

MULTIPLYING CHURCHES

A Biblical Imperative

by Brian Vaatstra



CRCA MINISTRY FORMATION

"A Church Reforming To Reach the Lost for Christ"

www.ministryformation.com.au

Introduction

When the early Dutch migrant families came to Australia 50 years ago, they brought with them a desire to build the kingdom of God in this country. They established new churches wherever they settled, much in the same way the early Christians did when they were forced out of Jerusalem by persecution. The result was that churches were multiplied and planted throughout the country, and people were saved, albeit mainly through the evangelism of other Dutch migrants (Article 30 of the Acts of Synod 1952 states, "The churches are encouraged to carry out home missions work among the many unchurched Dutch migrants"). This effort grew the Christian churches to a peak of around 10,000 members in the 1980s.

However, as large-scale migration from Holland stopped, and Australian-born children started to outnumber Dutch-born children in many churches, our churches gradually lost their migrant character, which had in the past provided the impetus for church planting. As a result church planting has all but stopped, and with it the growth of our denomination, which has slipped to just under 9,000 members in 2005.

This short article suggests that church planting is the most effective way to win new converts to faith in Christ, and build the church of Jesus Christ. This is not suggested as something that operates apart from God's grace, but very much within it, and dependent on the sovereign

work of God. Before we start, we also need to acknowledge that there have been some churches in our denomination, which have grown through means other than church planting. But an honest assessment will most likely reveal that the growth is more through transfers from other churches than new converts to Christ.

The principle & imperative of multiplication

Multiplication is a biblical principle and imperative. The Bible teaches that the Kingdom of God is something that grows. In Daniel 2:35 we read that the Kingdom of God is like a small stone that grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth.

Jesus teaches us to expect the Kingdom of God to grow. He calls us to pray, Your Kingdom come, He teaches through his parables in Matthew 13, that He has the Word of the Kingdom, which is capable of explosive growth. It is sown and it will bear fruit a hundredfold. As we read Luke's account of the early church in Acts we see this sort of

spectacular growth, as the Kingdom is spread through the preaching of the gospel and people are saved. How is this done? It is done by the power of God, through the process of discipleship making. The command of Jesus to make disciples in Matthew 28:19-20 has an inbuilt multiplying effect. The work of disciple-making is done by baptising people (bringing them to faith (by God's grace)), and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded, including



the command to make disciples.

Of course, the church and Kingdom are not identical. The Kingdom of God is broader than the church, because it includes God's cosmic rule over all things. Yet the church is an agent of the Kingdom. It spreads the word of the Kingdom – the gospel of Jesus Christ. As the Kingdom grows, so the church grows. That does not mean that every church will see spectacular growth. God is sovereign and will determine where and when growth occurs.

Nevertheless, as the Word of the Kingdom, the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, the church should expect growth. The church is described as a living thing in Scripture. It is described as God's garden (1 Corinthians 3:6), a living temple (Ephesians 2:21-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5), and a body (Ephesians 4:16), all indicating dynamism and growth.

As we have already seen, the church grows through the proclamation of the gospel. The parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-23 teaches that the Word of God is to be liberally spread around into every social context. This is more readily achieved when the church is proactive in planting new communities in those different social contexts. My friend and colleague, the Rev David Jones, uses the analogy of the Titanic going down in icy waters. The people are in the water

and in danger of hypothermia and drowning. They need to be rescued, and what is required is not another large liner, but life boats, as many as possible. Each church is like a life-boat. The more we have the more people we will be able to save.

The Biblical strategy of multiplying churches

When we look closely at Luke's record of the early church in Acts we see that the Apostle Paul's strategy was to plant

churches. It is so obvious when we read it. The problem we have is that we have a mental grid through which we read Acts, which skews our understanding of Paul's strategy. When we ask what church ministry should be, we naturally go to Acts 2 and Acts 4



and list things such as preaching and teaching, breaking of bread, fellowship, prayer and evangelism. But one thing never gets on the list, but which every church did was church planting. Churches in Acts planted churches. In Acts church planting is not an accident, or something forced upon the church by circumstances, it was a normal activity of the church. Paul never evangelised and disciplined people, without moving on to church planting.

For some reason, the church in the west, and our denomination over the last 30 years seems to have adopted a

successionist view of church planting. We seem to think that this is something Paul did which is not to be repeated. We certainly do not regard it as a biblical imperative. Acts lists the detailed activities of the church as preaching, teaching, praying, evangelism, fellowship, but also clearly calls churches to be proactive in the big picture activity of church planting.

A closer look at Acts 14:21-28 shows us that Paul did two things continually. Firstly, He communicated the gospel which meant (1) preaching the good news (vs. 21), and (2) discipling the converts (he strengthened and encouraged them vs. 22, which is a regular formula used in Acts to describe establishing the converts in the faith). And secondly Paul formed churches, by (1) gathering the new converts together, and (2) empowering the group with their own leaders (vs. 23, 27). This is essentially what church planting is.

