

The Reasons for Church Planting

During recent decades there has been a renewed focus on church planting in evangelical missionary activity. Church planting appears in the vision and purpose statements of many mission agencies. Concern for unreached peoples—that is, ethnic groups without a viable Christian witness and local church—has spawned new efforts to “adopt a people” and to undertake pioneer church planting among them.

Denominations have come to recognize that church planting is essential to the long-term growth and health of a movement. Church planting has become a topic of interest even among mainline churches in Europe, amid growing awareness that the society has become post-Christian and even nominal church membership is dramatically falling. And yet the theological reflection on and rationale for church planting has often been rather shallow.^[1] In this chapter we present first the biblical mandate and then the practical reasons for church planting.

The Biblical Mandate for Church Planting

Church planting is more than a practical necessity. It is a biblical mandate! Roman Catholic theologians have long

affirmed the centrality of church planting.[2] The earliest Protestant to seriously reflect on mission was the Dutch Reformer Gisbertus Voetius, who formulated a threefold purpose of mission as conversion, church planting, and glorification of God's grace (Jongeneel 1991). This formula has influenced numerous missiologists since. Though church planting was not always a stated objective of Protestant mission agencies, it has always been a practical necessity. Numerous mission leaders and theologians have advocated church planting as central to the task of mission.[3] For example, Georg Vicedom, in his classic *The Mission of God*, concluded, "Therefore the goal of mission is the proclamation of the message to all mankind and gathering them into the church" (1965, 103).

However, theological writings and conferences in recent decades have seldom mentioned church planting as in any way central to mission. Evangelical missiologists have increasingly emphasized holistic mission and the kingdom of God while rarely even mentioning church planting. While this emphasis may reflect a correction of earlier imbalanced evangelical views, the neglect of church planting in current theologies of mission is also in need of correction. Because the church itself is central to God's mission, church planting must be central to that mission.

Mission practice and theology have grown apart, and this is a dangerous development. With the short space here we can only sketch the primary biblical reasons for church planting. Though there is no explicit command in the Bible to go and plant churches, the biblical record leaves no mistake that

church planting is essential to God's salvation purposes and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Church Planting as Part of Salvation History

Salvation history is the story of God's redemptive acts, including his calling a people—not merely individuals—to be his instruments in carrying out his plan of redemption. As one writer states it, “God’s way of relating to his troubled world has been to seek out a community of people who will dedicate themselves to fulfilling his compassionate and liberating will for all, on behalf of all” (Kirk 2000, 31). This call began in Genesis 12 with Abraham, who was to become a great nation bringing blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3). The promise is passed on to the people of Israel, who were to be the instruments of God’s salvific purposes in the world. Unfortunately Israel failed. The Messiah would, however, come and fulfill the role of “light for the Gentiles (or nations)” and “servant of the LORD” (Isa. 42:6; 49:3–6).

Based on the redemptive work of Christ, a new people of God, the church of Jesus Christ, is formed in the New Testament. They are to carry on his salvific purposes and spread the news of his kingdom, becoming a “light for the Gentiles” (Acts 13:47). One becomes a part of this new people not by natural birth but by spiritual birth (John 3:3–5). The continuity of God’s purposes through a people is nowhere more clearly and beautifully stated than in 1 Peter 2:9–10: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of

him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Peter echoes terms used of Israel in the Old Testament (Exod. 19:5–6), applying them to the church. The church becomes the instrument of God’s glory and eternal plan, as Paul writes, so that through it the wisdom of God may become manifest, not only to the nations but to rulers and authorities in heavenly places (Eph. 3:10).

The book of Revelation describes the culmination of salvation history, emphasizing that God will bring into the kingdom persons from every people, nation, tribe, and tongue (Rev. 5:9; 7:9). The marriage supper of the Lamb, when Christ receives the church as his bride, will be a time of great rejoicing (Rev. 19:6–8). This will be one of the culminating events of salvation history. Church planting is the ministry of proclaiming the gospel and forming kingdom communities among every nation, tribe, people, and tongue to glorify God in time and eternity! Tim Chester rightly summarizes, “If the church is at the heart of God’s work, we need not be embarrassed about making it the heart of mission” (2000, 29).

Christ Loves the Church and Desires to Build His Church

Christ states his explicit will regarding the church in Matthew 16:18: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” We cannot enter into a full discussion of this

passage in all its complexity here. But one thing is clear: for Christ to build his church, he must plant his church—churches must be called into existence. We should be cautious about interpreting this text in an overly abstract manner. The *ekklesia* is simply the assembly of God's people. Matthew's only other use of the term *ekklesia* occurs in a very practical context of church discipline in 18:17. Specific assemblies of believers are in view, and these collectively comprise the universal church. Christ will build his universal church by planting and building local communities of believers.

