

LEAD ON

COMMON CHALLENGES CHURCH PLANTERS FACE 18-36 MONTHS IN

BY JOHN VALENTINE

It All Begins

After all the work and build up and excitement of preparing to plant a church, the great day has arrived. The launch of the plant.

The core team is there and their families, there is quite a gang of people who have told you they were interested, and there are some people who you have no idea who they are.

Maybe you have invited some key people from the local community – the head teacher from the school, the councillors, the police and fire services, some names you have researched who are involved in the tenants' associations, the movers and shakers behind the community WhatsApp group.

There are some real nerves, along with the excitement, but all goes well – the worship is great, you feel your talk went well and was warmly received, the bun fight afterwards and activities for the children were terrific.

You even had one or two conversations along the lines of, 'I used to go to church and got out of the way of it; I think I might give this a go...' You get home in the late afternoon, tired but happy. 'This is really working,' you say to yourself.

I remember our launch Sunday and how marvellous it was. It was alive with hope and energy. The next Sunday was, of course, much fewer in number – none of our guests and well-wishers were there – but we had been prepared for that.

Succeeding Sundays saw steady growth, and we kept getting reports of an impact in the locality. One man said, 'I have lived here for 13 years now, and never even knew there was a church here. Now the flipping church is everywhere.'

It Gets Going

I was the Rector of the parish, and led the church plant. I was blessed with an amazing team, energetic, capable and committed. The congregation (the combined existing congregation and a group that had come from our sending church) were fantastic.

We were having a lot of fun getting to know each other, we felt that God was with us, and we were growing already. Finances were not a problem, the children's work was flourishing, we were starting new things, people were coming to faith, we were getting to know the local community.



A friend came to see me. He was about to plant a church, and he brought with him the man who was to be his curate. The curate asked how long it took before things settled down after the launch. This was about six months in. I said there was no sign of it yet. The pace was fantastic, and there were no signs of it letting up.

Our volunteers were doing amazing work amongst the most disadvantaged of our local community; our children's worker was building great links with the school; Alpha was going well, with people coming to faith; Christmas plans were well underway, with a volunteer choir, great audio-visuals, and a congregation happy to invite friends to it. This was great.

Of course, there were difficulties. And it was not always as exciting or positive as those heady early days. Over the course of time, we faced all kinds of challenges. We had enormous turnover in the congregation; many city-centre churches do, but ours seemed especially so.

We saw extraordinary numerical growth, and dramatic numerical decline. We faced financial challenges – we were set up with a paid staff model of church leadership, and our congregational giving could not sustain that long-term.

We had staff turnover too, and different staff members brought different gifts and passions. Some ministries proved exceptionally challenging and demanding. Other church plants moved into our area, and we went from flavour of the month to last year's news. At one point,

the ceiling of our church building fell in, and we had to move into the school.

God was always good to us, and we saw a constant stream of people coming to faith, engaged well with our local area, and sent people off every year to train for ordained ministry. But it was not all as I had imagined.

Common Challenges

I did more reading about church planting, and I talked to other church planters. I found that a number of the challenges we were experiencing were common to the early days of church planting. Our experience was pretty typical. It helped to know that. And it helped to talk with others and learn from them as we attempted to negotiate what felt like some pretty rough waters.

It turns out there are some common challenges in an 18-month to three-year period of a church plant.

PEOPLE

A lot of the issues church plants face are around people and relationships. There may be conflicts in the staff, misunderstandings with the sending church or the diocese, trouble within the congregation, ructions between the pre-existing congregation and the planting team. Many of the challenges of those early months and years require deep emotional intelligence and significant people skills from the church planter and the leadership team.



VISION AND VALUES

Another key area of challenge is around the ethos of the church and the direction of travel. There may have been a particular way of doing things in the church before the plant, or there may have been expectations in the planting team arising from the culture of the sending church. People may have joined from other churches bringing different theologies and ways of doing things, or the diocese may question how things are being done. These can all bring challenges for the leadership of the plant.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

There may have been unforeseen changes which have had an impact on the plant. Maybe a key staff member moves on, the money runs out, or there are issues with the building. There may be health concerns for key volunteers, or there are racial tensions in the parish.

THE LEADER

Another common factor is the health of the planter: emotional, spiritual, social and physical. There is a close correlation between the health of the planter and the unity of the leadership team, and the health, life and vibrancy of the plant.

THE FUTURE

There may be a loss of momentum, a dwindling of energy, a turning of the focus inwards into the life of the church, where it began with a focus outwards into the locality. There may seem less interest and less uptake about new ventures, the flow of volunteers is drying up, and things are just becoming harder. There may be several factors around this, but it nearly always comes back to vision and hope.

There are other things that might get a mention in this list. Some of them mask deeper issues. None of them is without precedent, and none of them are without solutions. The key is to identify what exactly is impacting you in your church plant. Take time to prayerfully and honestly work out what is going on. Do that with other core leaders. And then you know what you might need to begin to address.

The solutions will of course vary from place to place, but without a willingness to define reality there is no way of discerning a way forward. I've offered some questions below to get you started.

Take courage. You aren't the first person to encounter particular challenges 18-36 months in to a church plant. There are ways through. May God guide you.

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Where do you think 'people issues' are most likely to manifest themselves in your leadership? What might you do proactively to minimise their potential impact?
- Be ruthlessly honest with yourself, and express the missional heart of your vision for your church plant. What might be the major threats to this vision, and what steps could you take to deal with these? More positively, what can you do to fan the flame and keep the vision on course?
- What three steps can you take to ensure your health as a leader, and that of your team?

