"Eighteen Ways to Plant Churches in North America"

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It was the spring of 1979 when my wife and I began experiencing a persistent sense of calling to be involved in planting churches in the Washington, DC area. It seemed that whenever I studied the book of Acts about the church planting ministry of the Apostle Paul, the desire was strengthened to give myself to the same ministry. For the previous five years I had been serving as an Associate Pastor in a church in suburban Washington, but this concern to see the entire region reached for Christ through church planting caused me to make an appointment with a local pastor of a sister denomination to learn how he had planted his church two years earlier.

During the course of that interview, he described to me a group of seven families living on the western growth edge of the Washington region that had been gathered by a sign painter. This man had been praying for the previous 12 years that a Biblical church might be planted in his area. This pastor and the minister of Church Development for his denomination's regional association had been ministering to this group in a Bible study format for three months. Through a series of interviews and examinations, I was invited to become the organizing pastor for this new church. The church I had been serving was supportive to the point they allowed me to make the transition to half-time ministry status with them but also to continue at full-time salary for the next 3 1/2 months. Then, over the course of those months of conducting our worship services we grew from seven to twenty families and arrived at financial self-support. My new denomination's home mission board had promised to begin providing half support when the finances concluded with my previous church, but such support proved to be unnecessary. Nevertheless, it was comforting to me and my family of five to know that the financial "safety net" was in place if needed. This **first** church planting ministry illustrates how God enjoys honoring the prayers of a faithful layman who perseveringly beseeches Him for a church to be planted.

A **second** model for church planting developed four years later when our, church began averaging 259 in attendance during Sunday morning worship. The leadership of the church believed the best size for our church lay between 200 and 250 in attendance, so they gave me permission to take 36 volunteers with me to plant a daughter church in an area 13 miles closer to the city. After one year that church had grown to 85 in average attendance, so the national home missions board of our denomination helped us financially to invite on our staff a full time assistant pastor, whom I began training to become the pastor of the new church. Initially I preached at the mother church at the 9:15 am service and at the daughter church at their 11:00 am service, but after 1 1/2 years the assistant became the solo pastor. This second model is an example of an existing church becoming the mother of a daughter church as a result of the pastor preaching in two different locations until the second church was financially able to afford its own pastor.

The **third** model occurred when the mother church was 6 1/2 years old and the governing board of the church determined we were ready to plant another daughter. Again, with the financial assistance of our national home missions board, the church invited on staff an Assistant Pastor to co-plant a new daughter church with me. We asked for volunteers and this time 49 people went with us to a community 12 miles further away from Washington. The Assistant Pastor and I shared the preaching and pastoral responsibilities, but the young man proved to be so capable that after 4 months we determined he was ready to lead the church by himself. By the time the one year's financial support from the national office had concluded, that daughter church was self-supporting and self-governing. This third model exhibits a new church being formed through a co-pastoring arrangement in which a young man just out of seminary was successfully yoked with an experienced church planter.

A **fourth** model is exhibited by one of our churches in the northeast suburbs of Washington, DC. Rather than send out an Associate Pastor with a group of its people, the church commissioned one of its lay leaders to transplant about 50 of its people to a growing area of the region about 13 miles east of its location. This layman provided much of the preaching and in addition organized other lay people to pastor the growing flock. After a year of worship services, this new church was prepared to call a full-time pastor.

A **fifth** model was demonstrated by this same church several years later when it continued planting daughter churches, but this time decided to keep the new churches connected to her in a collegiate association. Presently, two daughter churches meet on Sunday mornings at a distance from the mother in public facilities in growing areas of the region, but gather at the mother's building on Sunday evenings. The pastors of the two daughter churches are Assistant Pastors of the mother church and the governing board of the mother oversees the ministries of the two daughters.

