

"Twenty Ways to Plant Churches in North America"

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It was the spring of 1979 and I had completed serving as an Associate Pastor in the Washington, DC area for almost five years. However, as I studied the book of Acts about the church planting ministry of the Apostle Paul, the desire developed to give myself to the same ministry. As a result, this passion to see the entire region reached for Christ by church planting led me to make an appointment with the Presbyterian Church in America's only pastor in the Washington area. I wanted to learn how he had planted his church two years earlier.

During that meeting, he spoke about a group of seven families living on the western growth edge of the Washington region that a sign painter had gathered for Bible study. This man had prayed for the previous 12 years that a Biblical and Reformed denomination might plant a church in his area of Manassas-Gainesville, VA. The Coordinator of Church Development for the PCA's Presbytery in that region and this pastor had ministered to this group for the last three months. After six weeks of interviews and examinations, the Mid-Atlantic Presbytery called me to serve as the Organizing Pastor for this ministry. We conducted our first worship service at an elementary school in Gainesville, VA on May 20, 1979. The church I had been serving, even though part of a mainline Presbyterian denomination, encouraged me to plant this PCA church. They permitted me to make the transition to half-time ministry status with them while continuing at full-time salary to plant the church. Over those months of conducting worship services, networking and evangelism, we grew from seven to twenty families and arrived at financial self-support. The PCA's Mission to North America Committee promised to provide half support when the finances finished with my previous church, but its support proved to be unnecessary. Nevertheless, it was comforting to me and my family of five to understand that this financial "safety net" was in place if needed. This first church planting ministry shows how God enjoys honoring the prayers of a faithful layman who perseveringly pleads with Him for a Biblical and Reformed denomination to plant a church in his area.

A second model for church planting developed after four years when our church was averaging in attendance 260 people during Sunday morning worship. The Session of our church believed the best size for our ministry was 200 to 250 people in regular attendance. So they gave me permission to take 36 volunteers with me to plant a daughter church in an area 13 miles closer to Washington. After one year that church grew to 85 people in average attendance. So Mission to North America helped us financially to invite on our staff a full-time Assistant Pastor, whom I began training to become the pastor of this daughter church. Initially I preached at the mother church at the 9:15 am service and at the daughter church at their 11:00 am service, but after 1½ years the Assistant became the solo pastor. This second model is an example of an existing church becoming the mother of a daughter church by the pastor preaching in a distant location until the second church is financially able to afford her own pastor.

The third model developed when the mother church was 6½ years old and the Session of our church determined we were ready to plant another daughter. Again, with financial help from Mission to North America, the church invited on staff an Assistant Pastor to co-plant a daughter church with me. We asked for volunteers and this time 49 people went with us to a community 12 miles further away from Washington. The Assistant Pastor and I shared the preaching and pastoral responsibilities, but the man proved to be so capable that after 4 months we determined

he was ready to lead the church with two elders from the mother church. When the one year's financial support from Mission to North America had finished, that daughter church was self-supporting and self-governing. This third model shows how a church forms by a co-pastoring arrangement in which a man just out of seminary successfully yokes with an experienced church planter.

One of our churches in the northeast suburbs of Washington, DC displayed a fourth model. Rather than send out an Associate Pastor with a group of her people, the church commissioned an elder to transplant 50 members to a growing area of the region 13 miles east. This layman provided much of the preaching and organized other laypeople to shepherd the growing flock. After a year of worship services, this church plant was able to call a full-time pastor.

This same church demonstrated a fifth model several years afterwards when it continued planting daughter churches, but decided this time to keep the churches connected to her in a collegial association. Soon, two daughter churches met on Sunday mornings at a distance from the mother in growing areas of the region, but gathered at the mother's building on Sunday evenings. The pastors of the two daughter churches were Assistant Pastors of the mother church and the Session of the mother supervised the ministries of the two daughters.

When we were able to identify a capable and willing church planter, but had no people, we created a sixth model. The future church planter had been an Assistant Pastor for several years in a church of a sister denomination in the area, but now he sensed a calling to start a church. We spent \$1100 advertising a public information meeting at a hotel in a rapidly growing part of suburban Washington and 35 people came. From that gathering the church planter was able to develop a core of six families to reach out to the area and begin worship services. This model is an example of what can happen when the church planter is available, but in the beginning there are no people to serve as the core group.

