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## The Task of Church Planting



Many church planters are enthusiastic about their calling and the challenge of launching into such an exciting endeavor.

Because church planters often have pioneering and entrepreneurial personalities, they sometimes have little patience for defining goals or answering fundamental questions about the nature of the task. But not doing so is like setting out to build a house without blueprints. Even allowing for unexpected developments and creative freedom, it's essential to have a good idea of the nature and goal of the task if it is to be fulfilled.

Years ago a cartoon frequently shown on German television depicted a character shooting an arrow rather randomly at a wall, then walking to the wall and drawing the bull's-eye around the point where the arrow struck. Such a method ensures that you're always on target! Oddly enough, some church planters do seem to shoot first and draw the target later. Given the growing number of church planters who have had little formal biblical or theological training, the need is all the greater to begin by defining terms and becoming clear about the nature of the church and what it thus means to plant a church. This is particularly important when one is planting a

church in another culture. Of course entire books have been written on the nature of the church. This chapter maps in summary fashion a theological blueprint for the practical work of church planting.

## **What Is a Church?**

Defining the church is the first obvious step in understanding church planting. Our natural tendency is to envision planting congregations that look and act something like our home church, even though the church may be planted in another culture or under very different circumstances. One tacitly assumes that this is the best or only biblical form of the church.

However, a careful look at the New Testament reveals that the first-century churches took a number of forms, meeting in various places and with differing emphases and structures. The church in Jerusalem, for example, which included members who were “zealous for the law,” continued to observe many Jewish practices such as participation in certain temple rites (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 21:20, 26). The predominantly Gentile churches had no such practices and met primarily in homes. Yet all were legitimate New Testament churches suited to their contexts.

Many elements of church life with which we are familiar at home may be neither biblically necessary nor culturally appropriate in a different setting. Does a congregation have to have a paid pastor, own a building, celebrate weekly Sunday morning services, or have legal status including a formal constitution and bylaws to be a “real” church? These may be desirable, but by New Testament standards they are hardly

essential. Many of the churches planted by Paul would not meet what many today might consider a minimal standard for being an established church. Nevertheless, he addressed even the most problematical congregations as “the church.” This forces us to consider more carefully what genuinely constitutes a local church in the biblical sense.

Every leader in a church-planting team should judiciously study the Scriptures and seek to answer these and many other questions about the life and nature of the church. One must distinguish between that which is biblically mandated and essential and that which is nonessential. The Scriptures allow great freedom in the details of church life and polity. Cross-cultural church planters must take extra care not to impose foreign expressions of church life, but to creatively develop the new church in ways that fulfill biblical purposes in a culturally appropriate manner. At the same time the church should demonstrate the countercultural values of the kingdom of God.

Church planters must clarify their ecclesiology in their own minds prior to launching a plant. A biblical study on the nature of the church should be included in the early teaching of any church plant,[1] allowing local believers to help determine what forms the church should take to fulfill biblical purposes in the local context. While there is no substitute for turning directly to the Scriptures for our understanding of the church, there is also much value in becoming familiar with historical teachings on the church and learning how the church has taken shape in other contexts (see chapter 6 on the shape of the church and contextualization).[2]

We must begin by understanding the essential *nature* of the

church. A summary of various understandings of the essence of the church is found in table 1.1. First and foremost, the church is a *spiritual* entity, conceived by the Father (Eph. 1:3–6), built by Christ (Matt. 16:18), and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22). The church is God’s primary vehicle for manifesting the nature of the kingdom of God in this age and among all people. This biblical vision of the church should capture our imagination and stir our hearts. What a glorious and holy privilege to be God’s servants in the planting and establishing of local churches!

