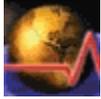




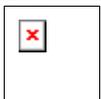
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The Most Effective Evangelistic Strategy Under Heaven

by Ed Stetzer

Southern Baptists applied this evangelistic strategy more than 1,600 times last year in the U.S. and Canada. Thousands of IMB missionaries are using it. SEBTS President Paige Patterson keeps encouraging his students to use it in New Hampshire. Former Pastors' Conference president Johnny Hunt keeps sending his church members away to do it (locally and in Las Vegas!). What is "it?"



They planted churches. They were involved with what some church growth analysts have called "the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven."¹

Church planting is catching the attention of more and more evangelical Christians. Why? Because the need in North America is great, new churches add value to our denomination and build the Kingdom, the Bible teaches church planting, and new churches have proven to be extremely effective in fulfilling the Great commission. People are planting new churches because new churches are part of God's plan to reach the world.

The Need in North America

There is clearly a need in Asia, but what about in the United States and Canada? If we look on the surface, we might be inclined to think that North America has been reached. Certainly, North American Christians have access to abundant resources of Christian information, technology, and music. Evangelicals read Larry Burkett for financial information and listen to James Dobson for advice on raising children. They sing along with popular Christian recording artists and purchase the current best-selling Christian fiction. Because this significant Christian subculture exists, some might wrongly conclude that most people have been reached. But the unchurched in North America remain generally untouched by this evangelical subculture.

The spiritual deadness of North America is reflected not only in its culture but also in its churches. Churches in the first decade of the 21st century are closing at a phenomenal rate. Churches in the first decade of the 21st century are closing at a phenomenal rate. Each year the number of churches per person decreases. Almost three times as many churches are closing each year as are opening.² It is not just less churches, but also less church attendees. No county in the United States reports having a higher percentage of people in church than ten years ago.³ Our churches

As a Little Child



Mosaic



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are dying and our culture is turning from Christ. But statistics show that new churches can — and do — make a difference.

In Seattle, less than 4 percent of people are evangelical, let alone Southern Baptist. This is less than any country in Central and South America — places that are seen as legitimate mission fields. Seattle, and much of North America, needs to be seen as a mission field once again. We need more missionaries like Kevin Sullivan who planted High Pointe Community Church in Seattle. This Southern Baptist church has grown to 1,000 in three years.

New Church Growth is Kingdom Growth

Although starting a new church might not grow your own congregation, it does expand God's Kingdom (and it might just bless your church in the process). More churches will help us reach more people by multiplication and not just addition.

New churches themselves are an indispensable gift to the Body of Christ. They are a gift of evangelism. According to research from Will McRaney at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary:

"In a newly planted church there are 14.4 baptisms per year for every 100 people in regular attendance in worship. When a church has been in existence sixteen years or more, the baptism rate is half that: Only 7.3 baptisms per year for every 100 people in attendance."⁴

Without church planting, our denomination will decline; but more importantly, the number of Christians in North America will continue to decline. If we love God's Kingdom, we must love church planting.

In Southern Baptist life, the majority of our new churches are ethnic or African-American. They add a new vitality to our denominational milieu. They are expanding the Kingdom into communities where we do not speak the language and/or do not understand the culture. For example, in 2002, Pastor Benjamine Mishin planted Lifeway Bible Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pa. The church is reaching Russian young adults and already averages over 100 people per week.

What Does Your Bible Teach?

The New Testament says a great deal about church planting. The early church fulfilled the Great Commission by planting churches throughout the Roman Empire. New churches were formed as a result of evangelism. Men and women were then congregationalized.

New churches still need to be planted today. Why? Because the methods of the New Testament are still valid today. Ephesians 3:10 teaches that God has chosen the church to make known His manifold wisdom. Like Paul going to Athens, we need to go to the Areopagus of our communities and proclaim a culturally relevant gospel witness leading to a new church.

Matthew Heusted understands this biblical mission. He is a Nehemiah Project Church Planter working part-time to start house churches in multihousing communities in Louisville, Ky. He believes that these house churches are an extension of the New Testament church in these often closed off communities. Like the church in Acts, they meet together in homes to "do" New Testament church.

What Now?

We must focus on planting new churches if we are to fulfill the Great Commission. Without church planting, Christianity will continue to decline in North America.

"Studies show that if a denomination wishes to reach more people, the number of new churches it begins each year must equal at least 3 percent of the denomination's existing churches."⁵ Southern Baptists plant about 4 percent, but still not nearly enough if we are to reach North America. That is only 1 percent over the break-even point.

To reach North America, we need God's people to step forward and be a part of the most effective form of evangelism under heaven. We need:

- Students from our colleges and seminaries,
- Experienced pastors planting in new communities,
- Churches desiring to expand the Kingdom by starting new churches,
- Prayer partners interceding on behalf of new churches,
- Laypeople planting churches in their homes, and
- Many other kinds of Kingdom builders — perhaps even you!

1 C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1990), p. 11.

2 Tom Clegg and Tim Bird, *Lost in America: How You and Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishers, 2001), p. 30.

3 Robert E. Logan and Thomas T. Clegg, *Releasing Your Church's Potential* (Carol Stream, Ill.: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), pp. 1-3.

4 *Church Planting as an Effective Evangelistic Strategy* (Alpharetta, Ga.: North American Mission Board, 2003), p. 23.

5 Excerpt from the "Eastland Report: Church Planting," www.easum.com/church.htm, December 11, 2002.

Adapted from Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age *by Ed Stetzer published by Broadman and Holman Publishers. Ed Stetzer is a church planter, former seminary professor, and now works at the Church Planting Group of the North American Mission Board helping colleges and seminaries to recruit, train, and help deploy church planters.*

Interested in learning more?

For potential planters: www.churchplanting.info

For academic institutions: www.namb.net/nehemiah

For churches: plantachurch@namb.net

For associations: www.namb.net/lightupthenation

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