

Church Planting and the Great Commission

By Justin Kuek, Auckland New Zealand. August 2007

Church Planting is the best way to complete the Great Commission!

*“The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”*ⁱ Peter Wagner, one of the most respected authorities of the Church Growth movement made this famous statement in the early 1990’s and it has quickly become accepted conventional wisdom that has influenced the thinking of church leaders and missiologists worldwide. Through the 90s and into the new century, many denominations and missions organisations began to devise plans to undertake church planting, both in their countries as well as in the foreign fields that they were working in. This new thrust of church planting was exciting! It’s influence on denominations and missions boards cannot be overstated. This influence led the missions board of the Southern Baptists in the USA to develop a variant of this strategy – the Spontaneous Planting of Churches (Church Planting Movements). This was a very significant development because the Southern Baptists were the largest and arguably the most influential missions organisation in the world. The new strategy led to a major re-tooling and de-definition of the traditional missionary endeavour. Suddenly the traditional white missionary who would struggle on the missions field to start one church was now being re-trained to become Strategic Coordinators (or being replaced by) – people who would be catalysts in the starting of Church Planting at a level where it becomes spontaneous and overwhelming! What a great idea! This monumental shift quickly became extremely popular – to the point that many other missions organisations also made the transition.

In this article I would like to revisit this premise, that the planting of churches is the best way to evangelise and by extension, complete the Great Commission. However, before I do that, I would invite you to take a few moments to gather your own thoughts on this. Do you believe the statement to be true or false? Why do you hold those opinions?

Our Background

Before we proceed, I must say that we were one of the top advocates of Church Planting. We arrived in the East Malaysian part of the Island of Borneo in 1983 and quickly saw the planting of 3 churches within our first year of ministry there. This quickly grew as the Ibans (the largest indigenous tribal group in South East Asia) began to respond to God. Because this work rapidly outgrew the original church that we started, we formed a missions organisation specifically to “handle” this great harvest. The motto of the mission was “Planting Churches, Raising Leaders!” The Lord blessed the work tremendously and we were able to train many young people to be thrust into the harvest field, planting churches as they went. By the time we left the Island of Borneo permanently after 19 years, we had seen over 200 churches started. The mission had developed to the point where we had developed a school to train church planters, and we were conducting seminars in many other countries in Asia and Africa to help them plant churches. However, over the last 1½ to 2 years, we

have began to re-look at this area again. This was due to the fact that we began to observe some disturbing facts. However, before we go into that, I would like to present the case FOR and AGAINST church planting.

The Case for Church Planting

Several reasons are put forward to back up the case for church planting. They generally fall into the following:

1. ***Planting new churches leads to faster growth of the church when compared to trying to grow existing churches.*** Simply put, as churches grow larger their ***rate of growth*** slows, therefore starting new churches will allow the church to grow at a much faster rate. After all, it is much easier to have a 100% growth (a doubling) for a church with 4 people, than it is with a church of 4,000! On top of that, the excitement of the new work generates levels of energy that is difficult to whip up in an existing older church. As the new church is established and starts to grow, the percentage of new Christians to old within the work is also a lot higher. New Christians are well known to be the best soul winners not the least because they have the best contacts with the most unbelievers, but also because of the excitement of their new found faith.
2. ***Evangelism needs to be followed with church planting.*** This is especially true where the evangelism is done some distance from the mother church. This makes sense – one cannot expect new Christians to grow without being involved in a local church. Therefore, if we do evangelism as we should, this should be followed up by the planting of a local church in the area where the evangelism is being done.
3. ***Planting new churches releases new leadership and ministry.*** As the local church grows, the people who are involved in leadership and ministry as a percentage of the total church membership falls. In a new church plant, of necessity, more inexperienced and younger people are thrust into leadership. The planting of new churches allows those who are sometimes only sitting in the pews of the mother church to be involved in ministry in the new church plant.
4. ***The Planting of New churches allows us to target new areas.*** Geography, Culture and Language are all barriers to people coming to Christ. Church planting allows us to purposefully overcome these barriers and win these “hidden peoples” for the Gospel. This is done through the starting of churches in these targeted people groups.

You would think that these reasons make the case for Church Planting water tight! With such good reasons, why would any church not start other churches? Could there be any negatives from church planting? Surely if church planting was a problem, then the local church as we know it today would also be problematic!