The early church fathers often spoke of the church as the fellowship of the saints. Emphasis was rightly placed on the church as a people rather than as an institution. Essential attributes of the church were summarized in the Nicene Creed (AD 381) as *one* (unity), *holy* (sanctified life), *catholic* (universal, for all people), and *apostolic* (based upon teaching of the apostles). These attributes have been variously interpreted through the history of the church,[3] but they are confessed by nearly all Christians. The Reformers focused more on essential *marks* of the church, in an attempt to discern what constitutes the true church in contrast to false expressions of the church. Luther spoke of the *right preaching of the Word* (doctrine) and *faithful administration of the sacraments* (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) as the two essential marks. Reformed churches added the *exercise of church discipline*. Free churches emphasized the *personal regeneration and piety* of their members.[4]

**Table 1.1**

## The Essence of the Church

Nature	Marks
One	Right doctrine
Holy	Faithful administration of the sacraments
Catholic (universal)	Church discipline
Apostolic	Personal faith

Purpose	Metaphors
Witness, <i>martyria</i>	People of God
Fellowship, <i>koinonia</i>	Body of Christ
Service, <i>diakonia</i>	Flock of God
Proclamation, <i>kerygma</i>	Bride of Christ
Worship, <i>leiturgia</i>	Temple of God Royal priesthood

A more practical approach is to define the church in terms of its *purpose* and *work*. Acts 2:42 describes the basic activities of the church in terms of apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking bread (and baptism), and prayer, to which are added worship and evangelism (v. 47) and then later the intentional sending of missionaries (Acts 13). Theologians have also spoken of the church's witness (*martyria*), fellowship (*koinonia*), service (*diakonia*), proclamation (*kerygma*), and worship (*leiturgia*).<sup>[5]</sup> Rick Warren's popular book *The Purpose-Driven Church* lists outreach (to evangelize), worship

(to exalt), fellowship (to encourage), discipleship (to edify), and service (to equip) as biblical purposes that should be kept in balance and give the church direction. Yet another way to view the church is in terms of its *relationship to Christ*. Highly relational cultures, especially in Majority World settings, may find such an understanding more helpful than other approaches:

- confession of Christ as Lord (baptism)
- witnesses to Christ (evangelism)
- remembrance and fellowship of Christ (Lord's Supper)
- Spirit of Christ (filling, fruit, gifts)
- love of Christ (worship, devotion)
- Word of Christ (preaching, teaching)
- family of Christ (fellowship, community)
- sacrifice of Christ (stewardship, service)
- suffering of Christ (faithfulness, perseverance)

Note how the key biblical metaphors of the church also place the church in relationship to Christ—for example:

- Christ as head of the body
- Christ as the good shepherd of his flock
- Christ as foundation, cornerstone, and builder of his church

- Christ as the door to the sheepfold

Based on this discussion we offer the following practical definition of a local church as we will be using the term in this book. *A local church is a fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ committed to gathering regularly for biblical purposes under a recognized spiritual leadership.* This very basic definition includes several key elements:

- *Believers.* The church is composed of persons who have experienced salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ according to the gospel and confessed in baptism. They desire to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, regenerated and enabled by the Holy Spirit. They are the new people of God.
- *Gathering.* These believers are committed to meeting together regularly to serve God and one another.[\[6\]](#) They are the family of God. As a missionary people, they gather in preparation to be sent as agents of God's mission in the world.
- *Purpose.* Their fellowship gathers to fulfill biblical purposes that include prayer, worship, evangelism, instruction, edification, service, celebration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, exercise of church discipline, and the sending of missionaries. They embody values of the kingdom of God.

- *Leadership.* They submit to recognized spiritual leaders. Leaders provide a minimal form of structure under Christ's headship. In a spirit of servanthood they give direction, spiritual oversight, and care, teaching and equipping the body of believers.

This might be considered a minimal list of practical characteristics defining a church for the church planter. Isolated believers, special interest meetings, or unstructured gatherings alone do not constitute a church.

This definition leaves much room for flexibility. A paid pastor is not essential, but recognized leaders are. Church buildings are not necessary, but regular meetings are. Adherence to a particular creed or denominational distinctive is not required, but faithfulness to biblical truth and purposes is. Deep spiritual maturity is a goal, but more essential is the believers' fundamental commitment to obedience in following Christ.