A **sixth** model was developed when we were able to identify a capable and willing church planter, but had no people. The prospective organizing pastor had been an Assistant Pastor for several years in a church of a sister denomination in the area, but now he sensed a calling to plant a church. We expended $1100 advertising a public information meeting at a Holiday Inn in a rapidly growing part of suburban Washington; 35 people came. From that gathering the church planter was able to develop a core of six families to reach out to the area and begin worship services. This model is an example of what can happen when the church planter is available, but we initially had no people to serve as the core group.

A **seventh** way we have planted churches is displayed by one of our pastors who has a burden to reach with the gospel the ethnic communities of the Washington area. This concern led him to form the Washington Spanish outreach and raise the support to place on the field an Hispanic church planter. This man subsequently started two churches in the area through his evangelistic self-efforts.

An **eighth** method was implemented when the same Anglo pastor was instrumental in the formation of Chinese, Japanese and Korean churches in the area. In each case, the ethnic church meets in the facility of one of our Anglo churches so that not only are new churches planted, but also there is greater efficiency in the use of our buildings.

A **ninth** means by which we are planting new churches occurred when three of our existing churches on the western side of Washington contributed families to a new mission effort in their area. We had a qualified church planter with 18 years of ministry experience, and we had the right area in which to start the church, i.e. western Fairfax (County, Virginia, which is a very fast growing area of Washington. But, once again, we had no core families. After the need became known, one of our churches contributed three families when its pastor visited prospective families in his church asking them to become involved in the new mission. Another church contributed three families and our church contributed two families to provide the new mission a good start with eight core families.

The **tenth** method of planting churches developed in 1986 when I was called to be the Professor of Church Planting and Growth at our denomination's seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. The understanding was that I would train the students in church planting as I planted churches in the St. Louis region. By means of our demographic studies, we discovered that the western growth edge of the region was the optimal place to begin. At that same time, I was contacted by a lay leader in one of our existing churches who had been praying for 12 years that a church would be planted in his neighborhood, which unknown to him was in the middle of the targeted area. He and his wife, two seminary couples and I planted that church and within one year it was self-governing, self-propagating, and ready to call its own full time pastor. Because of excellent demographics and the man's persevering prayer, this was a church ready to be born. Because I was working as a full time professor which provided my support, the church was able to be self-supporting from its first day. This planting is a model of a "tent-making" ministry, so called because the Apostle Paul made tents to support himself as he planted churches throughout the Roman Empire.

The **eleventh** method of church planting occurred at the end of the year when one of the students, who assisted us in planting the above church and took church planting and growth courses with me at the seminary, was soon to graduate and desired to plant a church. Because he and his wife had participated in our church planting effort, they were considerably ahead of other seminary graduates in their preparation for this ministry. As a result, we were able to work with the church planting committee in the Washington, DC area to provide an internship and the finances for this couple to plant a church in one of the fast growing suburbs in the region. Several years later, this church planter gave away 40 people to another church planter to start a church 40 miles south of his location which is now 200 people and planting a daughter church of its own in Southern Maryland. Presently, we are producing approximately 5 men per year from our church planting training program at the seminary who will either plant a church immediately or we believe will do so within four years of graduation.

The **twelfth** method of church planting, which did not succeed very well, was attempted when we invited ten volunteer seminary couples to act as a core group to plant our second church in St. Louis. One of the reasons this planting did not take root was that new families who came to visit the church could not easily identify with the seminary families. Also, during exam periods and school vacations the students would emotionally or physically absent themselves. However, we have successfully planted churches when we carefully chose a maximum of three or four seminary families to participate.

The **thirteenth** method by which we have planted churches occurred during my third year at the seminary. I was concluding my time at the previous church when I received a visit from the pastor and lay leader from one of our established churches that had been planted 45 years before. Because of a series of difficult problems in the church, it had dwindled down to 5 families and these two leaders had come seeking counsel. The church had never owned a building but had just sold some land, so it possessed the financial resources to do significant ministry. After studying the various options, I proposed that we close the existing church and that I act as the organizing pastor to plant a new church with the present pastor as my Associate and the five families as the core group. Everyone agreed to the plan, so three months later we began a massive tele-marketing program calling 15,000 homes in the area. As a result, we planted the new church and from the first day averaged 110 in attendance and it is now averaging 175 people in weekly attendance. Perhaps, some of our small struggling churches should seriously consider this model as a viable option.

