

WHO CAN LEAD A CHURCH PLANT?

BY JOHN VALENTINE

Who can lead a church plant? Is it highly specialised? Or should this be something that everyone can do?

This is the second of three articles on the intersection of leadership and church planting. The first was about how church planting is something of a negotiated space; the task requires flexibility together with clear and tightly-held vision. This article turns more to the person themselves, as she or he is involved in leading a church plant.

IT DEPENDS ON WHAT IS MEANT BY A CHURCH PLANT ...

Partly, the answer depends on what is meant by a church plant. Craig Ott and Eugene Wilson, writing from a global perspective, identify three

fundamental models of church planter leadership in the New Testament (Global Church Planting, chapter 5:

1. **The apostolic** Starting a church from scratch, then moving on to do the same again when it is established.
2. **The catalytic** When churches are started with a view to them in turn planting further churches.
3. **The pastoral** When church planters start churches and stay on to pastor them.

Plainly, each approach would require different leadership styles and gifts.

In a British context, a resource church, with many hundreds of people, with a vision to plant other churches across a city or region, with a budget of hundreds of thousands of pounds, and a high social media profile, clearly demands very different gifts and personalities from a gathering of neighbours to read the Bible in our kitchen.

It is striking though that a major church planting movement in India looks for a love for Jesus as the preeminent characteristic of their potential church planters; and that a Chinese church planting movement looks for those who put

training into action for theirs; and that a study of church planters in the United States found that the main characteristics of successful church planters were spiritual ones. (Have a read of Church Planting Movements by David Garrison and Contagious Disciple Making by David and Paul Watson for examples of this thinking in practice.)

And it is also striking that there is a growing emphasis on teams in church planting in the work we are engaged in at the Gregory Centre. There are very few people who have all the necessary gifts in themselves to plant churches, which makes teams not so much a luxury as a necessity.

Maybe this was Paul's learning in his church planting work. Eckhard Schnabel identifies no less than nine different words used of Paul's companions in his missionary work, of which four use the prefix syn-, implying a shared activity (Paul the Missionary, p243). Robert Banks writes of the striking 'language of collegiality, of partnership' (Re-envisioning Theological Education, p113). Paul always had companions on his missionary journeys, but the number of co-workers expanded dramatically the more he went on. E.E. Ellis counts over a hundred of



them (article 'Paul and his Co-Workers' in Dictionary of Paul and his Letters, pp183-89).

IT DEPENDS ON THE INDIVIDUAL ...

In America, J. Allen Thompson has studied the characteristics of church planters. His research led him to identify three categories:

- Fundamental was what he called 'spiritual life dimensions'.
- Next were certain 'church planting skills'.
- Lastly, 'personal and interpersonal abilities'.

Charles Ridley has developed an analysis which is widely used in the United States to assess potential church planters: he lists church planter competencies as:

- The planter being intrinsically motivated.
- Spousal co-operation.
- The exercise of faith.
- Vision-casting.
- Effective building of relationships outside the church.
- Using the gifts of others.
- Building groups.
- A commitment to church growth.
- Flexibility.
- Resilience.

Craig Ott and Eugene Wilson, building on Thompson and Ridley, list seven competencies that church planters should demonstrate:

1. God's call.
2. Godly character.
3. Strong spiritual dynamics.
4. Spousal support.
5. Mission skills.
6. Emotional intelligence and adaptability.
7. Spiritual gifts.

See Global Church Planting, pp306-07.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERSHIP OF CHURCH PLANTS

Learning from this helpful research, we could suggest the following thoughts:

Devotion to Christ is primary.

The New Testament encourages us to locate the discussion of leadership competencies in the arena of love for Christ. As Jesus restores Peter, at the end of John's Gospel, his questions are all around Peter's love for him (John 21: 15-19). The calling of the apostles is grounded in the call to be with Jesus (Mark 3: 14-15). One thinks of John Wesley saying, 'Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God... ; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth'. Perhaps we run too quickly to gifts, rather than hearts. People who love Jesus tend to be more willing to spend and be spent for him. And what could be nearer to the heart of the work of church planting than a life lived out of a sense of the splendour and wonder and goodness of Jesus?

Calling is crucial.

It is interesting to note how Jesus appointed the apostles. After a night spent in prayer, he called them to be with him and gave them a commission; then he named them as apostles; and then he sent them on mission (Mark 3: 13-19). The naming seems crucial. Some contemporary research has identified the significance of church planters or pioneers thinking of themselves in such terms (for example Steven Croft, Michael Moynagh and Dave Male). Dave Male writes of the power of 'self-identify(ing) with their calling' ('Pioneering Leadership' Grove Booklet, p5). This seems a crucial step into their ministries. And a sense of having been called by God into this work helps sustain the church planter in difficult and challenging times. Maybe, there would be more church planting and more church planters if we were careful to name the ministry and those engaged in it accordingly?

