

# ADDRESSING OBJECTIONS TO CHURCH PLANTING

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A Paper

Presented to

Dr. J. D. Payne

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for 88500

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by

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May 17, 2007

## ADDRESSING OBJECTIONS TO CHURCH PLANTING

In North America today Christians often worry about increasing secularization as evidenced in losses in the culture war for morality, concern over the younger generations not being reached, and decline in attendance in many churches. Such concern is justified as the decline in Christianity's influence in North America has statistical backing. For example, a recent survey indicates that 44 percent of Americans now seldom or never attend church.<sup>1</sup> One church leader's recognition of this crisis is seen when he states that the church is yielding ground both numerically and spiritually, resulting in "losing the war for the heart of the people of this world."<sup>2</sup>

What can be done to reverse these trends? Is there any hope for Christianity in the North American context? Leading evangelical scholars state that there is hope, and part of that hope is found in church planting.<sup>3</sup> Ralph Moore claims that aggressive church planting will reverse our current trends.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, C. Peter Wagner boldly asserts that "the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches."<sup>5</sup> Those who

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Newport, "Just Why Do Americans Attend Church?" [on-line]; accessed 12 April 2007; available from <http://www.galluppoll.com/content/?ci=27124>; Internet.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Moore, *Starting a New Church: The Church Planter's Guide to Success* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002), 21.

<sup>3</sup>C Peter Wagner is one of the leading missiologists who advocates church planting. His book *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002) is an excellent example of his call for church planting. In addition, Ed Stetzer is a church planting leader within the Southern Baptist Convention. His website, [www.churchplantingvillage.net](http://www.churchplantingvillage.net), along with his book *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003) demonstrate his views on the subject. Additional evangelicals who have written about church planting in recent years include Stuart Murray, Charles Brock, and Wade Akins.

<sup>4</sup>Moore, *Starting a New Church*, 22.

<sup>5</sup>Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 11.

advocate church planting as a key part of the solution believe that a biblical basis exists for the practice. For example, in a handbook on how to start new churches, Paul Becker and Mark Williams respond to the question of whether God wants us to start new churches. They state,

The answer is as clear as a simple reading of the New Testament. Jesus gave the Great Commission just before He ascended into heaven.... The Apostles obeyed His command by going from town to town leading people to faith in Christ and planting churches. The book of Acts is primarily the account of the planting of churches in obedience to the command of Christ to make disciples.<sup>6</sup>

Starting new churches has a biblical basis. Considering that basis and the fact that Christians are yielding ground today, could anyone object to those who desire to see more churches? The answer to that question is not what one might assume. A debate does exist today as to whether or not it is appropriate to start new churches in North America.

It should be recognized from the outset that those who object to church planting do not usually make their objections in a straightforward manner. One is hard pressed to find Christian writers or leaders directly stating that starting new churches in North America is a bad idea. However, “a predictable series of objections”<sup>7</sup> may be found concerning church planting. On the pages that follow, such predictable objections will be addressed. These objections deserve mention and a response. As Stuart Murray notes, believers should “listen carefully to these objections, assess their significance, and consider their implications for church planting.”<sup>8</sup> Such an approach will be attempted here. While there are a myriad of objections to church planting, most can be classified into four main groupings: There is no need for church planting; Church planting harms existing churches; Church planting is not effective; and Church planting is good but is not for us.

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<sup>6</sup>Paul Becker and Mark Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, ed. Jim Carpenter (Oceanside, CA: Dynamic Church Planting International, 1999), 2.

<sup>7</sup>Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, 5.

<sup>8</sup>Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 18.

### **Objection 1: There Is No Need for Church Planting**

The first type of objection to church planting is based on the belief that it is not needed in the North American context. Those who hold this perspective may affirm that church planting is a valid approach in “unreached areas.” However, they reject it for “evangelized” areas. Such an objection is typically presented in one of two ways.

