

Reaching New People through Church Planting

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The Story of the Church of the Nativity

In 2006, I went to Bishop Kirk Smith of Arizona and asked to become part of his grand vision for our diocese: to plant ten new churches in ten years. Passionate about reaching out to new people with the gospel the way others had once reached out to me, I had long wanted to become a church planter. In May 2006, Bishop Smith commissioned me to plant a church in the growing suburb of Desert Ridge and north Scottsdale, in the northern Phoenix area.

Sometimes I think that if I had known the challenges that lay ahead, I might have looked elsewhere for my next ministry call. But despite research that shows that most church plants fail, I believed that God would lead our church to answer the call to touch new people with Christ's love.

We began with a group of fourteen people meeting in a living room. Over the next few months, we continued to meet for prayer, Bible study, and visioning about the church we dreamed of planting. The committed core invited others to join our adventure, and our group of fourteen quickly grew to sixty-five enthusiastic members. We spent this visioning period laughing, dreaming, praying, and asking ourselves the three basic questions of ministry: Who are we? Who are our neighbors? Who is God calling us to become?

We began Sunday morning worship services in September 2006 in an elementary school, making music on an electronic keyboard, teaching Godly Play in a portable classroom, taking all our furniture and equipment home with us each Sunday and bringing it back the following week. The work was hard, but we joyously devoted ourselves to the mission of helping God plant a church.

Three years along in the church-planting journey, the Church of the Nativity is a growing congregation with about 250 members. Nativity is home to a wide array of ministries within and outside the congregation, and now worships in a beautiful jewel of a worship

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space housed in a suburban office building. We have a staff of six, a budget of \$300,000, lively children's and youth programs, and significant outreach to people in need in our community and beyond. Our congregation has grown through intentional hospitality, strategic marketing, and people whose lives have been transformed, inviting others to join in our adventure.

Why Should We Plant Churches?

At heart, the reason for planting churches is simple: there are people who have not yet been reached by the gospel. Church plants are able to reach new people with the message of Christ because they are flexible, adaptable, hungry for growth, and willing to experiment with new ways of being the church in order to grow. An established church can enjoy the luxury of remaining stable; a church plant must grow or die.

A church plant must also be very clear about its vision if it is going to survive and succeed. That clarity contributes to a mission-orientation on the part of all its members. A person who becomes part of a new church quickly learns that he or she is an essential member of a team that is working to accomplish a clear mission.

The simplest reason for planting churches is that it is an effective strategy for growth. We plant churches, says Bishop Smith of Arizona, "because it's our baptismal imperative to proclaim the good news in word and deed. It's the nature of the church to grow. When we're living out our call, we're growing."¹ When he became bishop of Arizona, the decade of the 1990s had seen Arizona's population grow by 40 percent—yet no new churches had been planted, and average attendance had remained flat. His vision of ten new churches in ten years aimed to help the Episcopal Church in Arizona make up for lost time.

Churchwide, the Episcopal Church has not kept pace with population growth. New generations of young people are not finding their way to our church: the Episcopal Church is significantly older than the population at large, losing 19,000 members per year by virtue of our age structure alone. Overall, our average Sunday attendance fell by 10.5 percent from 2003 to 2007.²

¹ The Rt. Rev. Kirk Smith, telephone conversation with author, May 26, 2009.

² House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church, *Report to the 76th General Convention* (2009), 5.

One antidote to this decline lies in church planting, the renewed, exciting, daring adventure of taking our beautiful Anglican expression of God's kingdom into new contexts. Our God is a "sending" God: Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). If God is a sending God, we are a "sent" church, says Tom Jones, and "the most efficient way to fulfill the total mission of a sent church is the multiplication of local churches."³ As we plant new churches, we reach new people. As we reach new people, Christ's love is born anew in our world.

Key Factors for New Church Success

In 2001, the Episcopal Church Center published a study of Episcopal church plants which identified seven key factors that are correlated with success (defined for the study as being self-supporting within seven years). Those factors were:

- Careful site selection
- A community context where the population is well-educated and relatively affluent
- Effective recruitment and training of lay leaders
- Shared vision and direction
- A younger minister who is good at starting groups from "scratch"
- A focus on reaching unchurched community residents
- Systematic efforts to track visitors and prospects.⁴

This useful study has one weak point: the way in which it defines "success." Defining success in terms of a congregation's ability to achieve financial self-sufficiency almost requires "successful" churches to be planted in well-educated, affluent communities (factor two). If we want to do the work of evangelism, however, we will not be discouraged from planting churches among populations that are not as well-educated or affluent. A church plant can be hugely successful in proclaiming the gospel and in creating a church community without

³ Tom Jones, "Why Plant Churches?" in *Church Planting from the Ground Up*, ed. Tom Jones (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Publishing Co., 2004), 14.