The church planter can be assured that to engage in the task of church planting is to obey the expressed will of Christ. Christ himself will be the church builder. The passage also indicates that spiritual opposition is to be reckoned with. However, Christ will prevail. Individual church plants may fail, but the ultimate cause of building Christ's global church, his kingdom people, will not. The church is *Christ's* own church, not ours. As George Eldon Ladd comments on this passage, "Jesus' announcement of his purpose to build his *ekklesia* suggests primarily . . . that the fellowship established by Jesus stands in direct continuity with the Old Testament Israel. The distinctive element is that this *ekklesia* is in a peculiar way the *ekklesia* of Jesus: 'My *ekklesia*'" (1974, 110).

A second passage indicating the value of church planting is Ephesians 5:25–27: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, and to present her to himself as the radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." The

church is Christ's bride. He loves her. He gave his life for her. Not only has he purchased the church through his work of redemption on the cross, but he is sanctifying her. Though she has many flaws and blemishes today, one day she will be beautified and perfected as she is received into Christ's eternal presence. Thus Christ both builds his church and sanctifies his church.

From these passages we see that church planting and church edification is the work of Christ himself. This is a most noble undertaking, one near to the heart of God, both mandated and empowered by Christ. Church planting is not merely a "method of evangelism." Indeed evangelism should lead to the building of the church. The church is not an afterthought, not merely a place where individual Christians happen to meet for mutual encouragement. It is the object of Christ's love and the instrument of his service in the world.

The Great Commission Entails Church Planting

Two aspects of the Great Commission as formulated in Matthew 28:18–20 entail church planting: the command to baptize and the command to teach obedience to all that Christ commanded. These are virtually impossible to fulfill apart from planting churches. The command to baptize reminds us that conversion includes entry into the new community of Christ. Baptism is often viewed as an individualistic event. Indeed it is a public confession of personal repentance and faith, but beyond this it indicates reception into the body of Christ, the new kingdom community. "For we were all baptized by one

Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor. 12:13). Similar to proselyte baptism among the Jews, early Christian baptism indicated identification with a community—a meaning that we have largely lost today. In other words, to baptize is to enfold into a Christian community, the church.[4]

Christ calls us to make disciples who obey all that Jesus commanded. The command to teach obedience also assumes committed participation in the new community of Christ. Preaching the gospel and converting the lost only begin to fulfill the Great Commission. The commands of Christ cannot be kept by one individual alone, and the kingdom of Christ cannot be demonstrated in isolation. Where there are no communities of disciples, they must be created. Mission must be considered incomplete without the planting of churches among every people. Because disciples are to be made of all nations, the work of church planting cannot be considered completed until communities of disciples have been established among every people.

Acts: New Churches Are the Normal and Necessary Result of Biblical Mission

Everywhere in the book of Acts, where evangelism occurs, churches are created.[5] Believers are found meeting together in homes or in public places for prayer, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the apostles’ teaching. They simply don’t go their individual way. These small congregations are placed under local spiritual leadership, exercise spiritual gifts, care for

the poor, and preach the gospel. George Peters writes,

The apostles seemingly did not go out to “plant” churches. They were not commissioned to launch out toward that goal. They were sent forth to preach the gospel. Yet wherever Acts 1:8 was faithfully discharged, a church was born. The functional tie between gospel preaching and church planting, nurture and growth, is clearly established. We may confidently state that the church is germinal in the gospel as evangelism is germinal in a New Testament church. (1981, 20)

The language of Acts makes it quite clear that as persons came to faith in Christ, they became part of the local church community. For example, Acts 2:41 reads, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” “Added” (*prostithemi*) is a term used in early Jewish proselyte literature to indicate being gathered to or joining a fellowship, implying a break with the former community—for example, Gentiles being joined to Israel (Reinhardt 1995, 99–100; cf. LXX Esther 9:27; Isa. 14:1). We find the same terminology in Acts 2:47; 5:14; and 11:24.

In Acts 2:47 we read, “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Here it is significant that being added to the church is concurrent with being saved.[6] “Their number” is a reference to the local church and is sometimes translated as such.[7] Later in Acts 11:24 the term is used again in a parallel formulation, “and a great number of people were brought [i.e., added] to the Lord.” Being “brought to Christ” and being “added to the church” are virtually equivalent expressions.