#### **New churches are not needed because North America is already reached.**

This objection to church planting is perhaps the most dangerous of all objections, not only because it is based on a false assumption, but also because it is one of the strongest myths that discourages church planting today.<sup>9</sup> Ed Stetzer, a leading church planting advocate for Southern Baptists, describes how this view persists: “People are fond of saying that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that Canada was founded upon the principles of peace, order, good government, and Christian principles. And so there’s this perception that North America is made up of two Christian nations.”<sup>10</sup>

While there is no denying the Christian foundation of the United States of America or the significant role that Christianity has played in this society, the view that the United States, or North America for that matter, is reached is a myth. Church planting author Stuart Murray notes that believers must come to terms with the end of Christendom, the time when church attendance was normal.<sup>11</sup> As already noted, a 2007 survey indicates that 44 percent of Americans now seldom or never attend church. Stetzer helps us go beyond these statistics and recognize the unreached nature of our nation in terms of everyday experiences. He notes how daily conversations reveal that the most well know verse is no longer John 3:16 but is now “judge not” from Matthew 7:1. He goes on to note the prevailing pluralistic attitude that there are many

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<sup>9</sup>Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, 9.

<sup>10</sup>Ed Stetzer, “Why We Don’t Plant Churches in North America” [on-line]; accessed 16 April 2007; available from <http://www.churchplantingvillage.net/atf/cf/%7B087EF6B4-D6E5-4BBF-BED1-7983D360F394%7D/01%20teacher%20notes%20final%20edit.pdf>; Internet.

<sup>11</sup>Murray, *Church Planting*, 20.

ways to heaven. These realities lead him to conclude that the United States and Canada must be viewed as “post-Christian nations.”<sup>12</sup> As an additional reminder of our own mission field, non-Western nations are now sending missionaries to reach North America.

In spite of the statistics and everyday experiences, the reality of an unchurched or post-Christian America is still hard for some Christians to embrace. In a place where there is freedom to worship, many churches, and Christian media abounding, how can this country not be reached? Stetzer provides an excellent response:

Certainly, North American *Christians* have access to abundant resources of information. Evangelicals read Larry Burkett for financial information, listen to James Dobson for advice on raising children, sing along with Third Day, and purchase Tim LaHaye’s fiction. But unchurched persons in North America remain generally untouched by this evangelical subculture and abide in darkness because the evangelical subculture is not providing a culturally relevant gospel witness.<sup>13</sup>

With the reality of millions of individuals in North America not being reached by the Christian subculture, the idea that new churches are not needed must be rejected. North America is, in fact, a vast mission field. As such, the words of Jesus should grip the hearts of all American Christians: “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest” (John 4:35, ESV). Those who recognize the mission field of this continent will embrace church planting just as they do for its use in the mission fields of other parts of the world.

### **There are already enough churches to reach North America.**

This objection is based on the idea that while North America is not reached, the existing churches are adequate to meet the challenge of reaching the peoples here. Such a view persists because, as in the words of church planter Ralph Moore, “most established churches serve their constituents well.”<sup>14</sup> Believers who see churches dotted across the country and who

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<sup>12</sup>Stetzer, “Why We Don’t Plant Churches in North America,” 8.

<sup>13</sup>Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, 9.

<sup>14</sup>Moore, *Starting a New Church*, 21.

enjoy their own churches can be lulled into thinking that there are enough churches to meet the challenge of reaching North America. It should be recognized that their perspective is not completely unfounded. Today more than 375,000 churches exist on the continent.<sup>15</sup> That number of churches means there is approximately one church for every 800 people.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the large number of churches, this argument is fundamentally flawed. First, looking to the large numbers misses the reality that many of those churches are not evangelical as all types of Christian groups are included in these statistics. Many of those “churches” are far removed from the New Testament concept of a church. Second, it does not take into account the reality that all areas do not have adequate number of churches. For example, Canada only has one church for every 1500 people.<sup>17</sup> There are also large unchurched areas of the US northeast and west coast. Third, while this objection correctly recognizes that there are sufficient churches for the present churchgoing population,<sup>18</sup> it misses the fact that there are not sufficient numbers to reach all of the unchurched individuals. Fourth, existing churches are in a period of decline. Even in the Southern Baptist Convention, one of the few denominations still experiencing growth today, more than seventy percent of the 42,000 churches are in a state of plateau or decline.<sup>19</sup> If a more strict definition of church health is utilized, only eleven percent of Southern

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<sup>15</sup>Taken from <http://www.americanchurchlists.com>. Accessed 16 April 2007.

<sup>16</sup>J. D. Payne, “42,000+ Southern Baptist Churches: Do We Really Need Another One?” [on-line]; accessed 16 April 2007; available from <http://www.northamericanmissions.org/?q=node/41>; Internet.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Murray, *Church Planting*, 23.

<sup>19</sup>Ken Walker, “Experts: Churches must focus more on connecting with guests,” *Baptist Press*, 16 February 2006 [on-line]; accessed 16 April 2007; available from <http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=22673>; Internet.