The **fourteenth** model was demonstrated recently when one of our larger St. Louis churches outgrew its facility since it was averaging over 550 people in attendance each Sunday. The township in which the church was located would not allow them to expand their building; so, the church purchased a large tract of land in a rapidly growing area at a distance of 12 miles and began making plans to construct a new facility. After studying several options, it was decided that 35% of the church would stay at the established location and 65% would begin meeting in a high school near its new site. Both churches have now grown significantly with combined Sunday attendance approaching 1400 people. Often, one of the most effective means of church planting and growth is for one church to have an amicable split and begin meeting in two different locations.

The **fifteenth** model is demonstrated by one of the largest of our St. Louis churches, which has designated $35,000 per year in its missions budget to enable a church to be planted somewhere in North America. As a result of this strategy, a church was planted in Columbus, Ohio and is now averaging 400 people in attendance per Sunday. One of our church planting students, who is also a member of the sponsoring church, has now completed an internship assisting the church in being planted. Now this St. Louis church is sponsoring a church being planted in Salt Lake City. This model illustrates a large church establishing as part of its mission focus the planting of new churches in a region it has especially targeted.

The **sixteenth** model was demonstrated several years ago when an elder in one of our St. Louis churches became enthused by the successful church planting efforts in our region. When he moved to Cleveland and found that we had no churches in the area where he lived; first, he pledged to provide a portion of the start up costs for the new church to be planted, and secondly, he immediately began developing a Bible study group to become the core of the new church. An ideal church planter was identified through our national church planter assessment center and the new church was planted. Now that church is ready to plant its first daughter. This model illustrates how a highly motivated layman can become the prime mover in the planting of a new church.

The **seventeenth** model occurred in 1989 through the president of our seminary, Paul Kooistra, because he was burdened to see many churches planted in the Midwest through the seminary. As a result, we developed a Midwest strategy in partnership with our national home missions agency and he raised most of the funds necessary to provide me with a full time associate for church planting. This man subsequently spent much of his time traveling through the 14 states of the Midwest acting as a catalyst with the church planting committees of our 7 presbyteries. We have now conducted several vision setting and training seminars for our church planting leadership of the Midwest with the result that a goal has been set to plant many additional churches in the Midwest. In addition, this man who subsequently became the Coordinator for Church Planting in the Midwest, was instrumental in the planting of an urban church in St. Louis. This strategy of establishing the position of Coordinator for Church Planting for a region has proven so successful in terms of the numbers of churches already planted that our home missions agency has now recruited coordinators for the other 5 regions of the nation. This model demonstrates the importance of a regional approach through a coordinator who acts as a catalyst for church planting.

The **eighteenth** model involves our current efforts to develop within our Doctor of Ministry program a Church Planting, Growth, and Renewal Concentration. After a man has attained at least three years of pastoral experience he can enter the program and take several of the program's eight courses in church planting/growth/ renewal and then develop his dissertation ministry project on a church planting topic. We are hopeful this training program will encourage pastors who are at mid-career to consider being "retooled" for church planting, because our most successful planters are experienced pastors who are willing to be trained for the more specialized ministry of church planting.

In summary, we believe the most effective way to win the lost to Christ is through the ministry of church planting. In the established churches of our denomination, one person comes to know Christ through every 21 members, but in our mission churches that ratio is 1:14, an increase of 33%. It is our prayer that over the next several decades these eighteen methods will be used to plant thousands of Christ-centered and Biblical churches that will serve as instruments in the hand of God to win North America to Christ.