

## **A Circular Letter to the churches of ARBCA**

The Church Planting Committee, in keeping with its charge to encourage the planting of churches in the United States, has sought to put before the churches this letter to explore different aspects of church planting. We want to consider four aspects of home church planting: 1) a brief theology of church planting; 2) questions to ask before planting a church; 3) a look at kinds of church cultures that tend to plant churches; and 4) an exhortation to “look at the fields” that already surround our churches. The letter is a joint effort of the committee, with different men contributing to the effort. The Church Planting Committee is comprised of Gordon Taylor (ARBCA coordinator), Hank Rast (chair), David Campbell, Jim Dundas, John Miller, and Brad Swygard.

### **A Theology of Church Planting**

What is a good theology of church planting? To know the correct theology we must begin with a good definition. Dr. James Renihan has given this definition at each of the Schools of Church Planting. “Church planting is about bringing to birth by the work of God’s Spirit worshipping congregations.”<sup>1</sup> Although this definition does not explicitly say that God uses means to accomplish the planting of a church, yet it is clearly implied. This definition assumes or implies that there are two essential pillars of theology on which church planting stands: the glory of God and man’s responsibility.

1) Church planting must have as its basis and goal the glory of God. This is the fundamental principle for all church planting. Why plant churches? It is so that God’s wisdom, power and grace will be more fully known in the world and in the heavenly places, even as Paul says in Ephesians:

“To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known **by the church** to the principalities and powers in the heavenly **places**, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.” (Ephesians 3:10-12)

In the book of Acts churches grew for the purpose of God’s glory. Whether a miracle was performed or multitudes believed, the result was praise to God. So today it must be the glory of God that forms the foundation of church planting. The glory of God is best seen in worshipping congregations. As the church gathers for worship to hear the Word preached and to observe the ordinances, God is glorified. This fundamental theological principle, the glory of God, must be the foundational truth for all church planting.

2) A second theological principle of church planting is the truth of man’s

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<sup>1</sup> Renihan, Dr. James, “The Theology of Church Planting,” lecture at Heritage Baptist Church, Mansfield, Texas, Feb. 10, 2011.

responsibility. God is completely sovereign as to where the gospel goes and where churches are planted (Acts 16:6-10). The sovereign God who determines where the Gospel is preached also sends men to preach. These men preach at the command of Christ. Since there is a command the church is responsible to send men to preach and plant churches.

The truth of man's responsibility may be explored from two perspectives. First, Reformed theology takes seriously the command of Jesus to preach the gospel to every creature (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8) The primary way this is to be done is by men set aside for the gospel ministry. "We believe in and affirm the special office of the minister of the Word and sacraments – that there is an official proclamation that is conducted by a minister who is authorized to speak for Jesus Christ as he explains and applies his text as the Word of God." <sup>2</sup> Jesus was an evangelist; the apostles were evangelists who planted churches. In Acts 1:8 Jesus gave the places where the gospel was to be preached. It was to begin in Jerusalem and then extend to Judea and ultimately to the world. This was the pattern that Jesus followed. Jesus preached the gospel at home and then went to the next towns (Mark 1:38). Ministers are responsible today to preach the gospel at home and also in the next towns as our Lord did.

Second, Reformed theology takes seriously the necessity for the members of the new church plant to be actively involved in promoting the gospel among themselves and also to others in their community. Ephesians 4:15 teaches that the result of the pastoral ministry is that the saints will be speaking the truth in love so that growth in Christ occurs.<sup>3</sup> Romans 15:14 states that Paul is confident that the believers are able to instruct one another. The Scripture also teaches that all believers, though not preachers who are sent and ordained by the church, are to have Christ and the gospel on their lips while in the market place (1 Thessalonians 1:8).<sup>4</sup>

Members of the church are able to speak about Jesus Christ. This

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<sup>2</sup> Planting, Watering, Growing: Planting Confessionally Reformed Churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, ed. Daniel R. Hyde and Shane Lewis (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books) 72.

<sup>3</sup> A difference of opinion exists as to whether a comma should come after the word "saints" in verse 9. But no matter the interpretation of verse 9, verse 15 clearly refers to all the saints in a church speaking the truth in love. The verbal is a present, active participle, masculine, plural, nominative.