Biblically speaking, becoming a believer, being saved, and belonging to the Lord all include being added to a local church, a community of believers, Christ’s body. Once again, we must

avoid thinking of the church in this context in an abstract manner; the church is a local assembly of believers (cf. Banks 1994, 27–31). Being a believer is not to be separated from participation in a local church. Biblical evangelism leads to believers' being gathered in communities—that is, church planting and growth.

Only in churches do new believers receive the encouragement and teaching they need to grow in faith and service. Only in mutual accountability and fellowship can true discipleship occur. Only in communities of believers can kingdom values be realized. This is one of the challenges facing specialized parachurch organizations that emphasize evangelism apart from the enfolding of new believers into local congregations. The fruit of evangelism is generally lost.

Biblical evangelism cannot be separated from the church, and where churches do not exist they must be planted. As Howard A. Snyder states it, “To do justice to the biblical understanding of evangelism, we must go a step further and say that the goal of evangelism is the formation of the Christian community. It is making disciples and further forming these disciples into living cells of the Body of Christ—new expressions of the community of God’s people” (1975, 331).

Church Planting Is Central to Paul’s Understanding and Practice of Mission

As we have seen in Acts, Paul worked as an evangelist gathering new believers into churches. In the Pauline correspondence we do not find the formulation of an explicit

mission strategy or methodology. However, in Romans 15:18–25 we do read of Paul’s working principle: in the power of the Holy Spirit he seeks to preach the gospel where Christ is not yet known. He does not want to build on another’s foundation, that is, work in churches that others have founded. Granted, Paul’s concern did not end with the planting of churches. He clearly continues to minister to churches already planted through letters, visits, and prayers, even postponing further pioneer work to strengthen existing churches. Nevertheless, his calling and purpose is to evangelize new regions and found new churches.

In Romans 15:18–25 Paul makes a remarkable claim, that “from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ” (v. 19) and that “there is no more place for me to work in these regions” (v. 23). Paul considers his pioneering work in this region completed. But what could he have meant by these words? Certainly a church had not been planted in every town, much less had every person heard the gospel in this enormous region from Jerusalem through what is today Turkey, Greece, and the Balkan states. Paul apparently considered his missionary ministry in the region complete because churches had been planted that would *further preach the gospel* to those who had not yet heard and would *further multiply* by establishing churches in as yet unreached regions. The seeds of the gospel had been adequately planted in strategic centers. These churches would in turn continue to evangelize and reproduce, planting additional churches and thus completing the evangelization of the region.

In the New Testament we find several examples of churches Paul planted that evangelized and reproduced throughout their region. In Acts 13:49 we read that because of the church in Pisidian Antioch, “the word of the Lord spread through the whole region.” Of the Thessalonian church Paul writes, “The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it” (1 Thess. 1:8).

Perhaps the clearest example is the church in Ephesus. Paul remained in Ephesus for over two years because there, in his words, “a great door for effective work has opened to me” (1 Cor. 16:9). According to Luke, the result of Paul’s teaching in Ephesus was that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). As a result of dramatic conversions, “the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:20). Even critics claimed that “Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia” (Acts 19:26). From Ephesus, churches were eventually planted throughout the province of Asia. These included the other six churches of Revelation 2–3 (Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea), Colossae, and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13). Probably none of these churches were planted by Paul; rather they were most likely the fruit of a dynamic church-planting movement launched from Ephesus.

Numerous biblical scholars draw the same conclusion regarding the centrality of church planting to Paul’s mission. For example, W. P. Bowers argues, “Paul’s missionary vocation

finds its sense of fulfillment in the presence of firmly established churches” (1987, 198).[8] Andreas Köstenberger and Peter O’Brien write, “The activities in which Paul engaged as he sought to fulfill his missionary commission included not only primarily evangelism through which men and women were converted, but the founding of churches and the bringing of believers to full maturity in Christ” (2001, 184). Eckhard Schnabel concurs: “Paul’s missionary work did not end with the oral communication of the good news of Jesus Christ and the conversion of individuals. Paul established churches, communities of men and women who had come to faith in Jesus the Messiah and Savior” (2008, 231–32). This confirms Roland Allen’s statement in his classic *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* “Paul did not go out as a missionary preacher merely to convert individuals; he went to establish churches from which the light might radiate throughout the whole country” (1962a, 81).

This is how Paul understood his pioneering work, and it was for him the guiding principle. Mission for Paul meant not only to preach the gospel but to also plant churches, and his mission could not be considered completed apart from planting churches that would *multiply*. Only then could a region be considered “reached.”[9] Evangelism leading to the planting of reproducing congregations will complete the full preaching of the gospel not only in a region but throughout the world.