Notice that Paul does not keep the new church as his own ministry. Sure, he still has broad oversight through his pastoral letters and visits, but he hands control of the church over to the leaders appointed. One of the reasons why we don't have a church planting mindset, is because ministers and elders need to be willing to give away and send out their people, among whom will be some of their best leaders, givers, and workers. And so what is needed is to redefine our idea of success. The kingdom is built through gospel effort, struggle and sacrifice, not through maintaining the status quo and seeking our own comfort. We follow a Saviour who called us out to carry our cross for the sake of his Kingdom.

Multiplying churches in practice.

For several years now the Session and congregation of the Christian Reformed Church of Kingston has sought to embrace the above principle of multiplication, and be a church that is proactive in church planting. So far we have been involved in three church plants. The first was a joint Christian Reformed/Presbyterian church venture, in which a few members from each denomination planted Cornerstone, a church in Hobart city, which is now a separately instituted Presbyterian Church.

The second church plant was a Kingston church plant called One Way a new church community located in Margate. This church is now just over four years old. It has its own pastor and is slowly growing.

Then more recently in July 2005, the Kingston church planted a new church in Blackmans Bay, called Bay Christian Church. The church held its first public meeting on the 3rd July 2005, and meets at 11:00am every Sunday.

Each new church plant grew out of a small group, which met together over a period of 12 to 18 months studying God's Word, praying, planning, and reaching out to people in the community in which the church was to be planted. The three churches, at Kingston, Blackmans Bay and Margate are all part of the Kingston Session but have their own elders who meet separately as the leaders of each congregation.

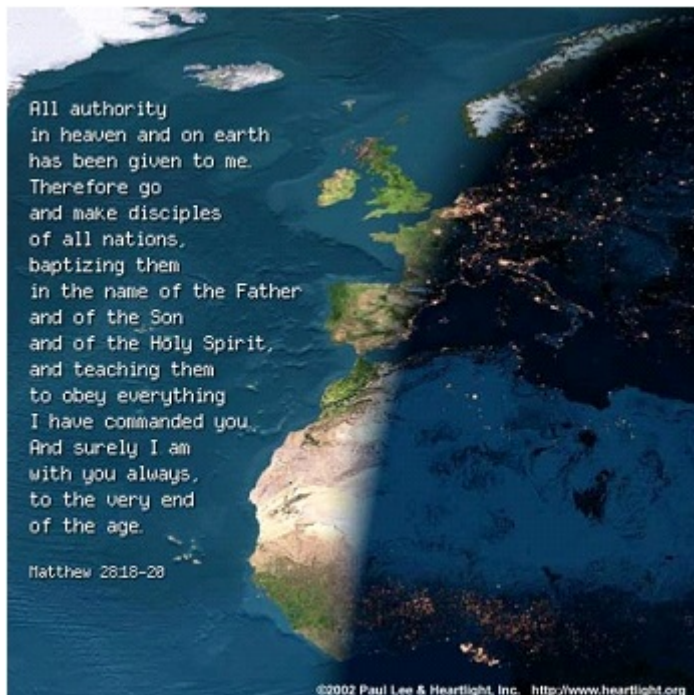
The church planting has not been without problems and issues, the most critical being the availability of ministry workers who have the skills and desire to take on this pioneering work. On the other hand we have seen many folk in our congregations

stepping up to be engaged in the work of ministering to those inside and outside the church. We have also seen proportionally more people come to Christ through the proclamation of the gospel in our church plants than in the main Kingston Church. The Kingston church continues to seek new opportunities by identifying small groups in the church, which have the propensity to become a church plant.

A question I am sometimes asked is, "How big does a church need to be to be able to be active in church planting?" Obviously, the Christian Reformed Church of Kingston is a large church, and to give 50 people away to start a new church does not affect the church all that much. At the other end of the scale, the

Crowded House in Sheffield, England is a network of house churches that has congregations of up to 30 people. They plan to litter the city with small gospel communities and have planted five such communities to date. The leaders of the congregations network closely together and keep each other accountable. For our denomination, given the way we operate, any church with more than 150 people could be effectively engaged in church planting. They would have the resources to employ two ministry workers, and would be able to send out 40-50 people from their

congregation and still have a good size church. The Session of the mother church would provide oversight to the church plant for at least five years. On this basis half of our churches (25 out of 50 having more than 150 people) could be planning to plant other congregations. Of course, this would necessitate the majority of the members of these churches being convinced of the gospel imperative of church planting, and being prepared to sacrifice to see this happen.



The benefits of church planting

There are great benefits to planting churches. Firstly, church planting revitalises existing churches. Churches that plant other churches are naturally focussed on the Lord's work of reaching into the community with the gospel. Established churches have a strong tendency to

turn inward, become tradition bound and opt for the status quo. They easily lose their passion for the vital work of making Jesus known. But a church that is active in church planting, and in which people are being equipped and encouraged to be involved in the mission of the church, finds itself growing spiritually. When we do Christ's work in prayerful dependence on him, he promises to be present (Matthew 28:20; Acts 11:19-21).

