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The Joy of New Beginnings

by Laura O'Shea

Scripture readings

Matthew 28:19

Acts 1:8

1 Corinthians 12

Opening prayer

Dear Lord, open our hearts to the joy of new beginnings. Show us the harvest and help us to get excited about the many ways to reap the harvest. Amen.

Early in 2001, God called me to step up to a new challenge—to help plant a new RCA church. So one sunny day in February, about twenty of us from our mother church sat in a room and prayerfully began the process of asking God to guide us. Eight months later we had our very first preview service, and by January 2002 we were holding services every Sunday.

Planting a new church is a lot like getting pregnant, having a baby, and then raising your child. Though this analogy is overused, it is appropriate and biblical. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul refers to the church as a body—as a living organism. Churches, like all living organisms, are born, grow, reproduce, grow old, and even die. Therefore, the only way for churches to survive and grow is by converting new believers and by planting new daughter churches.

Don't we have enough churches already?

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If you've ever thought this to yourself, you probably have also thought, "Why not just get more people to come to my church?" I wondered that too. The reasons are complex and multilayered. First, we need to realize that over time, established churches become less effective at reaching new people in their community. Studies have shown that churches that are three years old and under reach ten new people each year for every one hundred members; churches that are three to fifteen years old reach five new people per one hundred members, and those older than fifteen years reach an average of just three people for every one hundred members.¹ Even if you do invite people, not every person is comfortable stepping into a traditional brick-and-mortar church. Whatever the reason may be—the language, the music, a negative childhood experience, a feeling of intimidation, or maybe feeling like they don't have the right clothes—some people just can't bring themselves to do it.

Why plant a new church?

Studies have shown that smaller churches are 1,600 percent more effective than larger churches are reaching the unchurched in their area.² That's because planting new churches allows various types of people to be reached more effectively. No one church speaks to all people, who may differentiate themselves by the language they speak, their culture, or the generation they belong to. People respond to and like different kinds of music, have different ways of learning, and relate to one another differently. Starting a new church allows these differences to be celebrated and removes barriers to the teaching of the gospel.

Imagine a local community center where individuals learn how to dance the two-step on Tuesday nights, but which on Sunday morning houses a church designed specifically for them—a place where they can worship God to the rhythms of country music!

Starting a new church provides opportunities for people to grow and to step up as new leaders. This is true for the mother church as well as for

¹ *Christianity Today*, January 1991

² *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, by Christian Swarz (ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), pp. 47-48

the church plant. God is amazing. In my own life, God has given me the opportunity to work hand in hand with him in building his kingdom. Surprisingly, I find myself leading ministries that I would never have led had I stayed in my mother church. This is not a critique of that church, but a fulfillment of God's plan. God called me to lead new ministries in a church plant, just as he called others to lead the ministries that I left behind at my mother church. The act of blessing a new set of leaders and sending them off to plant a new church may seem scary, but I promise you that God will not leave you wanting.

A passion for changed lives

I will never forget the joy I felt that first Sunday in January when people I would otherwise never have met came walking into our new “baby” church. About six months later, I was further blessed when I participated in our first baptism and witnessed as ten individuals committed their lives to following Jesus Christ.

When the first-century church was just beginning, it faced many of the same challenges that we do today. The bottom line is that planting a new church may not be easy, but the rewards are great. Though the culture, language, and music of the early church were vastly different from our own, the power of the Holy Spirit brought the gospel to every corner of the world. It's no different today, except that the “corners” of world are closer than ever before.

Questions

1. Review Acts 1:8. Would this scripture be realized by supporting a new church plant in your area? In what way?
2. In what ways is supporting a new church plant in your area the same as supporting an overseas mission? In what ways is it different?
3. How important are the following things in helping people find God: music, popular culture, style?
4. Why are smaller, newer churches better at reaching the unchurched than larger, established churches?

5. Skim Acts chapters eight through twenty-one. How did the disciples fulfill the Great Commission described in Mathew 28:19?

Closing prayer

Dear God, thank you for your providence. Bless us and expand our territory for you so we may reach people and share your good news. Amen.