An Integration Point for Ecclesiology and Missiology

Church planting is where missiology and ecclesiology

intersect. Unfortunately many missiologists and mission practitioners have a weak ecclesiology, as if mission could exist without the church or as if the church were a practical but imperfect and bothersome necessity. On the other hand, many standard systematic theologies and ecclesiologies devote few pages, if any, to the topic of mission. A missionless church is no church, and a churchless mission is not biblical mission. In the words of Lesslie Newbigin, “An unchurchly mission is as much of a monstrosity as an unmissionary Church” (1954, 169). The church is God’s instrument in mission. Planting new churches is essential to the goal of mission. In the words of Michael Quicke, “At its best, church planting has the capacity both to recall the church to its primary task of mission and to remind mission strategists of the significant role of the church” (1998, x).

It should be evident from the discussion thus far that the church, and therefore also church planting, is essential to God’s kingdom purposes and the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Church planting is not an end in itself in the sense of propagating religious institutions for their own sake.^[10] But church planting *is* an end in the sense that it is God’s chief instrument for expanding his kingdom, bringing redemption to the nations, and forming a people who will manifest his glory. Church planting and growth, while not synonymous with the kingdom of God, are nevertheless essential to the spread of the kingdom. It is not merely a question of more churches being planted but also of the *kind* of churches being planted.

The task of mission can be formulated as *the creation and*

expansion of kingdom communities among all the peoples of the earth to the glory of God.^[11] The chief means of creating such communities are evangelism and discipleship, which lead to the planting, growth, and multiplication of churches that manifest the reign of God in word and deed. Having discussed the theological reasons for church planting, we now turn to practical reasons for planting churches.

Practical Reasons for Church Planting

The need for church planting is obvious in regions and communities where no churches exist. However, critics often argue that in all but the most remote parts of the world enough churches already exist to complete the Great Commission. Not *more* churches are needed, so the argument goes, but *healthier* and *larger* churches. Similarly, some argue that rather than numerous small churches, fewer larger churches would be more effective for evangelism and ministry. Planting new churches where other churches exist offends Christian unity and creates unnecessary competition, weakening existing churches.

These arguments are indeed valid in many situations. A mere numerical proliferation of small, competing, and struggling churches will not necessarily advance God's kingdom purposes. Larger churches can have greater impact than smaller churches in many ways because of their greater resources, ability to carry out specialized ministries, and higher public visibility. Often wise stewardship speaks for investing in existing churches and against planting new ones. Some communities are already well served by numerous biblically sound churches, while other communities are underserved. Wise stewardship will focus church-planting resources and energy on locations of greatest spiritual need and strategic opportunity.

However, framing the issue in terms of larger churches *versus* church planting, an either-or option, poses a false dichotomy. Many large churches plant daughter churches and

continue to grow. It should also be remembered that even the largest churches were once small when they were planted! In fact, Ed Stetzer and Phillip Connor (2007) studied some 2,080 church plants from twelve denominations in North America and found that church plants that in turn planted a daughter church within the first three years of their establishment grew *faster* on average than churches that did not plant a daughter church.[12]

The impact of small churches (as opposed to large churches) should not be underestimated. For example, house churches in many parts of world, though hardly visible to the public, are having a tremendous influence in their societies, much like the effect of leaven in Jesus's parable of the kingdom (Matt. 13:33). Planting new churches where other churches exist needn't necessarily involve competition or weakening of those churches. In most locations there is a need for both more churches and larger and healthier churches.

One sometimes hears the argument that most new church plants fail within the first few years of existence, thus wasting resources and energy. Various studies have proved this to be a popular myth. Stetzer and Connor's massive study on "church survivability" found that "68 percent of church plants still exist four years after having been started" (2007). Survival rates have been demonstrated to increase when the church planter is assessed and various support systems are provided. A study of all 4,339 congregations in the Church of the Nazarene revealed that the closure rate of churches five years or older (3.6 percent) was virtually the same as that of church plants five years or younger (3.5 percent; Olson 2002, 5).

New Churches Grow Faster and Reach More Non-Christians

There is growing statistical evidence that new churches, generally speaking, not only grow faster than established churches but also grow more through evangelism. Studies in North America demonstrate that baptisms per hundred members can be four times higher in new churches than in older churches (see Wagner 1990, 32–33). Net membership growth in the Church of the Nazarene in 1995–96 also demonstrated that the churches eighteen years old or younger grew by 40 percent, nearly double the average growth rate of older churches (Sullivan 1997, 25; see also Olson 2002). In one district of the Free Methodist Church with forty churches, five churches were less than five years old. But these five churches accounted for 25 percent of the total church attendance and 30 percent of all conversions, and they produced 27 percent of persons entering vocational ministry in the district (Mannioia 1994, 18–19). A study by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptists found that churches less than three years old averaged ten conversions per hundred members per year, churches three to fifteen years old averaged five conversions per hundred members per year, and churches over fifteen years old averaged only one and a half conversions per hundred members per year (cited in Harrison, Cheyney, and Overstreet 2008, 60).

