PLANTING A CHURCH IN THE CITY

DR. TIMOTHY KELLER

What are the common principles for any church plant? This article explores five basic principles.

Nearly all books and lectures on this subject outline how to plant a particular kind of church, either a particular denominational model or some other kind of model that works in a specific environment. But what are the principles for any church plant? Here are five elements I think you've got to have.

1. LOCATING

You need to live in or very, very close to the community of people you are trying to reach.

+ Some of the most heart-breaking church plant failures have involved people who simply would not follow this incarnational principle. Jesus didn't commute from heaven every day. He moved in!

+ If you do not live in the community, you will tend to talk to issues the people do not have, and you will miss issues they do have. You won't really know them.

+ If you do not live in the community, you lose lots of time commuting.

+ If you do not live in the community, there will be fewer natural connects for evangelism.

2. LEARNING

You must learn the community's needs. You must understand the people in order to communicate and relate well to them. This means knowing their strengths, weaknesses, and prejudices.

+ Contextual-life profile: What people groups live in your community? Which ones are declining and which ones are growing? Investigate demographics and learn about material/economic groupings, social structures and power relations between groupings, and educational/psychological groupings. See Craig Ellison's "Addressing Felt Needs of Urban Dwellers," in *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*, ed. Harvie Conn (Baker Books, 1997).

+ Interior-life profile: What are their greatest hopes? aspirations? pleasures? What are their greatest fears? problems? What are their greatest strengths? What are their weaknesses? prejudices? Use personal interviews, periodicals, sociological research, and literature/arts to begin to understand these aspects of local culture.

+ Worldview profile: What could be said to be their shared philosophy of life? What aspects of truth do they have some grasp of (through common grace)? What aspects do they deny or miss? What symbols/myths function at deep levels? Where are the tensions/pressure points? What is the people's "story"? Who do they see themselves to be? Where are they from? Where are they going?

+ Religious/institution profile: How are the religious bodies and churches within this people group doing? How are they organized? What ministry models seem to be effective?

There are two basic ways to learn these things: (1) Informal—living there and spending time there. (2) Formal—studying statistics, census, demographics, and also reading fiction about the area.

3. LINKING

You must create a contextualized ministry model that links (a) the needs and capacities of the com-

munity and (b) the gifts and calling of yourself and your leaders with (c) the resources of the gospel.

+ Everything—worship, leadership, fellowship, and evangelism—must be contextualized to fit these three things: the needs of the community/culture, the gifts and talents of you and your Christian leaders, and the Word of the gospel.

+ Combat the tendency to simply copy the preaching and ministry programs you like and are familiar with. Instead, develop ministry that is truly linked in and that fits the community you are trying to reach with the gospel.

+ Link the gospel to the heart. How will you incorporate Christ's story into the people's story? What communication modes will you use —how will you get the word out?

+ Link the church to the community. What would build up the common good of the neighborhood? What would make people in your neighborhood say, "Wow! I'm not part of that church, but they are doing a lot of good here!"? If you link resources to the perceived needs of the community, you will be far more able to preach the gospel persuasively.

4. LOVING

You must have the gospel firmly in your heart so that you are not ministering out of a need to convince yourself of your competence or worth but out of love. Religion is "I obey and minister, therefore I am accepted." The gospel is "I am accepted, therefore I obey and minister." If you are operating out of the former matrix (i.e., basing your justification on your sanctification instead of the other way around), then two sets of problems will emerge:

+ In your own ministry you will tend to overwork, deal poorly with criticism, worry too much about attendance, giving, and signs of success, and be less than a good and gracious model of a gospel-changed life.

+ In your preaching and teaching you will be creating a lot of "elder brothers" (cf. Luke 15), people who are very good and committed to serving God as way of procuring his blessing. This makes people (like the elder brother) very grumpy, condescending to "sinners," and unforgiving. In other words, you will create a church that can't win people to Christ.

5. LAUNCHING

You must use wisdom in deciding how to establish relationships and begin your work. Here are two very broad categories:

+ "Top down": Begin with a bang—start with a worship-service celebration. This works especially well for a "daughter" plant, where you have a substantial group from a mother church. A church planter with good up-front speaking gifts may find this model useful. (Problems with this model: There is a great temptation to skip learning, linking, and even locating. There is a tendency to simply reproduce the mother church.)

+ "Bottom up": The church planter lives in the community and does evangelism and ministry, sees some conversions, organizes new believers into a small group, and develops leaders. After several small groups are established, the planter begins a Sunday worship service. This model works best for church planters with good one-on-one and evangelistic gifts. (Problems with this model: It can be hard to attract people who want to see "something happening." Often the church planter feels money pressure because the congregation is not producing much income.)

+ Other approaches: (a) A new church in your own building reaching a different language group or people group. (b) Churches in two locations with the same pastor/leader until one group calls its own pastor.