### **What Do We Mean by "Church Planting"?**

Having defined what we mean by *church*, we can simply define church planting as that ministry which seeks to establish new churches. Normally this will be through evangelism, discipleship, and gathering of these persons into a functioning congregation. Most church planting will also have the longer-term goal of multiplication. We thus offer this definition:



*Church planting is that ministry which through evangelism and discipleship establishes reproducing kingdom communities of believers in Jesus Christ who are committed to fulfilling biblical purposes under local spiritual leaders.*

*Planting* is a term used by the apostle Paul to describe his ministry of establishing new churches in 1 Corinthians 3:6: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” Though Paul had a variety of gifts and ministries, here “planting” refers to his pioneering apostolic ministry of establishing new churches in locations and among people where there was no preexisting church. He makes this clear in Romans 15:20: “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.”

Complementary to planting or pioneering ministries are “watering” ministries such as that of Apollos noted in 1 Corinthians 3:6. Paul had sent him to Corinth to further instruct the church there (1 Cor. 16:12). Whereas the ministry of planting involves primarily evangelism, discipleship, and congregating, the ministry of watering involves further teaching and strengthening churches that have already been gathered. Both planters and waterers are essential to the long-term goal of establishing healthy, reproducing churches. When we speak of “church planting” in this book we are broadly referring to the entire process of planting (in the sense of pioneering) and early watering leading to the establishing of healthy new churches.

## **Church Planting as a Spiritual Undertaking**

Most of this book will discuss the process and practical methods of church planting. But we must keep foremost in our minds that church planting is essentially a spiritual undertaking, done primarily by spiritual means. Jesus is the real church planter, as he promised, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). The Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28:19–20, to go and make disciples of all nations, is sandwiched between the affirmation that all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus (v. 18) and the promise of Jesus’s presence with the disciples until the end of the age (v. 20). Only through “remaining in Christ” can our ministry bear fruit; indeed, apart from Jesus we can do nothing (John 15:5). John’s Gospel furthermore recalls Jesus’s promise that the Holy Spirit would convince unbelievers of sin, righteousness, and judgment and thus of their need for salvation in Christ (John 16:8).

Luke’s Gospel ends with Jesus’s command to wait in carrying out the Great Commission until they have been “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). Nothing could be clearer from Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts, than the centrality of the enabling and empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the spread of the gospel and establishment of churches. For example:

- power for witness and preaching (Acts 1:8; 4:8)
- granting boldness in the midst of persecution (Acts 4:31)

- strengthening and comforting the churches (Acts 9:31)
- guidance in decision making (Acts 16:6–10)
- calling and sending missionaries (Acts 13:2–4)
- confirming the apostolic preaching through signs and wonders (Acts 2:43; 4:16; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6, 13; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11)

It was the Lord who added new believers to the church (Acts 2:47) and the Lord who opened the hearts of those who heard the gospel (Acts 2:37; 16:14). Luke also writes of the growth of the church in terms of the Word of God increasing, spreading, and multiplying (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). Human agents play a subordinate role.

The same emphasis can be found in letters of the apostle Paul. God's power to save is in the gospel itself, not in the messenger (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18). The message must be proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:18–19; 1 Cor. 2:4–5; 1 Thess. 1:5). The church in Corinth had become divided by concentrating on various workers and particular spiritual gifts. To correct this Paul redirects their attention in 1 Corinthians 3:5–10 to the more central truth that ultimately it is God who is at work through the people and their gifts (accented via italics below):

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the *Lord* has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but *God* made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only *God*, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be

rewarded according to his own labor. For we are *God's* fellow workers; you are *God's* field, *God's* building. By the grace *God* has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it.