<sup>4</sup> Some suggest this is nothing more than news spread, but it is better to see this as evangelistic activity by the saints in this strategically located town. As Hendriksen says in his commentary, "Now the point certainly is not that merely the rumor with reference to the great change at Thessalonica had been spreading, but rather that the believers there, in the enthusiasm of a great discovery, actively propagated their "faith toward God." (NTC 1 Thessalonians, p. 53)

subject ought to be familiar to Reformed people from their catechetical instruction. In its exposition of the Apostles' Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism explains why we call Jesus 'Christ': He is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Ghost, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher ... our only High Priest ... and our eternal King' (HC, Q&A 31). It then asks how this applies to us: 'But why art thou called a Christian?' The answer is, 'Because by faith I am a member of Christ, and this a partaker of His anointing.' A part of that anointing is that we, too, are not only priests and kings but also prophets 'in order that [we] also may confess His name' (HC, Q&A 32). Every member of Christ, by definition, innately and inherently has a prophetic responsibility to speak about Christ to the world.<sup>5</sup>

So the theology of church planting rests on the two pillars of God's glory and man's responsibility. Both are essential to a proper understanding of church planting. Theology properly understood will produce right practice. Church planting must begin with the conviction that God's glory is the ultimate goal of church planting and proceed with the conviction that the Christian minister and the saints must obey the commands of God to spread the gospel and plant churches. The phrase that characterized William Carey must also characterize church planting: "Attempt great things for God. Expect great things from God."

### **Should We Plant a New Church?**

Imagine a group of elders, or an entire congregation, or a group of Christians from different churches, or the representatives of a particular denomination discussing the planting of a new church. Their question is, 'Should we plant a new church?' *Our* question is, 'when should the answer be 'Yes'?

1) When no church exists at all.

In Romans 15:20 Paul states that his mission strategy was to preach the gospel where Christ had not already been named. In his mind were places where Christ was not worshiped at all – virgin territory for the gospel. If the foundation had been laid by someone else (i.e. if someone had planted a church before him) Paul was committed to moving on and evangelising somewhere else. His heart's desire was to reach the unreached and to see them trusting Christ and forming Christian churches.

Unreached communities and peoples exist today in vast numbers. There is no shortage of places without a gospel witness. Should we be trying to plant churches there? Given the terms of the Great Commission and the vastness of the spiritual need, to ask is to answer.

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<sup>5</sup> Planting, Watering, Growing 73.

2) When an additional church is needed.

The assumption here is that in a particular town, city, or community a Christian church already exists. For various reasons, however, an additional church is needed.

Perhaps because *the numbers to be reached with the gospel are so great*. The present churches cannot adequately address the spiritual needs of the entire population. The help of other churches is urgently required.

Perhaps because *the existing churches are not doing the work of the gospel*. They have so departed from the truth that they have only a false gospel to proclaim. The needs of a community where this is the case are almost as great as one wholly unreached.

Perhaps because *the work of the gospel is not being done as well as it should be*. A church may be so inward-looking as to have little heart for evangelism. Or its efforts may be limited because of a hyper-Calvinist view of the gospel. Or it may be professedly evangelical and very active in its outreach and yet its message be a serious dilution of the biblical gospel. If so, then there is evident need for a church which is going to aggressively make known the truth.

What are we to think, however, about Reformed Baptists desiring to plant a church because they wish to belong to *that particular kind of a church?* (A similar question could be asked about Christians of other convictions). There are serious questions that ought first to be addressed. Is the planting of a distinctively Reformed Baptist church important enough to justify believers in leaving their current church if that church is solidly biblical and missions-minded? Will their departure potentially weaken its weakness? Might the planting of yet another church hinder the overall work of the gospel in a particular place (because people are suspicious, confused or disillusioned because of what they see of the fragmentation of the church)? Are these believers committed to planting the new church in an area of genuine need? Is the New Testament vision of sinners being saved and becoming part of Christ's church honestly gripping and driving them? The appropriateness of going forward with the desired church plant needs to be determined in the light of the answers to these questions.