The Case against Church Planting

Our work has mainly been in missions and in the poor third world. We acknowledge that this has given us a perspective that is different from that of most pastors and church leaders. Therefore it would be easy for the reader to say, *"That is a MISSIONS perspective, and what you say has validity in the THIRD world, BUT this is New Zealand (or whatever country you find yourself in). It will not*

work here." I have heard this statement made so many times, and each time I do, it never ceases to amaze me how much tunnel vision affects church leadership. Surely we cannot only retreat to the excuse of what is applicable in our country, area, denomination or church. If something is BIBLICAL, then we have the responsibility at the very least to see what impact that truth has upon our situation and what adjustments, if any we need to make to our own theology and methods.

Over the last 14 years, I have been making some very interesting observations. Through our travels on the missions field, we began to see that many churches started through the 200 years of modern missions were actually struggling even though what is seen from the outside looks good. There were extremely few cases of churches which had become self sufficient, this despite missions having adopted the "Three-Self formula" for 150 years!" (The Three Self formula basically says that the churches we start are mature or indigenised when they are: a) self-governing; b) self-propagating; and c) self-supporting.) The lack of actual application of the Three-Self formula has begun to disturb many missions leaders worldwide, calling for an end to dependency of these churches in the third world.

However, unlike most other Western missions leaders, I have come to see that most of these problems have roots that go much deeper than the "symptoms" that we can observe. Yes, these problems are serious and require urgent and drastic action. However, if the problem is deeper, then just dealing with symptoms will not work. As I delved deeper, I realised that the root of these problems actually centred around the **model** of local church (and therefore, ministry too) as we know it. It is not simply a lack of FAITH that has produced dependency, but rather a model that is simply impossible for those in the Third World to implement. After all, how can we expect God to provide when we are asking Him to bless what He has not prescribed? When we understand that the problem is the MODEL, we begin to see that the situation is not much better closer to home! It is easy to think that this is only a problem for the church in the Third World, but in reality it also affects churches in the West! Several years ago, I read in an issue of *Charisma* magazine that the average length of time that a church is in existence for, is 3½ years! Not that churches in the USA are young, but they LAST only 3½ years! They start and are closed down, on average within the span of 3½ years!

Here is a collection of some reasons in the case against church planting:

1. **Church Planting relies on a complex and highly difficult model.** One thing that I have learnt from the business world is this, in order to **MULTIPLY**, you need to **DUPLICATE**. And in order to **DUPLICATE** you need to **SIMPLIFY**. Our local church model is far from simple! And because it is complex, it is hard to duplicate and thus multiply. Our model is; a) Finance driven, b) Resource dependent, c) Knowledge based, and d) Cannot be easily duplicated. Our local church model is basically this – *On a Holy Day, we go to a Holy Place to be ministered to by a Holy Man*. In order to do so, we need a building (meaning resources to either rent or purchase), a professional clergy (meaning salaries and training) and meetings (meaning again, resources to put these on). This reason alone should cause us to think twice about our approach. On a more important level, I believe that this approach is actually an Old Testament approach, and not valid for today! (I will re-visit this in a later issue of this newsletter).

2. ***The Un-natural Split of the Local Church and Missions.*** The traditional local church has been set up to look after the needs of the members of the church. Leaders of both the Church and Missions agencies throughout the ages have said that this is the reason why God has raised up missions organisations. Ralph Winter calls this split ***Modality*** and ***Sodality***ⁱⁱⁱ. He proposes that these two structures are found throughout the bible and are the way that God has used to reach out to the lost. However, just because this is the way that most people have gone about doing church, does not mean that it was God's intention in the first place. It is my argument that central to the life of every Christian should be the very purpose of God. We are called to seek first the Kingdom of God. We are to pray for the kingdom to come! This purpose of God is the salvation of the whole world. If we can split the kingdom into the local church and missions organisations, then we have at best abdicated our responsibilities and at worst are totally disobedient to God's command for us to make disciples of ALL nations!
3. ***Jesus never asked us Plant Churches!*** This is perhaps the BEST case against church planting! What we tend to do is to jump in to do ministry without asking questions about what we are doing. About 18 months ago, I was in Kenya teaching on Church Planting when God gently nudged me and asked, "Where did I ever ask you to start Churches?" This came as an absolute shock. You see, that was the very basis of our missions organisation. Our focus was the planting of churches and we felt that we were now called to help others into this "vital ministry"! After all, our motto was "Planting Churches, Raising Leaders!" Have we really got it so wrong? The voice grew louder and louder to the point I could no longer ignore it! I had to humbly admit, that there was simply NO MANDATE to start churches! It cannot be found in either the Old or New Testaments! I knew that I was now in big trouble! We had to make some DRASTIC changes, and there was simply no way to go back to "business as usual!" This is a sobering thought! If Jesus never commanded us to plant churches, perhaps He is on to something! More on this later.