Similar evidence can also be found in Europe. For example, membership statistics of Free Evangelical churches in Germany revealed that churches more than five years old received an

annual average of one new member through conversion for every 102 members, while churches less than five years old receive one for every 38 members. Growth through conversion began to drop significantly in churches over twenty years old. Churches with more than two hundred adult members experienced not only a lower percentage of total growth but also a lower percentage of conversion growth. Similar trends are seen in other denominations in Germany. [13] Wolfgang Simson (1995, 69–71) believes that 30–56 percent of people in new churches are seekers who can be better integrated into such churches.

We must be cautious about generalizing this principle to every context. As a case in point, Allen J. Swanson's (1986) random sample study of 113 churches in Taiwan showed that churches less than five years old actually grew slower and had a lower percentage of conversion growth than older churches. Yet Christian Schwarz's (1996, 46) data on one thousand churches in thirty-two countries showed that generally, over a five-year period, smaller churches had a significantly greater percentage of growth than larger churches.

One explanation for this phenomenon is that newer churches are planted in newer, growing communities, while older churches are typically in older neighborhoods that are stable or decreasing in population. Persons new to a community are often more open for new relationships, personal change, and the possibility of attending a new church where others are also new. However, new churches usually also evidence greater evangelistic zeal and are more intentional in reaching out and integrating visitors into the life of the church. Newcomers

don't go unnoticed. Members of church plants tend to be more aware of their purpose and more focused and motivated to evangelize. They realize that if they don't evangelize, they probably won't grow. New believers receive more personal attention. As a church grows and becomes established, more energy is usually devoted to meeting the needs of the members and less on outreach.

Church plants are often more flexible in their methods. They can be creative without disrupting older church traditions and without robbing other ministries of workers. They are freer to adapt worship, develop outreach, and create ministries that respond directly to the needs of the community. There is often a contagious sense of anticipation and boldness among team members of a church plant. This all contributes to more effective evangelism and church growth.

All Churches Eventually Plateau in Growth

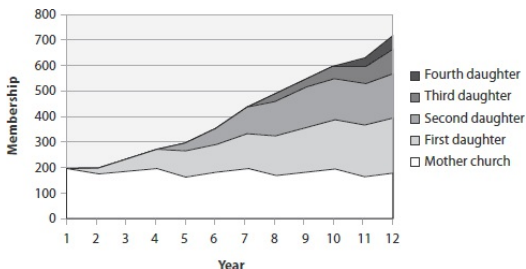
Though many churches experience consistent growth over many years, eventually every church plateaus. No church can continue to grow indefinitely. Churches that experience decades of uninterrupted growth are rare exceptions. In the United States and most countries the majority of churches plateau with a Sunday attendance of under two hundred.^[14] Sometimes this is because of the unresponsiveness of the focus population. More often it is because the energy of the church is diverted from evangelism to the needs of members. Also the church structure, the gifts of the leaders, expectations of members, location, and other limitations do not allow for

consistent growth beyond a large family-sized church.

This reality is not necessarily to be bemoaned. It does, however, accentuate the need for continually planting new churches as a way to reach new people. A church with one hundred members can give twenty members to form a daughter church; a church with five hundred can give many more. Experience demonstrates time and again that after giving members to start a daughter church, the mother church will begin to grow again and will regain or even surpass its plateau size, while the daughter church will also grow. On the whole more people are reached. The growth pattern might look something like the graph in figure 2.1. The mother church has plateaued at two hundred members. If it gives twenty or thirty members to start a daughter church every three years, the total movement grows. After starting a daughter church, the mother church resumes growth to its natural plateau of two hundred. The mother church has never broken the two hundred barrier, and none of the daughter churches experienced dramatic growth. But a cumulative movement with over seven hundred members has been launched, more than tripling its initial size in eleven years. If the daughter churches had also started new churches, the growth could have been exponentially larger.

Figure 2.1

Cumulative Growth through Planting Daughter Churches



This pattern can be illustrated throughout the world. In many movements the growth is much more dramatic (see Garrison 2000). But even with ordinary gifts and resources, relatively small churches can launch multiplying movements.

