to also be gospel-planting churches in the twenty first century.

1. Church planting is biblical.

Church planting is surely the way that the church got its start, but it is still biblical. On the one hand, Paul could say that he preached Christ where Christ had not been named. Revelation 5 speaks of a people from every tribe, and tongue, and nation praising Christ. God is bringing a people to Himself made up of people from everywhere. On the other hand, what we see in Acts is a frenzy of missional activity. The Jerusalem church, for instance, in the earlier chapters of Acts, grows and spreads and sends. Christ is committed to building his church, and that doesn’t mean merely expanding the property and buildings of existing churches, but spreading his people out to form new local congregations.

Like the early church, we want a self-conscious identity as a sent people sending people out with the gospel. We want to send people to plant churches far away, and send people to plant churches in our own backyard. DSC needs to be a church that is both sent and sending. We are sent right where we are at, spreading the seed of the

gospel. And we are sending people out from among us to do more of the same in different places, extending the reach of God's work in our church.

2. Church planting is a uniquely effective means of reaching the lost.

One denomination in the United States recently found that 80% of its converts came to Christ in a church that is less than two years old. On average, as many as half of those in a church two years or younger are "unchurched." Additionally, statistics demonstrate that new churches have three times as much conversion growth as a church that is fifteen years or older.

While religious sociologists aren't quite certain as to why this is the case, there are a number of suggestions. One possibility is that there is a general distrust for established religion in the world. Another possibility is that new churches are hungry in part for their own survival. But regardless of why it nevertheless is true that new churches reach people that established churches can't reach. We need both.

3. Church planting is needed, even in America.

While there are many church buildings in America, America is not oversaturated with churches. In fact, for an entire century, the number of churches has been on decline. In 1900 there were 27 churches per 10,000 people. In 1950 there were 17 churches per 10,000 people. In 2000 there were 10 churches per 10,000 people. In 100 years there was a 66+% decline of churches in the US. In fact, 3,500 churches close their doors each year.

If every church in America were packed for each of three services, there would still be ninety-four million people without a seat. For all of our spaces for worship, the United States is the world's 4th largest unchurched nation. For decades church-planting efforts weren't coming close to matching the number of churches closing their doors each year. As recently as 2007, only 1500 churches were planted.

Some might suggest that one explanation for less churches is that churches have generally gotten larger. Mega churches, for example, have to factor into that equation in some fashion. But research shows a decrease not only in churches but in church-goers.

But there is good news. According to Ed Stetzer, as of 2009, there has been a shift and we are now actually planting more churches than the 3500 that close their doors. This is almost unbelievable.

And let's remember too that the goal is not simply a lot of churches, but a lot of *good* churches. 80% of churches are either plateaued or declining. We actually do want more churches that are God-centered, expositional, disciplining, and committed to eldership.

4. Church planting is needed in our town.

There are less churches in New Mexico than the national average. Specifically, Rio Rancho has less churches than the national average, and it is one of the nation's fastest growing cities.

In addition, we are seeing more and more people travel further and further distances to come to DSC. We're thrilled and humbled when people drive 40, 45, or 60 minutes to come here. But the closer we are to our church the better our ability to connect our life and our witness to our church. There is a kingdom benefit to a church that's close to home and close to the rest of life.

5. Church planting will help DSC be more missional in other ways.

Being a church planting church will foster more of a missional mindset for those who go *and* for those who stay. Regular, enthusiastic talk about church planting for the sake of spreading the mission will excite all of us about the spread of the gospel in our own spheres of influence. Funding, praying for, and talking about missions abroad when we're doing so for the gospel will actually fan the flame of mission all over the place including our own neighborhoods.

6. Church planting is in some ways an attempt at DSC "growing without growing."

Church planting is actually an alternative "building fund." Through church planting we build the church by birthing another congregation. This isn't a final answer to the growth of any given church. Frankly, we should pray that for all of our planting, we can't keep up with God's blessing of new converts. We do want to reach more people, and more people after that. Growing and expanding and growing and expanding is one way to manage growth. But we're committed to church planting, since church planting gives us the greatest gospel-seeding return on our investment of time, resources and energy.

7. Church planting fosters a broad-minded kingdom mentality.

Even if it won't keep us from growing numerically, it's a mindset that will help us fight against any personal kingdom building. We want to prioritize the place of the local church in God's plan. But we want to have a broad-minded kingdom mentality. We don't want to think that we're the only ones doing it right. There are many local churches that we partner with and love and cheer on and pray for. Church planting keeps us broad-minded and forward-looking in our kingdom mentality.

8. Church planting puts to use a growing number of equipped leaders and potential leaders at DSC.

What business duplication does for job advancement, church planting does for growing leadership within churches. When a business increases and expands its business, all kinds of opportunities for leadership open up for those within the

company. In business duplication, mid-level employees at a big business are called upon to lead parts of a smaller business. Church planting means many of our stronger leaders will move on with the new plant. For those willing to serve, there will be an array of new opportunities to serve in the plant and at DSC.

9. God is doing something special with church planting in the U.S. these days.

As those who believe in the work of the Holy Spirit, we should have a revival radar on at all times. When we spot something God's doing that's unique/special, we should get behind it. Across a number of networks and denominations, God is doing something special with church planting these days. Church planting is increasing not only through networks like Acts29, but among the Presbyterians, Anglicans, Southern Baptists, within the Evangelical Free Church, etc. We want to ride this wave of learning and strategizing and pursuing the lost.

10. As a former church plant, DSC should be pro-planting.

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker: "as a former fetus, I'm pro-life." Well, as a former ecclesiastical fetus, DSC should be pro-church planting. If we love what God is doing in and through DSC, then we should have a special place in our hearts for planting more churches with the commitments that we share here at DSC. DSC was birthed about twenty years ago. It's time to have some babies.

This article is an edited transcript of a sermon preached by Ryan Kelly, August 29, 2010 at Desert Springs Church, "Spreading God's Glory Broader and Deeper... via Church Planting."