

5 Ways Established Churches Should Think Like Plants

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I have no significant church planting experience. I helped with the launch team of a recent plant in the Chicago area for just a couple months before being called to my present role last spring. Though quite young by New England standards, the church I serve is established. It began a little more than 35 years ago when several young adults from Park Street Church caught a vision for reaching the MetroWest suburbs of Boston. And we enjoy many of the benefits common to established churches: nice facility, stable financial base, variety of ministries, and breadth of generational wisdom and participation.

But there are several key values established churches can and should glean from those just getting started.

1. Church plants clearly define their mission and keep it before them in everything they do.

When you're starting from scratch, almost everything is intentional. The feel of the webpage, the flow of the nursery system, the types of ministries, the shape of the worship service---everything is painstakingly considered and prayed over to retain focus and clarity for staying on mission.

But the longer churches have been doing something, the harder it is to remember why they do it. It's easy to lose focus and become cluttered and fragmented in programs and ministries. This lack of clarity and focus can lead to passionate resistance to strategic changes. We can learn from church plants

about recapturing the focus of your mission and holding it clearly and consistently before the congregation.

2. Church plants feel an acute sense of urgency to engage in evangelism.

This is the simple fact of planting a church: if it doesn't grow, it will die. And most church planters are not interested in transfer growth; they want to see conversion growth. So urgency for congregation-wide evangelism is woven into the church's DNA from the beginning.

But the longer a church does its thing and the larger it gets, the greater the pressure to divert attention to the needs of the church itself. We need more programs for families, programs for children, programs for teens, programs for singles. We might have a program for outreach, but the idea that every member is called to be a missionary in his or her own sphere of influence has long since dissipated. Established churches need to think like church plants in regaining the urgency of life on mission.

3. Church plants tend to better understand the culture they're engaging.

Researching the target culture is an important part of every missionary endeavor; church plants are no exception. A lot of work goes into understanding the history and spiritual climate of the area, not least identifying the prevailing cultural idols. When ministries are shaped, hospitality is a key virtue. Everything is done with awareness and love for newcomers and nonbelievers, who are often unfamiliar with church lingo and culture.

Just as established churches tend to increasingly focus inward, they also tend to become isolated from the surrounding culture. Routines that were once strategic and meaningful become rote. Elements of church life and worship that were initially shaped for the sake of mission become part of a cherished heritage that must be guarded at all costs. To even speak of engaging culture can invite an eye of suspicion. And yet God has given us his timeless truths to be proclaimed and applied in ever-changing times and places. Revitalizing our awareness of the surrounding culture and engaging people who live and breathe that cultural air (inside and outside the church) is crucial to our faithfulness in gospel mission.

4. Church plants use a wider portion of the congregation in service.

An experienced friend once commented that planting a church is like trying to build a boat from scratch . . . when you're already in the water. It's not just all

hands on deck---you don't even have the deck yet to lay hands on. The context of urgency and camaraderie that comes from working so closely together at those early stages often creates a more pervasive culture of service in a church plant.

Established churches tend to embody the classic 80-20 rule: 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. When the focus and clarity of the mission dissipate and urgency wanes, it's a lot easier to participate in church as a spectator rather than as a partner in gospel ministry. As established churches work on recapturing focus in mission, that focus should translate into congregation-wide service.

5. Church plants are more likely to think strategically about planting more churches.

Church plants naturally understand the importance of continually planting newer congregations. As [Tim Keller](#) suggests, planting "is one of the best ways to renew the existing churches of a city, as well as the best single way to grow the whole body of Christ in a city." Several leading church planting networks hold out this expectation of ongoing involvement from the start.

It's a lot harder for established churches to think about sending away some of their resources, or even some of their best people, for this kind of ministry. Few established churches have a thoughtful plan to keep this strategic investment close to their mission and vision. Passion and commitment to planting new churches is more crucial to the health and vitality of established churches than many of us realize.

The point in all of this is not to foster a "grass is greener" mentality for established churches. Neither is it to romanticize church planting---any planter will testify to the vast difficulties he faces, not least the potential drift toward the very challenges discussed here. Rather, the simple exhortation is for established churches to keep learning and thinking about why we do what we do, and to recognize that some of our best tutors will be those who come behind us.