For example, in Germany, where church growth is generally slow, a congregation in Bonn with just over 300 adult members gave a total of 118 members between 1989 and 1996 to start five daughter churches. During that period the daughter churches nearly doubled their membership, growing to a total of 214. Meanwhile the mother church grew by more than the 118 members it had given to the daughters. Total church attendance for the movement grew from 420 to 690, and the number of home groups grew from 24 to 55.^[15] This is an example of growing a movement through church planting with ordinary gifts and modest resources in a somewhat resistant region. The key was the mother church's visionary leadership, bold faith, and willingness to release members to plant new churches.

This should be an encouragement for smaller churches that struggle to break growth barriers to consider starting daughter churches as a way of reaching more people. Often the mother church will even continue to grow after giving members to launch daughter churches.

New Churches Can Reach People Groups Not Reached by Existing Churches

This is particularly the case when churches are planted among unreached people groups. It has been estimated that as much as one-third of the world's population of six billion people are still not within reach of a local church able to effectively communicate the gospel to them: "200 major ethnolinguistic peoples each have over 100,000 unevangelized ethnoreligionists in their midst," and there are "1,192 unevangelized ethnolinguistic peoples who have never been targeted by any Christian agencies ever" (Barrett, Johnson, and Crossing 2008). According to another study approximately one-quarter of the world's population, over 1.6 billion people, live in 5,837 people groups with under 2 percent evangelicals and no active church planting within the last two years (Holste and Haney 2006). Unless new churches are planted, it is highly unlikely that these people will have any contact with Christians or hear the gospel in a way that they can understand (see Wood 1995).

Not only do existing churches plateau in growth, but they tend to reach relatively homogeneous groups of people. New churches can focus on reaching additional social groupings,

subcultures, and ethnic groups. Existing churches may be inaccessible to sectors of the population because of transportation difficulty or social barriers. For example, in Eastern Europe the Roma (commonly called Gypsies) are typically looked upon with disdain by the general population. In one Eastern European city numbers of Roma were coming to faith in Christ, but they were made to feel very unwelcome in the existing churches. There remained, unfortunately, no other way to disciple these believers apart from establishing a new church for them (LOP 43, 2005).

New churches can reach out in local neighborhoods in ways that geographically more distant churches cannot. Furthermore, older churches have often exhausted their natural evangelistic contacts through family, friends, and colleagues of their members. New churches often are able to develop new contacts in the community and thus reach new people.

New Churches Are Necessary to Saturate Cities and Regions with the Gospel

It has been the strategy of organizations such as DAWN (Discipling a Whole Nation, Montgomery 1989) and the Alliance for Saturation Church Planting to saturate cities and regions with new churches so as to reach more people. Their goal is one church per thousand residents or, in rural areas, within easy traveling distance of every person. The rationale is that the average church will only be able to personally reach and evangelize effectively about one thousand persons. A study in Munich, Germany, in 1993 demonstrated that to attain

the goal of even one evangelical church per ten thousand residents, one hundred new churches would have to be planted! The study further revealed that the fastest-growing churches were all under five years old and were not centrally located but located in communities where they had immediate contact with residents (Ott 1994). The experience of the Christian and Missionary Alliance churches in Guinea, West Africa, illustrates this point well (see case study 2.1).

New Churches Are Necessary for Long-Term Growth and Discipleship of New Believers

As demonstrated in case study 2.1, until new churches are planted, large numbers of persons who have made professions of faith do not continue in discipleship. Reports are sometimes heard of large movements of “churchless” Christians, for example among the Tamil in India. Such persons may not attend existing churches because they do not feel welcome or because the social barriers are too great for new believers to overcome. Sometimes the existing congregations are geared to the needs of Christian populations but not contextualized to meet the needs of new Hindu-background believers. In other cases traditional church buildings quickly became too small to hold the large numbers of new believers, or traditional leadership structures could not adapt and care for the needs of the growing church. David Garrison (2004b) found that there is a 50–80 percent attrition rate among new believers who do not become integrated into a church fellowship.

New Churches Stimulate Established Churches to Greater Evangelistic Activity

While church planting is sometimes viewed as a form of competition with existing churches, members of older churches often observe how new churches are reaching people for Christ using creative methods. This can in turn stimulate them to renew their evangelistic efforts. The old phrase “That won’t work here” is regularly disproved by new church plants! Existing churches often become comfortable with the status quo, lag in evangelistic motivation, or are discouraged about evangelism. Numerous stories could be told of how a new church plant gave impetus to joint evangelistic efforts together with the other churches in a region or city. Ultimately more believers and more churches are mobilized, more people are reached, and all churches benefit, not just the church plant.