Baptist churches can be considered healthy and growing.<sup>20</sup> Not only are churches in decline, but they are also closing in large numbers. Every week more than seventy churches in North America close their doors for good.<sup>21</sup> With so many churches in decline, the belief that existing churches are up to the challenge of reaching the lost is not sustainable.

In reality, while enough churches exist for the current church goes and while those churches tend to serve their constituents well, “the percentage of Christians within the general population is shrinking.”<sup>22</sup> Church planting is a step to reverse this trend. In fact, church planting is built on an expectation and hope of future growth.<sup>23</sup> Instead of waiting for existing churches to impact society, new churches are needed as a proactive step to reach more for Christ. While many people have been reached in North America, we must not forget Jesus’ parable of the shepherd going after the lost sheep (Luke 15:4). As Wagner summarizes, “Even where there are many sheepfolds, there are still many lost or wandering sheep.”<sup>24</sup> Knowing that the Lord desires all to come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9), let us seek to plant new churches to pursue those individuals.

### **Objection 2: Church Planting Harms Existing Churches**

A second predictable type of objection to church planting deals with the perceived effects of starting new churches on existing churches in the community. It is especially true that these objections are rarely stated in a straightforward manner. Rather, these objections normally

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<sup>20</sup>The standards for a healthy, growing church as described by Bill Day of the Leavell Center for Evangelism and Church Health are a ten percent total membership growth over five years, at least one baptism for the first and last years of the study, a member to baptism ratio of 35 or less, and at least 25 percent of the membership additions being from conversions (Michael McCormack, “Study updates stats on health of Southern Baptist churches,” *Baptist Press*, 15 November 2004 [on-line]; accessed 16 April 2007; available from <http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=19542>; Internet.).

<sup>21</sup>Payne, “42,000+ Southern Baptist Churches: Do We Really Need Another One?”

<sup>22</sup>Moore, *Starting a New Church*, 21.

<sup>23</sup>Murray, *Church Planting*, 21.

<sup>24</sup>Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 30.

are found in terms of statements about the existing churches, particularly in relation to how starting a new church will impact the sponsoring church and other nearby churches.

### **Church planting creates too many losses for the sponsoring church.**

This objection deals with the effect starting a new church has on the mother or sponsoring church, which is the church from which the new church forms. This objection usually is presented in one of three ways. First, some say that starting a new church will break up the wonderful fellowship of the sponsoring church. They speak of the unity of their local congregation and how problematic it would be to send some of the people out to start a new church.

There is no denying that starting a new church will likely give an initial decline to the sponsoring church as a core group leaves to begin the new church. However, this objection is really an excuse. As church planters Paul Becker and Mark Williams note, the average church member only knows a few people well. The rest of the congregation are mere acquaintances. Thus, “it would be tragically short sighted to deny some the opportunity to hear the Gospel through a new church because we want to see casual acquaintances once or twice a week.”<sup>25</sup> Wagner helps demonstrate the fallacy of this objection to church planting. He notes that when a church member leaves because of a job transfer “few will complain that long-standing Christian fellowship will be broken.”<sup>26</sup> Yet in the area of something of much higher value, namely seeing the lost come to faith in Christ, people object on those grounds. In addition, it is hard to imagine the church in Antioch objecting to sending Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey (Acts 13) because they would lose fellowship with them. The New Testament pattern is that of sending people out from a church fellowship for the purpose of Kingdom work.

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<sup>25</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 16.

<sup>26</sup>Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 40.



Second, this objection may be presented in terms of not being able to afford to lose the workers and leaders who would go to the new church. Such an objection should not be surprising in an age where pastors are praised for having bigger buildings, larger budgets, and more programs and staff.<sup>27</sup> This objection may also be stated in terms of harming the growth momentum in the sponsoring church. Are such fears warranted?