⁴ C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny L. Marler, *New Church Development: A Research Report* (New York: Episcopal Church Center, 2001), 4–5; see www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/ncdreport2.pdf.

any hope of being self-supporting in the foreseeable future. In the Diocese of Arizona, for example, the five church plants include a thriving Sudanese congregation, a Spanish-speaking congregation of recent immigrants, and a new congregation that reaches out to at-risk urban youth. Church leaders hoping to do the work of evangelism will not ignore such underserved populations, where huge potential for growth and life transformation exists, though they will have to be prepared for a long-term financial commitment.

In this sense, factor number one, “careful site selection,” might better be expressed as “careful community selection.” Choosing where to plant and whom to reach is a matter of discernment. Who is untouched by the gospel? Who is in need of God’s saving grace? Who is underserved by our church? The underserved may often reside in growing, affluent suburbs, whose spiritual emptiness can be satisfied by Anglican spirituality. But God’s heart also yearns for other groups of people, and God may inspire us to plant Episcopal churches in nontraditional communities.

Leadership Practices for Church Planting

Church planting is not for the faint of heart. It involves long hours and long odds. Church planters are members of an unusual breed, says Tom Brackett, the Episcopal Church Center’s Program Officer for New and Emerging Churches. “A church planter has to love a vision for what can be, but is not yet, so powerfully that they’re willing to stick by something despite terrible odds. They have to be so impassioned that they can stay with a lot of hard work for years to see something come out of nothing.”⁵

In short, a church planter must be a person of vision, who can see something where nothing now exists, and who can believe that God will provide all the resources necessary to make that vision a reality. Church planting is a work of faith and hope, and it is grounded in prayer: personal and corporate prayer that underlies everything we do, and prayer that is open to the unexpected leading of the Spirit.

A planter must also be enthusiastic about the gospel and able to articulate “a compelling understanding of the gospel in local language, and gather people around a compelling vision,” says Tom Brackett.⁶

⁵ The Rev. Tom Brackett, telephone conversation with author, May 28, 2009.

⁶ The Rev. Tom Brackett, telephone conversation with author, May 28, 2009.

Preaching is a large part of this gift, but being able to create the story of the community requires exegesis of the culture as well as the Scriptures, and a deep understanding of how they interact. The successful planter has a gift of speaking the words of the gospel in terms that resonate with the local culture: the essentially Anglican gift of inculturation.

Because church planting is above all a matter of bringing together a group of people with a common vision, the planter must be someone who has what Bishop Smith calls “the gift of gathering. It’s a charism of being able to gather people around you,” he says. “The personality of the church planter is someone that people want to be around.”⁷ But the gift of gathering is not a matter of sheer force of personality or “charisma” in the secular sense; rather, it is the gift of creating a compelling vision and calling others into their God-given place in that vision.

This ability to call others into a shared vision is crucial because church planting is a group effort. The first task of a church planter is to build a leadership team that is willing to commit itself to God’s hope for a new community. Planting a church is a work of dedication and passion that requires a whole group of people who become the local incarnation of the body of Christ. A successful church planter discerns the gifts of others and calls those gifts into service, making the church plant a team effort. The best work a planter can do in establishing the DNA of a new congregation is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12).

In this sense, a church planter cannot be a “larger-than-life, celebrity leader,” the kind of leader Jim Collins calls a “Level 4 leader” in his groundbreaking exploration of business leadership, *Good to Great*. Instead, a church planter must work toward what Collins calls “Level 5 leadership.” “Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.”⁸ If a leader is creating a new incarnation of the body of Christ, she plans for change and growth, including

⁷ The Rt. Rev. Kirk Smith, telephone conversation with author, May 26, 2009.

⁸ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don’t* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 10, 21.

the day when that body will go on without her. Like any parent, she realizes that her task is to help the child grow strong and healthy enough to make his own judgments. Therefore, the leader creates structures in which that child can learn how to thrive independently, maturing, learning, and adapting.

“Early on we said to ourselves that all leadership structures were temporary,” says Ken Howard, founding vicar of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church, a ten-year-old congregation in the Diocese of Washington.

We didn’t want to get stuck with any particular size or shape. One thing we did is we imagined ourselves as larger than we were and tried to organize that way. It was a partnership of laity and clergy from the very start. We also had a vision-oriented model of leadership. Everyone in the organization had a calling. My job as leader was to articulate the community’s calling so all could follow it.⁹

Evangelism: The Heart of the Call

The heart of the new church community’s calling is always evangelism: proclaiming the reign of God in new ways, adapted to the context of the local community and culture. As we reach out to new people with the gospel, creating new incarnations of the body of Christ, we fulfill Christ’s Great Commission: “Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20).

⁹ The Rev. Ken Howard, telephone conversation with author, June 5, 2009.