The advance of the gospel will face spiritual opposition. The expansion of the church in Acts encountered persecution, demonic opposition, and human failure. Paul writes of the spiritual nature of much opposition (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:2–4; Eph. 6:12). Yet Scripture makes equally clear that Christ has overcome all spiritual principalities and powers (e.g., Rom. 8:35–39; Col. 1:16). Though we have no assurance that every individual attempt to plant a church will succeed, we do have the promise that ultimately the cause of Christ will prevail with his words: “I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18).

These truths should give church planters great confidence that the fruitfulness of their efforts is ultimately dependent on God's working. This does not excuse us from preparing well, working hard, and evaluating carefully. But it frees us from unnecessary pressure to produce results and from a needless sense of failure when, after giving our best, we see little visible fruit of our labors. It equally guards us against pride and boasting when we experience great blessing in our ministry. Walking and working by faith should characterize our attitude in ministry. Full dependency on God should be the “method behind the methods.” Finally, these truths should move the church planter to greater prayer. Prayer or praying is mentioned twenty-six times in the book of Acts. Paul's letters to his churches abound with examples of how he prayed for them and their spiritual growth (e.g., Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–19; Phil. 1:3–6, 9–

11; 2 Thess. 1:11–12). These serve as wonderful examples of how church planters can pray for their church plants and people.

Church planting is a thoroughly spiritual endeavor. We may employ the most proven methods—and methods *are* important—but they are no substitute for prayer and deep dependence on divine guidance and working. It is possible by human means to establish an institution that has all the outward appearance of a church. But a true church is the creation of the Holy Spirit.

### **Church Planting—An Undertaking Demanding Wisdom and Insight**

Church planting is not only a spiritual undertaking; it is also a complex human undertaking. Many a church planter has been passionately committed but practically unprepared and naive, leading to unnecessary frustration and often failure. Proverbs 19:2 reads, “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.” God has given us the capacity for insight and understanding so that we might better understand his ways and exercise greater wisdom in his service. There are several ways we can seek to be better informed, discern God’s wisdom, and be better stewards of our energy in the ministry of church planting.

- *Biblical teaching.* Though the world of the New Testament was very different than the world today, we

can still glean many important principles from the example of the first Christians as they spread the gospel and planted churches.

- *Prayer.* James 1:5 gives us the promise: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”
- *History.* We can learn lessons from the history of missions and church planting, discovering some means God has blessed and some pitfalls to avoid. The adage is all too true: if we fail to learn from history we are condemned to repeat it.
- *Social sciences.* The social sciences help us understand human behavior and societies. If we want to serve people well, we must understand them deeply. Social sciences help us overcome blind spots and discover in a disciplined manner factors that will lead us toward effective ministry, addressing people’s deepest needs in both biblical and culturally appropriate ways.
- *Best practices.* Some of the most helpful insights are gained as church planters share with one another and seek to discern together best practices for church planting. One caution here is that effective methods in one setting may have little application to another.

There is a difference between sound wisdom and crass pragmatism in which the end justifies the means. Further, the

best methods are no guarantee of success—only Christ can build his church. But God works through human means, and he generally chooses to work through well-prepared and informed servants who are humble and teachable and who make use of every available means to advance his cause.

### **When Might a Church Be Considered “Planted”?**

How does the church planter know when his or her job is done? When should the church be considered “planted”? At what point does the church planter and/or the church planting team move on and entrust the church fully to local leaders? The Bible does not give us a checklist to use in answering these questions. Missionary church planters have been notorious for staying too long, dominating the church, and having the attitude that local believers are never quite far enough along to survive without the missionary. The opposite extreme occasionally occurs as well: the church planter, having failed to develop local leaders disengages abruptly and the church withers and dies.

Some writers looking to the example of the apostle Paul suggest that a church should be considered planted very shortly after the first believers have been congregated (e.g., Allen 1962a, 3). Indeed, in most cases Paul left the churches within only a few weeks or months after their initial establishment. In Asia Minor he and Barnabas even installed elders in the churches shortly after the initial evangelization and then considered the work “completed” (Acts 14:23, 26).<sup>[7]</sup> Thus a qualified and recognized local leadership seems to be

essential.