Ralph Moore, a pastor with a vision for church planting, recounts how he was once asked if he would be pastoring a much larger church if he quit sending people away to work in church plants. His response was, “Yes, but I would touch fewer people.”<sup>28</sup> Moore recognizes the danger of equating success with size. Unfortunately, those who raise this objection do not share his perspective. Instead, their objections tend to reflect a subtle, underlying desire to build an earthly kingdom instead of a heavenly kingdom. Becker and Williams describe such objections as coming from Christians who are “more concerned with the growth of their own corner of the kingdom, rather than the growth of the kingdom as a whole.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to having an incorrect focus, this objection also misses the recognition of how God operates. Jesus told us to “pray earnestly” for laborers to be sent into the harvest fields (Luke 10:2). At the same time, He promised us that if we give it will be given to us (Luke 6:38). Churches that send out laborers have experienced the joy of obedience to His commands as well as the blessings of God fulfilling His promises. Often, the host church discovers that other members who were not involved in ministry step up to fill the gaps created by those who left. The leadership void is quickly filled, resulting in more believers involved in ministry. In addition, church planting helps the believers in the sponsoring church keep a Kingdom mindset and develop trust in God as they take steps of faith. Woodstock Baptist Church in Georgia is one

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<sup>27</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 23.

<sup>28</sup>Moore, *Starting a New Church*, 17.

<sup>29</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 20.

example of a church that took God's commands and promises seriously. On the very week that they sent out a part of their congregation to start a new church, they experienced a high-attendance day in their own church as "God brought new people into their mother church."<sup>30</sup>

### **Church planting hurts other churches in the area.**

As with the previous objection, this objection is cloaked in terms of helping existing churches. In a recent online discussion regarding church planting, a person raised the following question: "I am wondering to myself if church planting is the answer when there are already so many empty churches?"<sup>31</sup> Similarly, a news article on church planting several years ago recognized this concern when it stated, "There are concerns within churches about using denominational funds to start new churches when struggling existing churches have so many needs."<sup>32</sup> Should resources be focused on church revitalizing instead of church planting?

United Kingdom church planters Martin Robinson and David Spriggs provide a helpful response to these questions:

At first sight it does seem ridiculous to consider planting a new church when old ones are being closed. At first sight, it looks as if people do not want to go to church any more. However, the truth may be somewhat different. It could be that the building is in a place where people no longer live and the church has dwindled because of population movement. It may also be that people do not want to go to that kind of building, or even that the values and lifestyle of those represented there are alien to the culture of those who live around the building. A different kind of "church," made up of people committed to Christ, may work even where a building is being closed.<sup>33</sup>

Robinson and Spriggs illustrate this concept by noting that city-center shopping areas are closing. That reality does not mean that people are no longer interested in shopping. Instead, it

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<sup>30</sup>Ed Stetzer, "To Plant or Not to Plant? The Debate" [on-line]; accessed 28 March 2007; available from <http://www.churchplantingvillage.net/atf/cf/%7B087EF6B4-D6E5-4BBF-BED1-7983D360F394%7D/02%20student%20notes%20with%20blanks.pdf>; Internet.

<sup>31</sup>Taken from <http://www.goodmanson.com/2006-05/16/the-state-of-the-american-church-why-church-planting-is-critical-to-the-future-of-american-christianity>. Accessed 28 March 2007.

<sup>32</sup>David Briggs, "Mainline Bodies Return to Church Planting," *Christian Century*, 23 August 2003, 16.

<sup>33</sup>Martin Robinson and David Spriggs, *Church Planting: The Training Manual* (Oxford: Lynx Communications, 1995), 14.

shows that the preferred location and approaches to shopping are changing. Just as large storefront shopping areas today have replaced the city centers of the past, new churches that present the unchanging Gospel in a culturally relevant way are needed in the new population centers. As such, what is being advocated is not planting more churches like the existing churches. According to Stuart Murray, many of our existing churches have “inadequate or inappropriate buildings, indebtedness, poor community relations, debilitating traditions, intransient leaders, and low morale.”<sup>34</sup> New churches that contextualize the Gospel without compromising its message are needed to reach people where they live and in a relevant way.

While new churches consistently are shown to reach people, several additional comments are needed in response to the objection that church planting harms existing churches. First, the objection presents an unhealthy view of competition between churches. Christians must remember that the enemy is Satan, not each other. Truly, “no Bible believing church is the competition.”<sup>35</sup> Second, the objection is based on the faulty premise that reviving existing churches is both easy and effective. The reality is that it is very difficult to reverse the trends of a declining church. As is often quoted by church planters, “It is easier to have a baby than to raise the dead.”<sup>36</sup> The pastor of a recent United Methodist church plant in Ohio recognizes this reality when he states that using money to revitalize dying churches has not proven to be effective. His conclusion is, “We’ve tried that for the last decade and it hasn’t worked.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Stetzer notes that nobody has discovered how to revive large churches on a widespread basis.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Murray, *Church Planting*, 23.