### **Churches That Plant Churches**

Is there a kind of church culture that tends to plant churches? Our limited research from the history of missionary-minded churches and some churches within the ARBCA orbit shows at least three different characteristics that might describe church-planting churches.

First a correlation seems to exist between churches that have missionary emphases in their churches and churches that plant other churches. The outward-looking church tends to be supportive of and interested in all kinds of

missionary activity, whether it is home church planting or foreign mission church planting. Therefore the cultures of churches that plant churches are missions-minded. They tend to have emphases on prayer for missions, conferences on missions, youth and women's prayer and support groups with particular missions emphasis. They might involve their young people in short-term missions. They set aside time in prayer meetings and worship services for prayer for the advancement of God's kingdom. Some might have special seasons of prayer or think of creative ways to encourage and support missionaries already in the field. Some might encourage a zeal for missions and church planting by making sure their people get to know men already in the field by having them visit and preach on furloughs, hearing their testimonies of the Lord's call on their lives, the calls to sacrifice, and the joys and disappointments they face. They arrange for visits to the missionary in the field to get a hands-on perspective. Other churches might have regular missionary biographies studied or reviewed in Sunday School or small-group interaction.

Second the churches that plant churches *try* to plant churches. Something more than general prayer for church planting has to happen. Tangible pursuits, which include researching particular areas lacking in gospel witness, and following through open doors with attempts (even the kind that don't pan out), seem to characterize churches that plant. As Brad Swygard has observed, writing in one of the Updates, the New Testament shows a proactive attitude in church planting. Noting Paul's activity in Acts 16, "when the Holy Spirit forbid the apostle's going into Asia, Paul and his companions did not sit back and become cautious, waiting on the Spirit's leading. Luke notes 'they tried' to go onto Bithynia, but the door was closed. Even then they did not slow down but went on to Troas. While there, in the midst of 'trying,' they received the call to go over to Macedonia."<sup>6</sup> One ARBCA pastor exhorts, "we must have a commitment and eagerness to plant churches, a belief that we *must* do it."

This mindset leads to the third characteristic of churches that plant churches, a deep spirituality that moves people out of their comfort zones. Robert Davey's recent book, *The Power to Save*, chronicles the history of the gospel in China, beginning with the ministry of Robert Morrison in 1807. Later in the same century, Hudson Taylor began the remarkably successful China Inland Mission, the fruits of which remain to this day. Davey reveals Hudson Taylor's biblical prescription for raising up missionaries and church planters in the churches in his day to labor for the salvation of the Chinese.

In the study of the Divine Word I learned that to obtain successful laborers what was needed was not elaborate appeals for help, but first earnest prayer to God to thrust forth laborers, and second *the deepening of the spiritual life of the church, so that men should be unable to stay at*

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<sup>6</sup> Swygard, Brad, "Evangelism Shows the Mind of Christ," ARBCA Update.

*home.*<sup>7</sup>

Most striking is Taylor's insistence on the deepening of the spiritual life of the church and particularly the results in men's hearts that drive them from the comforts of their homes into the field of labor. This characteristic lies at the very heart of the missionary and church planting enterprise. Taylor goes on to speak of the responsibility of the Christian in his day – for the Chinese – to care about the salvation of the lost. Commenting frequently on Proverbs 24:11-2, which reads

Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Behold, we did not know this,' does not He who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not He who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will He not repay man according to his work?

Taylor exhorts, "Guilt comes on every believer who knows the salvation of God and does nothing, or very little, to assist in carrying out the command of the Great Commission. It is the command of Christ. It is a duty. On behalf of China, he calls for, at the very least, effectual, fervent prayer and strenuous self-denying effort for the salvation of the benighted Chinese. Apathy and indifference concerning the eternal well-being of the Chinese are a denial of the law of love."<sup>8</sup>

David Vaughn, ARBCA missionary to France, preaching on Luke 24:44-47 at the end of the General Assembly in 2010, spoke of the memory of hearing heart-rending evangelistic sermons in his youth and how they caused his heart to burn within him, and impressed upon him later the desire and impulse to preach the gospel to the lost. He was one of those 'unable to stay at home.' Churches that plant churches seem to have something of the heart-burning desire to see men saved that comes out in their meetings that in turn thrusts men out from their churches to do this great work. May the Lord promote this deep spirituality in our own churches that we may see more churches planted, more missionaries sent, for the honor of His great name and the salvation of those 'stumbling to the slaughter.'