However, concluding that missionary involvement should be curtailed quickly after the gathering of the first converts overlooks the larger biblical picture. Paul's quick departure was often prompted by persecution, not by plan. Paul remained over two years in Ephesus, where God had opened up to him a "great door for effective work" (1 Cor. 16:9), thereby postponing other pioneering work. The biblical report also makes clear that continued assistance was given to these fledgling congregations through follow-up visits, letters, and sending of additional coworkers. Thus more careful analysis of the Bible reveals that planting healthy churches involves much more than short-term campaigns that leave new congregations to fend for themselves. Paul's church-planting method installed local leaders and entrusted responsibilities to them quickly, but various forms of longer-term assistance were also provided to the young churches.

From the example of Paul and his coworkers, we discover that disengagement from a church plant can be viewed as a process of shifting emphases and responsibilities as the church matures. Rather than an abrupt withdrawal, missionary phase-out can be a gradual process with various team members serving in differing capacities and with diminishing levels of contact and assistance. The biblical examples also demonstrate that various gifts and talents are needed during the progressing phases of planting and establishing churches.

In keeping with our definition of a church, we suggest the following short-term goals as a measure for phasing out the church planter's or church-planting team's involvement:



- Persons from the locality or focus people have been led to faith in Christ, disciplined, and congregated into a fellowship of mutually committed believers meeting regularly.
- A qualified local spiritual leadership team (ideally from the focus people) has been called and recognized by the congregation. They guide, teach, and appropriately apply the Scriptures in their lives and society.
- Culturally appropriate structures for fellowship, worship, evangelism, service, and governance are functioning.
- Local believers have internalized biblical values and goals. Kingdom purposes for the church are being progressively lived out.

The church might be considered “planted” when the above short-term goals are achieved. However, the longer-term development of the church must be kept in view if genuine kingdom communities are to be established. After his or her departure, the church planter may continue to encourage the church toward the attainment of longer-term goals. Such goals would include the following, among others:

- church multiplication by planting daughter churches,

sending church planters, and sending or supporting missionaries[8]

- the establishment of local ministries that demonstrate kingdom values of compassion and justice
- initiation of specialized ministries to ethnic groups, subcultures, or special-needs persons
- creation of contextualized practices relating to local customs, traditions, and ceremonies
- being linked to or helping to form a national or regional fellowship of churches (see “interdependent fellowships” below)
- participation in local or regional initiatives with other churches

Attaining such goals is rarely possible during the pioneering phase. But the values and vision for such longer-term goals must be instilled early in the planting of the church.

## **What Kind of Church Is to Be Planted?**

Unfortunately many books on church planting and growth give little attention to the kind of church that is to be planted.

However, if churches are to be planted as we have attempted to biblically define them, they must adhere to more than some minimal definition or denominational standard. They must be *kingdom communities, healthy congregations, reproducing organisms, indigenous churches, and interdependent*

*fellowships.*

### ***Kingdom Communities***

A biblical understanding of the church will lead us to plant churches that are *kingdom communities*. New Testament scholars and evangelical missiologists alike recognize the centrality of Jesus's teaching on the kingdom of God for our understanding of the church and mission. Kingdom communities are congregations of Christians who embody and live out kingdom values as Jesus taught them. Their essence is found first in their relationship to the King, Jesus Christ, and second in their obedience to the will of the King explicitly stated in the Scriptures. Simply stated: they are Christ centered and Bible based.