<sup>35</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 22.

<sup>36</sup>David Snapper, “Unfulfilled Expectations of Church Planting,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996): 465.

<sup>37</sup>Briggs, “Mainline Bodies Return to Church Planting,” 16.

<sup>38</sup>Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, 9.

At this point it should be noted that starting new churches does not preclude efforts to revitalize dying churches. In fact, planting new churches and seeking the revitalization of declining churches can be complementary. Considering the shopping analogy once again, even though similar stores often locate in the same vicinity, the proximity usually increases sales in both. Hence, shopping malls and clusters of restaurants remain in the same vicinity. Similarly, Wagner believes that two churches in close proximity will reach more than either could do alone.<sup>39</sup> In addition, he describes the effect new churches have on existing churches by saying that they create a “force field” where “the whole religious consciousness of the community can rise.”<sup>40</sup> Moore describes this same concept in terms of “spillover growth.”<sup>41</sup>

Both of these objections that relate to existing churches are grounded in an underlying attitude of provincialism. Provincialism, or territorialism, is looking out for the interest of oneself more than the greater good of the Kingdom. Conservative Baptist church planter Leonard Waterman describes such provincialism in a ditty he wrote:

To plant a church across the state,  
O, that will be glory;  
But to start one in the town nearby,  
Well ... that's another story!<sup>42</sup>

Whether it be fear of losing people from one's own fellowship, fear that the new church will grow bigger than the sponsor church, or fear of how other churches will be affected and react, such fears are unwarranted and stem from a narrow focus on one's own kingdom. The bottom line is that “more churches reach more people.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 41.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>41</sup>Moore, *Starting a New Church*, 24.

<sup>42</sup>Leonard P. Waterman, *A Manual for Starting New Churches* (1984), 14.

<sup>43</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 27.

### **Objection 3: Church Planting Is Ineffective**

Interestingly, the objection that church planting is ineffective can be heard from both those who have never been involved in church planting as well as some who have tried to start churches. For the first group, the objection is raised in terms of questioning why one should start several small churches when the focus should be on helping large churches develop a full slate of programs. For the second group, the objection may be found in the form of exasperation, namely “We tried it and it did not work.”

#### **Focus on large churches since church planting divides resources.**

Waterman describes how he normally hears this objection articulated: “Why start several struggling little churches when you can have one big strong one with a full slate of programs and a multiple staff to minister to every possible need of both the congregation and the community?”<sup>44</sup> While we cannot see the hearts of those who make this objection, there is an inherent danger that, like the objection that church planting harms existing churches, people may be trying to build their own kingdom instead of focusing on God’s Kingdom. However, some legitimately believe that large “full-service congregations”<sup>45</sup> are the most effective form of the church. These individuals believe that larger churches reduce duplication found in having multiple smaller churches in an area, provide opportunities that small churches could not offer, and create a more unified voice for Christians in the community.<sup>46</sup>

First, it should be noted that there is nothing wrong with being a large church provided that the church stays focused on reaching the lost. However, being large is not necessarily the same thing as being effective. Stetzer notes that not all large churches have a passion for

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<sup>44</sup>Waterman, *A Manual for Starting New Churches*, 16.

<sup>45</sup>While this phrase is used by Ed Stetzer, he rejects the view that such large congregations are more effective. Instead, Stetzer believes that new churches are often more effective than large churches (Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, 6).

<sup>46</sup>Murray, *Church Planting*, 28.

reaching the lost. Instead, he found that new churches tend to be more effective at evangelism.<sup>47</sup> Because of their nature, new churches tend to be outwardly focused since there is a need to grow and since there are no existing structures and traditions to maintain. A study of 1,000 church plants from twelve denominations reveals that flourishing church plants have higher than average number of baptisms in their first four years and have the common traits of “evangelistic emphasis, effective ministries, and expanding leadership.”<sup>48</sup> While there is nothing wrong with having a large church, often new churches, which tend to be small at the outset, are more effective in having an evangelistic focus and outreach.

Second, large churches are not able to reach everyone in their communities. Moore notes that no one church can adjust to meet the needs of everyone in their community.<sup>49</sup> New churches are often more effective at welcoming and meeting the needs of the next generation since styles become ingrained in a church making their “wineskins less flexible” and less appealing to the new generation.<sup>50</sup> New churches also provide opportunities for both the poor and for people of differing ethnicities to find a place to belong. As Moore notes, “the more churches in a community, the more chances there are for people truly to find a place where they fit into the body of Christ.”<sup>51</sup> To illustrate from the business world once again, Stetzer cites the philosophy of McDonalds:

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<sup>47</sup>Stetzer, “Why We Don’t Plant Churches in North America,” 3.