Case Study 2.1

Church Planting in Macenta, Guinea

For years evangelistic campaigns in the district of Macenta had produced large numbers of “decisions” for Christ. The membership in churches, however, had not grown for twenty-five years. Something was wrong! A strategy was created to begin planting churches in locations geographically more easily accessible to the persons becoming Christians. This would facilitate follow-up, decentralize spiritual nurture, and mobilize lay church planters. Ideally every church would plant a new daughter church every year, and every Christian was encouraged to lead one other person per year to Christ. In order for such an ambitious plan to work, lay leaders for the churches would have to be trained through a program of

theological education by extension (TEE) and practical church planting experience. If traditional theological education and ordination were expected for the leader of every new church, the plan would be doomed from the start.

The program was launched in 1992. By 1996 the number of churches had grown from 25 to 150 (many were house churches in the villages). Even more dramatic, the membership had grown from 1,000 to 6,000, demonstrating that the church-planting plan was indeed facilitating more effective evangelism and follow-up, which was resulting in increased church membership and genuine discipleship. The number of ordained pastors had not changed, but ninety lay pastors had been trained and mobilized. This all occurred in the midst of considerable opposition and even persecution (Pfister 1998).

When an established church gives members to begin a daughter church, the remaining members suddenly notice empty seats in their own building. They observe the evangelistic zeal of the daughter and often begin to rethink their own evangelistic strategy. The status quo has been shaken! The mother church has renewed evangelistic zeal.

New Churches Mobilize More Workers

Church plants typically begin with a small team of workers. Not only are these workers highly invested, but as the church plant grows the new members are naturally plunged into ministry. In a church plant everyone knows that he or she must contribute and serve. Everyone is needed. Workers are stretched and challenged to develop new skills, take on responsibilities, and discover gifts that they never would have considered in an established church. The excuse “Someone else can do it better than I can” doesn’t apply in a church plant, because there often is no one else! God graciously supplies gifts and talents as workers step forward in faith and service.

Schwarz’s (1996, 48) international research revealed that, on the average, in churches with under one hundred members, 31 percent of worshipers are actively serving in the ministry of the church. That percentage drops consistently with the increasing size of the church; churches with over one thousand members have only 17 percent of worshipers serving. Our observation is that church plants (normally very small at the start) often have as many as 75 percent or more of the members serving. On the other hand, when a mother church gives members and workers to plant a daughter church, a vacuum is left behind where former members served. There also new workers must be trained and mobilized to carry on ministry.

New Churches Are Key to Social Change

As kingdom communities are planted, societies will be

positively affected. Church growth experts have long observed that “social lift” occurs as people become Christians: as people from the poor and lower classes become Christians, and as they adopt biblical lifestyles, they rise in social standing and standard of living (McGavran 1980, 295–313; Wagner 1981, 42–46). For example, fathers take more responsibility for their families, with the result that money is spent on education instead of alcohol or gambling. A work ethic is adopted, and human dignity is instilled in place of despair and inferiority.

Advocates of holistic ministry, such as Tetsuano Yamamori of Food for the Hungry, include church planting as a part of a total urban strategy to minister to the poor (Yamamori 1998, 9; see also Grigg 1992). As communities of hope and help are established among the poor, they become empowered to improve their lot in life. The Thailand Report on Christian Witness to the Urban Poor stated, “We believe the basic strategy for the evangelization of the urban poor is the creation or renewal of communities in which Christians live and share equally with others” (LOP 22, 1980, 16). Various relief and development organizations have found that partnering with local churches is one of the most effective ways to support communities not only for spiritual transformation but also for social, educational, and economic betterment.

Unfortunately, many, if not most, existing churches tend to neglect the poor or have difficulty accepting and serving the poor. Conversely, the poor often feel neither welcome nor comfortable in churches of higher social classes. While we should seek to correct this difficulty in existing churches, planting new churches among the poor may remain the only

realistic option if they are to be reached with the gospel. One of the most dramatic examples of this is the sensational growth of the Gramin Pachin Mandal movement among the Bhangi Dalits in India. Started in 1984, the movement grew to over 700,000 baptized believers by 2004. The Bhangis are the lowest of the low caste, rejected by the general population and relegated to the most demeaning work such as cleaning latrines. Only when a highly contextualized movement was launched that gave them dignity and allowed them to exercise their own leadership was a growing Christian movement possible (see Pierson 2004).