Kingdom communities are formed of people who are born of the Spirit, who enter God's kingdom with childlike faith, and who are poor in spirit.[9] They are characterized by the values of the Sermon on the Mount. They strive for personal holiness.[10] They know that they may experience suffering and tribulation in this world, but they live in the hope that the fullness of the kingdom will appear when Christ returns.[11] Kingdom communities become a transforming, countercultural witness and movement having an impact on persons, families, communities, cities, and nations. The power of the gospel becomes active in them, and they become the salt of the earth and light of the world.[12] No church is perfect or without sin, but every church should be a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God. David Shenk and Erwin Stutzman write,

Church planting is thus the most urgent business of humankind. It is through the creation (or planting) of churches that God's kingdom is extended into communities which have not yet been touched by the precious surprise of the presence of the kingdom of God in their midst. . . . The transforming grace of God recreates the visible presence of the kingdom of God in that cluster of people who are committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. (1988, 23)

In chapter 19 we will discuss further the nature of churches that have kingdom impact.

It will not do to merely plant churches focused narrowly on their own private concerns or confined to routine Christian programs. Church history is replete with tragic lessons of what happens when churches fail to live out their kingdom calling. In light of the hundreds of thousands of Rwandans killed in tribal warfare in a country supposed to be predominantly Christian, one observer wrote:

One of the "facts" we loudly proclaimed was that 20,000 or so Africans were becoming Christians every day. Of course, no one denies the phenomenal turning to Christ in recent decades all across sub-Saharan Africa. But in the midst of this ingathering of souls, apparently we have not stopped to consider our long-term biblical mandate, which is not simply to gather converts but to assimilate them into churches where their character will be shaped by biblical values and standards. We have not paid sufficient attention to serious warnings about the high risks of a truncated understanding of our mission. (Reapsome 1995, 4)

Other historical examples might include the Crusades of the Middle Ages, racism in churches of North America, uncritical acceptance of Hitler's National Socialism in German churches, and apartheid in many churches of South Africa.

### ***Healthy Congregations***

In recent years considerable attention has been given to the

topic of church health. In Revelation 2–3 Jesus himself examines the seven churches of Asia Minor, gives his assessment of their health—their strengths and weaknesses—and declares what corrective measures are to be taken. As churches are being planted, it is important to keep in view indicators of church health that not only serve to identify symptoms of unhealthy developments but can also give positive direction for church life. Various lists of church health indicators have been formulated (see table 13.1 for examples).

Unhealthy churches rarely reproduce, unless they reproduce through conflicts that result in church splits. Church health is normally a reflection of the spiritual health of the leaders. However, sometimes churches develop in unhealthy ways simply because of blind spots, ignorance, or circumstances that are beyond the control of the leaders. Healthy congregations are congregations with a healthy relationship to Jesus, a healthy understanding of the gospel, a healthy commitment to their calling, and a healthy (and honest) assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. Such churches will have kingdom impact and are in the best position to reproduce.

### ***Reproducing Organisms***

One of the consistent themes throughout this book is the importance of planting churches that reproduce. Reproduction is a part of life: all healthy living organisms reproduce. The church is not an institution but a living organism, the body of Christ. As we shall see, reproduction was a characteristic of

New Testament churches and central to the apostle Paul's missionary strategy. Only as churches reproduce can the world be reached with the gospel. In chapter 7 we will discover many different ways that churches can reproduce. Church planters must seek to plant churches that have in their very DNA the vision and commitment to reproduce and ultimately multiply. Having this as a goal has far-reaching implications for the methods church planters use. Thus the methodologies that we recommend in these pages seek to keep this longer-range goal in view.

### ***Indigenous Churches***

Churches that we plant are to be *indigenous*. In chapter 4 we will discuss in greater detail the nature of an indigenous reproducing church. An indigenous church is one that is primarily composed of and led by local believers. It has become rooted in the local culture in such a way that under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit it develops its life and ministry in culturally appropriate ways. A palm tree will not thrive and reproduce in Alaska, and a fir tree will wither and die in the desert. They are not indigenous to the local climate and environment and are unable to adapt. Similarly, an indigenous church must be suited to and rooted in its cultural environment in such a way that it can thrive in the local setting while at the same time living out countercultural kingdom purposes. A church that is foreign dominated or foreign in nature will generally have difficulty thriving and reproducing.