<sup>48</sup>Mickey Noah, “Baptisms Reflect Healthy New Churches,” *Baptist Press*, 4 April 2007 [on-line]; accessed 16 April 2007; available from <http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=25328>; Internet.

<sup>49</sup>Moore, *Starting a New Church*, 24.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

Consider for a moment a lesson from business. What if there was a city of 100,000 people and they had no McDonald's. Would they open just one franchise to meet the needs of the entire population? Of course not! A town of 100,000 with no McDonald's is a gold mine to the company! They don't just build one restaurant; they build 10 restaurants to service all those people. And in the same way, when you consider the demographics, the best way to reach people for Christ is through a multitude of churches. Thousands of souls hang in the balance. The truth is, many churches of all types are needed to reach the multitudes for Christ.<sup>52</sup>

Every community needs a multitude of churches so that everyone in the community can connect with the body of Christ.

Third, the duplication created by having many smaller churches is not necessarily bad. As already noted, starting new churches presents more opportunities for believers to be involved in the work of ministry. In addition, a cooperative spirit can exist in places where church planting occurs as people work together to advance the Kingdom.<sup>53</sup> Having multiple churches provides more unchurched people an opportunity to hear the voice of the Christian community. As Wagner reminds his readers, "Appeals to Christian love and Christian unity should be geared toward encouraging church planting and thereby contribute to evangelizing the unchurched."<sup>54</sup>

As with the issue of church planting and church revitalization, the discussion of large churches verses new churches, which tend to be small at the outset, is not an either/or issue. Perhaps a focus on starting newer churches will ultimately lead to those smaller church starts becoming large, vibrant churches which will plant other churches. Such a reproducing approach will increase the number of people reached. Stetzer describes this possibility when he comments, "Large churches are good and they are needed, but new churches tend to be more effective at winning the lost. And hopefully, in turn, they will become large churches, retaining that focus on reaching the lost."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Stetzer, "Why We Don't Plant Churches in North America," 5.

<sup>53</sup>Murray, *Church Planting*, 32.

<sup>54</sup>Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 42.

<sup>55</sup>Stetzer, "Why We Don't Plant Churches in North America," 3.

### **We tried church planting and it did not work.**

There is no question that church planting is hard work and that the results can be discouraging at times. A study of church planting efforts in the Christian Reformed Church presents a bleak picture. David Snapper reports that his denomination's church plants rarely grow larger than 200 people, with most remaining below 150 members for more than a decade.<sup>56</sup> He continues to state that even though his denomination has spent as much as nine million dollars per year on new church development, "the results are discouraging."<sup>57</sup> Like these experiences, many others have attempted to start a church only to fail in that effort. However, do such struggles and failures mean church planting is ineffective?

When considering just the failures, the examples do not negate the need to start new churches. Becker and Williams bluntly respond to this objection by asking that if a child dies do the parents not have any more children?<sup>58</sup> Their point is well taken that a trial, struggle, or defeat in people's lives do not prevent them from trying again. From a ministry perspective, Waterman articulates the same idea. He writes,

Yes, there are new church failures just as there are established church failures, missionary failures and failures in the pastorate. We are not about to scrap our missionary program because a missionary has a nervous breakdown or experiences some other sort of failure. When we see a new church failure we want to see what we can learn from it so that we can actually benefit from this failure rather than be discouraged by it. A fear of failure can stifle our vision.<sup>59</sup>

While we can learn from the failures, it is important to realize that despite common perceptions, most church plants actually succeed. A recent study of 1,000 churches begun between 2000 to 2005 reveals that the picture is not as bleak as some assume. The study conducted by the North American Mission Board found that these new churches had a 68 percent

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<sup>56</sup>Snapper, "Unfulfilled Expectations of Church Planting," 465.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 27.

<sup>59</sup>Waterman, *A Manual for Starting New Churches*, 12.



survivability rate regardless of their denominational affiliation.<sup>60</sup> After four years the average church plant had an average of more than eighty people in attendance.<sup>61</sup> While there are failures of some church plants, there are also many success stories. For example, Fellowship Community Church was planted in Salem, Virginia, in 2000. Today it has more than 674 members and has baptized approximately 190 people in the past three years. This church gives to the Southern Baptist Convention, is in the midst of its own building campaign, and has already helped start three new churches.<sup>62</sup> Their success is not unique; the statistics indicate that for every failure there is more than one success.<sup>63</sup> Church planting remains an effective way to reach people with the Gospel.