Furthermore, churches among the middle and upper classes must be planted with a vision to become voices of justice and compassion in society. Unfortunately, established churches have often become complacent with the social status quo. New churches can play a significant role in both practically assisting the poor in meeting immediate needs and working toward social change at the systemic level. Nairobi Chapel, for example, has determined to plant two churches among the poor for every church it plants among the middle or upper classes (Muriu 2007). In Manila a middle-class Evangelical Free Church released workers to help plant a church in a squatter district; various social programs to help the poor were part of the new church from the very beginning. Churches must become “salt, light, and leaven” in society, advocating education, equal opportunity, protection of human rights, land reform, safe and reasonable working conditions, fair treatment and equal opportunity for the underprivileged and marginalized. We will return to this topic in chapter 19.

What about Planting Churches in Communities Where Churches Already Exist?

Planting a church in a locality where other churches already exist is a sensitive matter. As noted above, such a church plant will likely reach new persons and contribute to the evangelization of the area. But it could also potentially empty other churches as Christians change their allegiance to the new church. Is such a church plant a violation of Christian unity? How can one determine if such a plant is justified in communities where other churches already exist? We do not advocate church planting everywhere and at any cost. Competition, denominational “flag raising,” and sheep stealing should never characterize a church-planting effort. A church should never be planted at the cost of another. But neither should “denominational turf,” personal kingdom building, or maintenance of a dying religious tradition be motivations for opposing new church planting in a community.

In many parts of the world a majority of local residents formally belong to a church but neither actively participate in church life nor personally adhere to even the most basic Christian beliefs. While only God can judge the heart, for all practical purposes such nominal Christians must be reached or re-reached with the gospel and won to a living faith in Jesus Christ. Existing churches that see no need to do so have no right to forbid a new church to attempt to reach out to such nominal Christians. Many of these churches are dominated by a theology that denies the power of the gospel and the authority of Scripture.

The presence of church buildings or even congregations in an area where church planting is being considered does not necessarily preclude the possibility of planting new churches. Introverted or socially isolated churches, churches concerned only with their own spiritual development, churches with nothing to communicate to their neighbours, churches speaking in terminology that cannot be understood, churches that speak much but do little, churches that fail to incarnate what they are proclaiming, may be making no positive contribution to *missio Dei*. (Murray 1998, 37)

Sidebar 2.1 lists a few guidelines for church planting in communities where other churches exist.

Sidebar 2.1

When Planting Churches Where Other Churches Exist

1. Honestly evaluate the spiritual needs of the community.

Are the spiritual needs of the community being adequately met by the existing churches? Do particular segments of the population such as ethnic groups, social classes, or neighborhoods remain unreached or underserved? What is the proportion of Christians to non-Christians in the community? What is the geographical distribution of churches in the area? Are existing churches evangelizing effectively? Decide to plant only where there is genuine need.

2. Consider how many churches are enough.

There is no fixed rule for determining the optimal number of churches for a region. Missiologists sometimes consider a region adequately reached where active Christians make up 10 percent of the general population. However, even in such areas there may still be pockets of the population who remain unreached by existing churches. The existing churches may also be geographically unevenly distributed. Furthermore, existing churches may be entirely ingrown, have no interest for outreach, and fail to influence the community for the kingdom. Murray summarizes the point quite well:

How can the mission of the church in contemporary society be accomplished? If this mission can be accomplished through the churches that already exist, then church planting is unnecessary. But if this is not feasible, because of the location of these churches, their inability to communicate with the surrounding community, or simply because there are not enough of them, then church planting is crucial. (1998, 14)

3. Inform existing churches of your intentions and assure them of a cooperative spirit.

Open communication is the first step to demonstrating respect, goodwill, and unity with other churches. Make clear the purpose and nature of the church plant, and indicate that your intent is not to “steal sheep” or proselytize but to evangelize and serve the community in new ways. This will avoid misunderstanding and ease negative suspicions. The presentation of demographic data clearly indicating the spiritual needs of the community may open the eyes of existing church leaders to the importance of a new church.

4. Carry through with promises to cooperate and not to proselytize.

Participation in local ministerial fellowships, the Evangelical Alliance, or similar groups as well as cooperation in prayer weeks, evangelistic efforts, or other joint ministries will demonstrate a spirit of unity and cooperation. Should an active member of another church begin attending the church plant, it is usually a good policy to contact a pastor of that church and openly discuss the situation. Other ways to foster good relations include informing other churches regularly of public events, supporting them in their initiatives, and refraining from criticizing others.

From this discussion it should be more than evident that church planting is not only biblically mandated and central to fulfillment of the Great Commission but also a practical necessity in many, if not most, places, even where other churches are already present. Church planting is at the very center of a biblical understanding of mission. It is the key to launching Christian movements among unreached people groups as well as saturating “reached” regions with the gospel.