Why the discrepancy?

A deeper study into the assumed effectiveness of Church Planting has revealed some very diametrically opposed conclusions. Why is this so? Can so many leading thinkers within the church and missions circles be so wrong? I believe not. It is not that the conclusions in the cases FOR and AGAINST church planting are faulty, but the problem is something more fundamental. It has to do with our foundational assumptions and definitions. The discrepancy arises from the fact that we are debating the issues from totally different perspectives.

One of the problems I find with the "thinking" within the church is this: "We seem to be oblivious to the need to define the frame of reference in our evaluations and discussions before we even start". We simply assume that we know what each definition is as well as the scope of the discussion. In the case of our current thesis, we are looking generally at Evangelism and specifically at the accomplishment of the Great Commission. What needs to come into the equation here surely must be the end-goal. What is it that we are trying to achieve? As the goals change, so will the measurement of our success or lack of it thereof. If we just want to plant more churches and reach out to more people, then church planting is a great methodology. It is easy to see that an addition of 20 churches per year in a denomination with 60 churches is a good thing! **BUT**, here is where we tend to fall down in our thinking. What if the end-goal is not denominational growth, but the

completion of the Great Commission? Surely new measurements must come into play. We would start to ask questions like, “Where have the people in our new churches come from?” If our growth is at the expense of other churches, then it is really not kingdom growth and we are simply fooling ourselves. HOWEVER, we would not see that if the context was church growth within our own denomination or movement only! So what are the larger issues that need to be considered?

What is the Command again?

Perhaps a helpful way for us to approach this is to ask the question, “What is the purpose of Evangelism?” If the answer is to grow the church, ministry or denomination, then any kind of growth is seen as good! However, if on the other hand, the purpose of evangelism is to complete the Great Commission, the measurements that we will use on the effectiveness of our methods will be very different indeed!

Here are some questions that are helpful in clarifying our thoughts:

1. Does the planting of churches automatically equate to furthering the cause of the completion of the Great Commission?
2. Is the Planting of Churches really necessary for the completion of the Great Commission?
3. What role should church planting play in the accomplishment of the Great Commission?

The point of view we work from in this case is very important. Are we working from the point of view of the **Local Church** or is it from the point of view of **Jesus’ command**? If we start from the point of view of the local church then we will try to understand the Great Commission through the eyes of the Local Church. This point of view necessarily puts the local church and its ministries outside the scope of the discussion as it is the platform from which we are basing our discussion. The church and its approaches to ministry and definitions of Christianity is seen as something that is non-negotiable. Everything else is then seen from the context of the local church and its ministries. If however, we changed the perspective and now approach the exercise not from the local church, but from Jesus’ last Command, something amazing happens... the whole discussion is changed, and the methods and assumed foundations are now subject to the end goal – which in this case is obedience to the Great Commission! This brings us back to the three questions I proposed above. **What has Church Planting really go to do with the Great Commission?** This is something that is so counter intuitive that it seems almost madness to ask, especially to an audience of Pastors and Church leaders! BUT it still is a question that NEEDS to be asked! Remember, the question we are asking in this article is the truthfulness of the statement that Church Planting is the best way to complete the Great Commission. If church planting has little to do with the Great Commission, then the answer is obvious – **“The premise is false!”**

In order to answer the questions raised with regards to the connection of church planting and the Great Commission, we need to re-state Jesus’ last command. He said that we were to, “...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”^{iv} Let’s break this command into the tasks that are to be performed. We are to:

1. Go
2. Make Disciples

3. Target all Nations
4. Baptise
5. Teaching Obedience

When these end goals are met, we will have completed the Great Commission. Surely in the process of carrying out the Great Commission the measurements would be how well we have done the 5 tasks above. This brings us to the fundamental rule that holds true in almost every situation – that the shortest distance between two points surely must be the straight line between those two points (unless, of course, if it becomes patently obvious that the shortest route is impossible or extremely difficult) . Put another way, the best way to complete any task is to choose the easiest (and by extension – the most effective) route. So, in the case of the Great Commission, the most effective way to complete the Great Commission is simply to OBEY the Great Commission! Just by simply doing what Jesus tells us is sufficient to complete His command! The Great Commission has within it the key for its fulfilment – just do what Jesus actually asked us to do, and we will fulfil His command!

I can already hear the objections being thrust forth right now! Amongst them would be:

1. It is too simplistic!
2. What about the local church? Where does it fit in? Where do Christians go to if there is no local church?