#### **Objection 4: Church Planting is Good but Someone Else Should Do It**

Unlike the other objections, this final objection recognizes the need for and legitimacy of church planting. However, those who make these objections see church planting as a task for someone else. The most common reasons for not personally being involved in church planting relate to finances and the size of the sponsor church.

#### **Church planting is good, but we cannot financially afford to be involved.**

Some people who affirm church planting do not become personally involved because of finances. They believe that church planting is an expensive endeavor, prohibiting their church from being involved. One author in the Brethren movement commented about the financial difficulties of church planting:

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<sup>60</sup>Ed Stetzer and Phillip Connor, “Study Shows 68 Percent Survivability Rate for Church Plants” [online]; accessed 16 April 2007; available from <http://www.namb.net/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=9qKILUOzEpH&b=2027651&ct=3656793>; Internet.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Noah, “Baptisms Reflect Healthy New Churches.”

<sup>63</sup>Stetzer and Connor, “Study Shows 68 Percent Survivability Rate for Church Plants.”

As any New Church Development Committee person would admit, it is also a lengthy, taxing, and expensive enterprise. The financial resources required to start a new church are constantly increasing as clergy salary scales rise, land values fluctuate, environmental impact fees are added to the cost of building permits, and the cost of buildings and equipment go up.<sup>64</sup>

However, such requirements are not necessary. First, church plants do not require the financial resources mentioned. Use of rental property or even public facilities such as schools can minimize cost. In addition, bivocational church planters will lessen the financial requirements. Second, churches do not have to attempt church planting alone. Partnerships with other like-minded congregations are just one possibility to enable financial hurdles to be overcome. As Becker and Williams describe, “careful and creative consideration, however, may reveal just how affordable a daughter church can be!”<sup>65</sup>

In addition, some make the financial objection by saying they already give to missions and, thus, cannot give toward a church plant. Those who make this statement tend to equate missions work with overseas work. One pastor commented, “My people just don’t see church planting as viable missions.”<sup>66</sup> Such a relegation of missions to overseas work is incorrect. Acts 1:8 makes clear that the mission field includes work in our own city, state, nation, as well as the world. It is both/and, not an either/or approach.

Regardless of which financial excuse is stated, the rationale is flawed. Not only are there creative ways to meet the financial needs of church plants, but there are ways for existing congregations to help support church plants without any financial involvement.<sup>67</sup> Sending people to start the church, providing leadership training, and praying for the new church can all be done without any financial commitments. As J.D. Payne notes, “Despite popular opinion,

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<sup>64</sup>Norman Harsh, “Financial Resources for Church Planting,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 36 (1991): 221.

<sup>65</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 17.

<sup>66</sup>Bruce R. Finn, “Small Churches Can Plant Churches” (D. Min. project, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2000), 116.

<sup>67</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 25.

church planting is evangelism that results in congregations and can be one of the most inexpensive evangelistic ministries of our churches.”<sup>68</sup>

**Church planting is good, but our church is not large enough to be involved.**

Some Christians and church leaders who recognize the need for church planting say they cannot be involved because their church is too small. Similar to an objection stated earlier, they believe that starting a new church would be too difficult because of their size. In response, it should be noted that there is no biblical precedent for reaching a certain size before becoming involved in church planting.<sup>69</sup> If church planting is biblical and if a church is committed to an Acts 1:8 principle of missions, then there is no reason to wait. Becker and Williams once again provide a needed rebuke when they say, “It is not the size of the church that counts, it’s the size of the vision that matters.”<sup>70</sup> Too often the delay of involvement in church planting is because a church is pursuing its own agenda and building its own kingdom. With millions lost in North America, such a delay is not acceptable. Churches of any size can be involved in helping start new churches.

Ultimately, citing finances or small size for a lack of involvement in church planting comes from fear, a lack of trust in God’s provision, and an improper view of the nature of the church. As Waterman describes, “fear of the unknown and fear concerning our own ability to initiate the preliminary steps in seeking to get a new work started is an old story.”<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, the fear often originates in the heart of the pastor, resulting in his congregation lacking the vision for involvement in church planting work. In conducting research on small church involvement in church planting, Bruce Finn heard pastoral remarks such as “I want my

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<sup>68</sup>Payne, “42,000+ Southern Baptist Churches: Do We Really Need Another One?”