The bar is not as high as we might think.

I love the title of Dave Male's book,



How to Pioneer (Even if You Haven't a Clue). There is a danger of imbuing church planting with a kind of mystique. Someone said to me the other day that church planters are like the SAS – this is true if he was extolling the courage of church planters, but not if he was implying that they are some kind of elite cadre within the Church. Reading through Romans 16, we find evidence of at least five church plants in Rome to whom Paul was writing, from very mixed backgrounds and ethnicities; we do not know much about them, but the fact that there were so many so early suggests that leadership was not thought of as as high bar as it sometimes is today.

Emotional intelligence is significant.

Bishop Ric Thorpe speaks about 'stickable people', when we are looking for church planters. Who are the ones who have the ability to gather others? When people go off in gangs to the cinema or to a meal out at the end of a church day, who has galvanised those groups? When there is a guest service or event, who brings people to these things? One example is of a parent, whose child joined a new school, and who had such gathering ability that very soon he had set up tea and coffee for the parents who would now arrive early to pick up their kids, so that they could spend time with these other people.

Entrepreneurial skills can play a part.

It is worth asking potential church planters if they have actually ever started something new. It need not have been a business or a large-scale project, but have they gathered a group, or set up an interest, or started a club? A mindset of innovation can be important in starting a church plant, as can the ability to be flexible and to find solutions rather than being stumped by problems.

Faith is central.

John Davidson has researched the training of effective church planters in the Assemblies of God in America. He has shown that faith is the key attribute. It was the key element of Jesus' teaching when he was just with the inner three or the 12 of his disciples, and it is core to how church planters approach their task. There are sure to be obstacles, and the faith that God is with them, for them and helping them overcome the challenges is a huge part of whether or not they succeed.

Spiritual gifts play a vital role.

If Paul planted, Apollos watered, but

God gave the growth (1 Corinthians 3: 6), then church plants fly or not through this beautiful interaction of what we do with the gifts given by God, and what he does. In the list of gifts given to the church by Christ in Ephesians 4, the apostolic and evangelistic (however we define these) seem more pertinent to planting new churches, than the pastor-teaching gifts, although all will be needed.

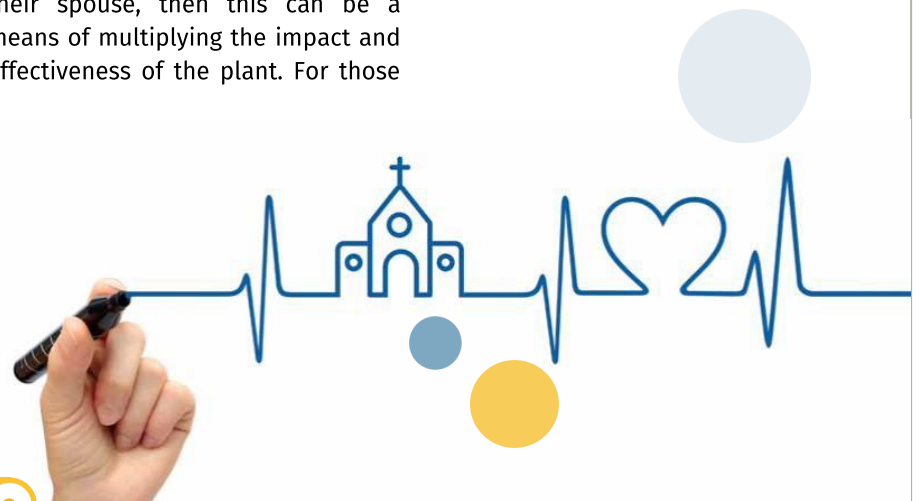
Supportive key relationships are important.

Last but by no means least, for those who are married, if the church planter's spouse does not have their heart in the church plant, this will likely mean that the plant will not thrive, and the church planter's marriage will be under strain. On the other hand, if the church planter has the support and encouragement of their spouse, then this can be a means of multiplying the impact and effectiveness of the plant. For those

who are single, key supportive friendships and like-minded networks have a vital role to play.

SO THEN, WHO CAN LEAD A PLANT?

The keys seem to be a passion for Christ, an enthusiasm for planting a church, and a love for people, a sense that Christ has called them and is with them, and a supportive network of relationships. All else can be trained and learned along the way.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. Harry comes up to you in church, and says he is interested in church planting. He is 15, and is sporadic in turning up for youth group. He has a wide circle of friends from school, but is often in trouble with the teachers. What do you say to him?
2. What about Michelle? She is a Chinese lady in her late 50s, recently widowed. You have been praying about starting a service amongst the community of Chinese students in the hall of residence in your parish from the local university. Could Michelle be the answer to your prayers? She loves the Bible and goes to every small group in the church, but has no friends outside the church.
3. The bishop has asked your church to put on a short course for training church planters. What do you think needs to go in it?