To this my answers would be:

1. **Why make anything more difficult than it is?** Is there any merit in anything just because it is more difficult to do? Doesn't it make sense that if it were intended to be more difficult, then Jesus would have told us so?
2. **What is the Great Commission?** Did Jesus ask us to **start churches**, or **make disciples**? Why is it that we insist on doing what Jesus has never asked us to do, BUT yet fail to do what He has explicitly commanded us to do? Is that simply a misunderstanding of His command or blatant disobedience?

If it is indeed so simple, then why is it so hard for us to accept this simplicity of the Great Commission? Here is a collection of some of the reasons I think we have such a difficult time:

1. **We have too much vested in our current systems.** Momentum is a great thing, but when it becomes something that is actually based on a false premise, then it becomes an even greater stumbling block. When we are actively involved in something bigger than ourselves, that involvement provides some validation of our existence. We would have to be extremely open and honest to allow our long held paradigms to be challenged. Yet, isn't this one of the most important characteristics of a person who is easily led by the Lord – An openness to learn and change?
2. **We have an Old Testament theology of the church.** I will write more on this topic in later issues of the newsletter, but suffice to say, I believe that most of our church ideas today are based on Old Testament theology.
3. **We cannot trust the Holy Spirit.** We would all acknowledge that this is the dispensation or age of the Holy Spirit and that He is the chief executive of the church, yet, when the chips are down, we really don't trust that He is able to look after His church, let alone GROW it!

4. ***We have mis-read the Great Commission!*** There are 5 simple tasks mentioned in the Great Commission. My plea is simple: Please do not add any others BEFORE we have obeyed these 5! When we have been obedient to these, then the rest will take care of themselves!

Now, I would like to list some reasons why it SHOULD be simple:

1. ***It is HIS church and He can dictate the rules that relate to it!*** Jesus Himself is the head of the church and He is the only one who should be calling the shots. If He says that we are to do these 5 things in the Great Commission, that is good enough for me!
2. ***Too much is at stake!*** What is at stake if we fail to complete the Great Commission? Do we really believe that there is no other name under heaven by which we are to be saved? If this Gospel of Jesus is the only way for man to be saved, then the stakes are very high indeed! With stakes this high, why would we want to make it more difficult to finish what Jesus commanded for us to do?
3. ***There is never any pattern for us to follow in setting up the church!*** All those who teach on the New Testament church will tell us that there is no set pattern for the local church to be found in the scriptures. If Jesus' goal was for us to set up local churches, then don't you think that it is odd that He did not specify the HOWs, WHATs, WHENs, WHEREs WHOs etc of church life? What we see instead are values and principles that He has given to those who are to become His followers (Disciples).

Conclusions

We opened our discussion with a quote from Peter Wagner that church planting is the best way under heaven to evangelise. We then extended it to the Great Commission. Is church planting the BEST way to finish the Great Commission? Our answer to this question is determined by how wide our frame of reference is. If it is in the context of our own local church and movement, then the overwhelming answer would be YES. However, if the frame of reference is as the statement suggests, from the view of the Great Commission, then the answer is a resounding NO!

At the end of the day – the fastest way to complete the Great Commission is simply to OBEY Jesus' commission to the church:

1. Go and make disciples of ALL nations,
2. Baptize them, and then,
3. Teach them to Obey what I have commanded

Will this work, even though it appears simplistic? I have no doubt that it does! Why? Because every command God has ever given has within it the ability to be fulfilled, (and easily, at that!). It is the plain SIMPLICITY of the approach that gives me absolute confidence that it will work! It is simple because the steps are clear, and can easily be fulfilled. It does not require finances, is not resource dependent, not knowledge based and can be easily duplicated! In fact, if every true Christian in the world today would just make ONE disciple over the next twelve months and this is repeated each year, the whole world would be saved in less than four years! Does it work? I am absolutely SOLD!!

In the Next Issue(s):

We have only begun to discuss this topic, and it has already opened up many other areas that need to be addressed. For example, how does this perspective interpret clear scriptures relating to:

1. The admonition not to neglect meeting?
2. The place of Leadership?
3. Giftings in the Church?
4. Ministries within the Church?
5. Elders and Deacons?

Feel free to add to this list, and we will discuss this over the coming months.

ⁱ Pg. 11, "Church Planting for a Greater Harvest", C. Peter Wagner, Regal Books, Ventura, California, 1990.

ⁱⁱ The Three-Self formula was first popularised and implemented by a pair of missions executives who headed the largest missions agencies of their day. These were Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson who headed their respective missions agencies from 1841-72 and 1832-66 respectively.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pg. 179, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission", Ralph Winter, in "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. A Reader.", William Carey Library, Pasadena, California, 1981

^{iv} Matthew 28:19-20 NIV