The second benefit is that church planting engages more Christians in the work of the

Lord. As people move out of the existing church into a church plant, there is invariably a gap in resources that needs to be filled. People in the existing church who are not so involved are called to step up and fill the gaps, and the people in the new church plant are all needed to help out. This means more people will be trained and serving the Lord, which in turn brings spiritual vitality to the church.

Thirdly church planting is beneficial in that it is shown to be the most effective way of reaching new people. The very nature of a church plant fosters a strong outward focus and urgency to reach new people. That's the key agenda that drives it, an agenda that is regularly lost in an established church setting. Dr Tim Keller of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, writes about this phenomenon in the Redeemer Church Planter Manual,

Dozens of studies confirm that the average new church gains most of its new members (60-80%) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches over 10-15 years of age gain 80-90% of new members by transfer from other congregations. This means that the average new congregation will bring 6-8 times more new people into the life of the Body of Christ than an older congregation of the same size. Why is this so? As a congregation ages, powerful internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of its resources and energy toward the concerns of its members and constituents, rather than those outside its walls. Older congregations therefore have a stability and steadiness many people thrive on and need. But new churches, of necessity, are forced to focus far more of their energies on the

needs of its non-members, and become much more sensitive to the sensibilities of non-believers. There is also a cumulative effect. In the first two years of our Christian walk, we have far more close, face to face relationships with non-Christians than we do later. Thus new Christians attract non-believers to services 5-10 times more than a long-time Christian. New believers beget new believers. What does this mean practically? The only way to bring in lots of new Christians into the Body of Christ in a permanent way is to plant new churches. This is the Biblical strategy.¹

We have seen the evidence of this in all three church plants of the CRC Kingston. There have been proportionally far more opportunities to introduce people to Christ in the church plants than in the Kingston church. By God's grace we have also seen a good number of people come to faith in Christ.

Tim Keller concludes, "the vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for 1) the numerical growth of the Body of Christ in any city, and 2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else – not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries (such as Fusion), growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes – will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting."²

One critical factor

The one critical factor in realising such a church planting program, is having sufficient trained people available to lead and preach the Word of God for existing

churches and future church plants. There is a currently a severe shortage of available ministers for our existing churches. How can we possibly consider a program that might exacerbate this? There are two solutions to this, which we need to seriously consider.

Firstly, we need in our churches, to embark on a solid program of discipling our young people, and challenging those gifted with teaching, wisdom and leadership gifts to consider full-time ministry. The Ministry Training Strategy used in several of our churches is available to help current ministers in this task. Several young people in the CRC Kingston and Launceston churches have or are doing the two-year MTS training program. Although they are in training during this time, they are a resource that contributes to the ministry of the local church. After completing the MTS program, if suited, these people go to Theological College to complete their training. If the majority of our churches embarked on this sort of training program, we would soon see the number of available ministers increase dramatically.

Secondly, the same discipling program will equip and empower many more people to be involved in ministry. The discipling program gets lay people involved. That helps free ministers up to do more of the critical gospel work. For example, in southern Tasmania, we run a preachers workshop, to train men and women in the art of preaching (the women are being trained to speak at women's outreach programs). At Kingston we give the men involved opportunities to preach in the evening service. The sermons outlines and manuscripts are discussed and checked by the minister before preaching, and the 'student preachers' are given feedback

after the sermon, including an evaluation by their peers. Lay people can also be trained in discipleship, Growth Group Leadership, Evangelism, eldership and much more. This equipping releases the gifts and talents of lay people and engages them in the work of the church. Surely, this is how Christ intended it. The ministry of all believers was one of the great biblical imperatives rediscovered in the Reformation.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Perhaps this will always be so. However, by God's grace, implementing a discipleship program will help to alleviate the critical shortages we face now, and enable us to plant churches in the near future.

Conclusion

Some people object to church planting on the basis that there are already so many churches around. Yet, the fact is that well less than 10% of the Australian population attend church. This means that 90% of the population is still to be reached with the gospel. We need to multiply those 'life boats' if we are to reach them. We also need to recognise that not all churches faithfully proclaim the gospel. Jesus gave us the task of preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations and peoples (Luke 24:47). That job still needs to be done here in Australia.

My prayer and hope is that the Christian Reformed Churches will embrace and support church planting as a biblical imperative. We have a wonderfully rich heritage of church planting. We do this work now overseas in India through the Gujerat church planting program (GOSPEL). Why not take a further step of faith and litter Australia with Bible-based, Gospel-

centred churches. It will take more than taking up a collection. It will mean more of our people being committed to serving the Lord in the task of spreading the gospel. That will lead to greater spiritual maturity among our people and glory to God as new people are brought into the Kingdom.

¹ *Redeemer Church Planter Manual*, Timothy J Keller & J. Allen Thompson, Redeemer Church Planting Centre: 2002, pg 28

² *Redeemer Church Planter Manual*, Timothy J Keller & J. Allen Thompson, Redeemer Church Planting Centre: 2002, pg 27