The history of missions is replete with examples of

missionaries who disregarded local culture, planted foreign-looking churches, established ministries that were not locally sustainable, and became closely associated with foreign powers. The churches planted were sometimes like David in Saul's armor: encumbered with structures, forms, and ministries that fit another time and place but were inappropriate in theirs. Local believers were sometimes viewed as cultural traitors, or worse, as instruments of subversive foreign influence. Furthermore, missionaries have often had condescending, paternalistic attitudes toward local believers, denying ordination to them for decades, underestimating the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and exercising power over them through control of finances or by retaining positions of authority. The stated goal of self-governing churches remained something for the distant future because the local leaders never seemed to be quite ready.

Like the goal of reproduction, this basic goal of planting indigenous churches has far-reaching implications for both the methods of church planting and the attitudes of the church planter. The cross-cultural church planter must spare no effort to understand the local people and culture, plant the church in a culturally relevant way, with locally sustainable structures, and empower local leaders for ministry.

### ***Interdependent Fellowships***

In many situations the question arises whether the new church should become affiliated with a preexisting association of churches or denomination. Missionary church planters often

partner with an existing national church. To what extent should the church cooperate with local ecumenical associations, ministerial fellowships, or an evangelical alliance? These are important questions that need to be addressed at the outset of a church-planting ministry. Sometimes they will be answered by the sponsoring agency. Other times they must be answered by the church planter or local believers.

All too often church planters have worked in a spirit of independence or even competition. Sometimes other Christians and churches in the locality or region are simply ignored. Cross-cultural church planters might assume that they have little to learn from the local believers and do not need their assistance. They may think they have all the answers that they learned in seminary, in the home church, by having read the latest book, or by attending the latest seminar. The churches they plant are, not surprisingly, also independently minded, having little connection with others either locally or internationally.

Jesus, however, prayed for his disciples and those who were to follow, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Evangelicals are often quick to note that in this prayer organizational unity is not primarily in view. Yet some form of visible spiritual unity is to be evident if the world (i.e., unbelievers) is to notice and recognize that Jesus was sent by the Father. In other words, demonstration of Christian unity and fellowship has implications for evangelism!

The churches of the New Testament were not independent



but interdependent in various ways. Though they did not have denominational structures in the modern sense, neither were they fully autonomous. The predominantly Gentile church in Antioch submitted to the leadership and decision of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:30–31). The predominantly Gentile churches planted by Paul were expected to assist the Jerusalem church in famine relief (1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8). Paul recruited coworkers from the various churches that he planted, and they ministered, at times exercising authority, in other churches. No church should exist entirely in isolation from other churches. A spirit of unity and cooperation with other believers locally, nationally, and internationally should be instilled. Such relationships may be very informal or may be quite binding. This will depend on local circumstances and theological convictions.

Missionary church planters have often sought to create a new denomination or movement reflecting particular doctrinal positions or methods of ministry from the sending church. This has resulted in an unfortunate proliferation of denominations and independent churches throughout the world. One of the positive developments in recent decades is a greater spirit of partnership between foreign mission efforts and national church bodies in host countries. Mission agencies and cross-cultural church planters are increasingly seeking like-minded partners in the host country who share compatible doctrine, lifestyle, and vision. There are many advantages to such partnerships in church planting:

- Unity in the body of Christ is demonstrated.
- Better stewardship of resources and gifts is achieved.
- Missionaries and nationals can form joint church-planting teams.
- Expatriate church planters can do internships under national pastors or church planters and thus better adapt and understand ministry in the culture.
- Identification with a national association or fellowship of churches can give the church plant identity, credibility, and legal status.
- Local believers have a greater sense of being a part of the larger church of Christ and not merely an isolated or foreign religious sect.
- The national church may receive new impetus for evangelism and church planting through its relationship with the foreign missionary.

We shall return to effective methods for forming international congregation-to-congregation partnerships and the use of short-term mission teams in chapter 18. Such partnerships require time, patience, and commitment, but they can result in great rewards and true synergy in mission.