### **Look At the Fields**

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) doesn't limit a church's missionary efforts to either foreign or home mission fields. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Sinners are everywhere, both

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<sup>7</sup> Davey, Robert, Power to Save, 110-11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 112.

near and far, at home and abroad. Sin, idolatry, and false worship are issues of the heart, not geography. Where you have people you have a great need for Christ, the preaching of the gospel, and the planting of churches.

We can readily see from Scripture that Jesus went where people were. Paul too went where people were. This has been the pattern of the church throughout history. It should be for us as well.

The United States has the third largest population in the world, China and India being first and second. According to the latest U.S. census, at present over 313, 232, 044 people live on American soil. By 2020 projections are that the population will increase to over 346 million. By 2030 that number will increase to 370 million. Some estimates are that by 2040 the U.S. population will be over 400 million people!

Two world-class metropolitan areas in the world are New York and Los Angeles. New York has 19 million people and Los Angeles 13 million. Beyond that, the 2010 census calculates that there are 51 metropolitan areas in the United States with over a million people. The five largest areas in order are New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Philadelphia, ranging from 19 million to 6 million souls. Over 80 million people live in the ten most populated metropolitan areas in the country.

Christ came to save lost sinners. He further came to build His church and to establish and advance His Kingdom. He gave the church His Word and gospel, the Great Commission, and the Holy Spirit to carry on His work of evangelism and church planting until He returns. If this is His mission in the world, it should be ours as well.

In Matthew 9, we are told that Jesus went through the cities and villages, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. With this sad and disturbing reality in front of Him, the Lord said to the disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers into the harvest."

There are 72 member churches in our Association. There is at least one ARBCA church located in 31 states across the nation. This means there are 19 states without an ARBCA church within its borders.

About five years ago a survey indicated that we have 25 metropolitan areas within a 100-125 mile distance of an ARBCA church. Some of these cities have a cluster of three, four, or even five ARBCA churches within this radius. It is not unreasonable to think that it is possible, even desirable, for some of these churches to get together to plant and support a church in one or more of these cities that has no ARBCA church. The time to begin reaching the 400 million people in our land is now, not in 2040! William Carey knew what he was talking about when he said that we must pray, plan, plod, and pay for evangelizing, planting churches, and spreading the gospel of the kingdom. Is

this not what the Great Commission is all about?

The most interesting discovery of that 25 city mission mentioned above is this: about 105 million souls live within driving distance of ARBCA churches. This figure is several years old and it is safe to assume that the number is significantly higher today. ARBCA churches are sitting in the midst of a very large mission field. Many of us are within 100-125 miles from some of the most populated metropolitan areas in the world! The force of the numbers of people alone should move us to pray and study the tremendous opportunities the Lord has placed before us as individual churches and as an association of churches whose mission includes cooperation in spreading the gospel in our neighborhoods, towns, cities, country, and world. Such a study to acquaint us with the spiritual condition and mission opportunities of our major population centers could very well be the first step in a fruitful endeavor for His kingdom, honor, and glory.

We have His gospel, Word, and Spirit. We have His Great Commission. We are already in the midst of a huge mission field. The harvest is indeed plentiful! The only question that remains is simply this: How are we as a church going to respond to such a call and opportunity?

In consideration of such a need for sending missionaries to ready harvest in India, William Carey wrote home to John Sutcliffe and said, "Staying home is now become sinful in many cases, and will become more and more so." Could the same words apply to our circumstances? In light of the Lord's example and His missionary mandate to the churches, who could truly dispute it? Sooner or later we must begin to ask this question of ourselves: Is Carey's point relevant to us today where we, as an association of churches, are within comfortable driving distance of over 105 million souls?

"Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers into the harvest."