<sup>69</sup>Becker and Williams, *The Dynamic Daughter Church Planting Handbook*, 28.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>71</sup>Waterman, *A Manual for Starting New Churches*, 12.

church to plant a daughter church someday. But that seems far away.” He also heard, “We are likely to expand our current facility before we plant a daughter church.”<sup>72</sup> Finn recognized that many pastors fail “to transfer the value and priority of church planting to the membership of his church.”<sup>73</sup> The result is that God’s people in those congregations miss an opportunity to be involved in God’s redemptive work and the blessings that go along with that work. Finn continues,

The sense of inferiority which is felt by many small churches presents a formidable obstacle to church planting. Feeling inferior, pastors and their congregations may draw the conclusion that church planting is not for them, but only for larger churches. They may decide that their small budget and limited resources are insignificant in the cause of church planting. By accepting the notion that “bigger is better,” the small church may choose to watch from the sidelines while larger churches with bigger budgets, more people, and bolder strategies do most of the work toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission.<sup>74</sup>

Unfortunately, this perspective is contrary to their calling in Matthew 28:18-20 and in Acts 1:8. Churches must reclaim their missionary calling and recognize how church planting at home helps fulfill God’s plan.

### **Conclusion**

There is a need for church planting; It does not harm existing churches; It is effective; Every church can be involved to some degree. However, the objections examined do provide some words of caution for church planters. First, the objection that there is no need has merit when one considers that church planting tends to be done in easy areas. There are many difficult areas in the United States where little work is being done, while an abundance of work is being done in areas where there are already many vibrant churches planting churches. Second, the objections concerning how church planting harms existing churches should serve as a reminder about the dangers of seeking to build an earthly kingdom. Church planters must guard against

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<sup>72</sup>Finn, “Small Churches Can Plant Churches,” 98.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 118.

developing those same mindsets as their churches grow, build buildings, and add programs. If they are not careful, there is a danger of losing their evangelistic fervor and vision as the church ages. Third, the objections relating to unity remind church planters of the need for partnerships with like-minded Christians in order to do more than can be done alone. As their churches grow, there is a danger in losing the focus on working alongside others to fulfill the great commission.

With the most common objections addressed, it is helpful to be reminded of some reasons *to* plant churches. Wagner says that there are both theological and empirical reasons to start new churches. Theologically, he uses 2 Peter 3:9 as a reminder that God wants His sheep found. Wagner states that every generation has to be won to Christ on its own terms, a task that requires new churches.<sup>75</sup> Empirically, he notes that new churches are a key for outreach, grow faster than older churches, provide more options for the unchurched, help denominations survive, and meet the needs of believers.<sup>76</sup> Robinson and Spriggs agree. They state that new churches are the best evangelistic method since they make the good news “accessible, culturally relevant, and authentic.”<sup>77</sup> However, they make a helpful distinction between the primary reason and the pragmatic reasons for new churches when they state, “We could say that our *primary* reason for planting churches is out of obedience to Christ, and the *pragmatic* reason is that church planting seems to be a very effective way to bring this about.”<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, church planting is a penultimate goal, not the ultimate goal.<sup>79</sup> The ultimate goal in this work is seeing God glorified as the lost are saved and as believers are built up and equipped for a life of worship and service before God.

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<sup>75</sup>Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 28-30.

<sup>76</sup>Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 31-34.

<sup>77</sup>Robinson and Spriggs, *Church Planting*, 13.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Murray, *Church Planting*, 31.

Every Christian and every congregation can play a part in starting new churches.

Stetzer provides an excellent challenge for us when he comments about Isaiah's response to God:

Who will the Lord send to the great unchurched cities of North America? And what about the communities and rural areas without an evangelical witness? How about all the suburban areas where young families have moved up and in but still attend no church? Who will the Lord send? Maybe He'll send you.

All of us need to seek the Lord as to how He desires to use us and our congregations in order to reach the lost in our own Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, without neglecting our responsibility to the ends of the earth as well. In light of the calling, the need for new churches, and the lack of validity in the most common objections to church planting, we should all seek to be involved in the work of church planting. How can we afford not to be involved in this effective evangelistic work when millions remain untouched by our Christian subculture?

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