One of our pastors who had a passion to reach the ethnic communities of the Washington area displayed a seventh means by which we have planted churches. His concern inspired him to form the Washington Spanish outreach and raise the support to place on the field a Hispanic church planter. This pastor subsequently started two churches in the area by his evangelistic efforts.

The same Anglo pastor was instrumental in developing an eighth method when he gathered the finances and planters to start Chinese, Japanese and Korean churches in the area. Because the ethnic churches often meet for worship during their beginning years in our existing churches, not only do we start churches to reach the nations but there is greater efficiency in the use of our buildings.

A ninth means by which we planted churches occurred when three of our existing churches on the western side of Washington contributed families to a mission effort in their area. We had a qualified church planter with 18 years of ministry experience, and we had the right area in which to start the church in a fast growing part of Washington. But, once again, we did not have core families. After the need became known, one of our churches contributed three families when its pastor visited potential families in his church asking them to become involved in the mission. Another church contributed three families and our church contributed two families to provide the mission a good start with eight core families.

The tenth method of planting churches developed in 1986 when Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri called me to be the Professor of Church Planting, Growth and Renewal. The understanding was that I would train the students in church planting as I planted churches with them in the St. Louis region. With our demographic studies, we discovered the western growth edge of the region was the best place to begin. At that same time, a lay leader in one of our existing churches had been praying for 12 years the PCA would plant a church in his neighborhood. Unknown to him his home was in the middle of the targeted area. He and his wife, two seminary couples and I planted that church and within one year it was self-governing, self-propagating, and ready to call its own full-time pastor. Because of excellent demographics and the man's persevering prayer, this was a church ready to flourish. Because I was working as a full-time professor, which provided my support, the church was able to be self-supporting from its first day. This planting is a model of a "tent-making" ministry, so called because the Apostle Paul made tents to support himself as he planted churches throughout the Roman Empire.

The eleventh method of church planting occurred at the end of the school year. One of the students, who helped us start the previous church and took church planting and growth courses with me at the seminary, was soon to graduate and wanted to plant a church. Because he and his wife took part in our church planting effort, they were ahead of other seminary graduates in preparation for this ministry. As a result, we were able to work with the Mission to North America Committee in the Washington, DC area to provide an internship and the finances for them to plant in that region. Several years later, this church planter gave away 40 people to another church planter to start a church south of his location. This daughter church is now 260 people and has planted several daughter churches of its own in Southern Maryland.

We attempted the twelfth method of church planting, which did not succeed well, when we invited ten volunteer seminary couples to act as a core group to plant our second church in St. Louis. One reason this plant did not grow was that families who came to visit the church could not easily identify with the seminary families. Also, during exam periods and school vacations the students would emotionally or physically absent themselves. However, we have fruitfully planted churches when we carefully chose a maximum of three or four seminary families to join in.

The thirteenth method by which we have planted churches occurred during my third year at the seminary. I was finishing my time at the previous church when I received a visit from the pastor and lay leader from one of our established churches that had started 45 years before. Because of a series of difficult problems in the church, it had dwindled down to 5 families and these two leaders had come seeking advice. The church had never owned a building but had just sold some land, so it had the finances to conduct significant ministry. After studying the various choices, I proposed that we close the existing church and that I act as the organizing pastor to plant a new church. The present pastor would serve as my Associate and the five families would be the core group. All the people agreed to the plan, so three months later we began a telemarketing program calling 15,000 homes in the area. As a result, we planted a church which averaged 110 in attendance from the first day and is now averaging 175 people in worship attendance. Perhaps, some of our small struggling churches should consider this model as a strategy.

The fourteenth example occurred when one of our larger St. Louis churches outgrew its building because of averaging 550 people in attendance each Sunday. The church's township would not allow the expansion of their building, so they bought a large piece of land in a rapidly growing area 12 miles away and made plans to put up a new facility. However, 35% of the members remained at the old location and 65% began meeting in a high school near the new site. Both churches grew significantly and now have a combined Sunday attendance of 1400 people. One of the most fruitful means of church planting and growth is for a church to initiate a friendly split and begin meeting in two different locations.

One of the largest of our St. Louis churches demonstrated the fifteenth model when it designated \$35,000 each year in its mission's budget to help plant a church somewhere in North America. As a result of this plan, a "flagship" church started in Columbus, Ohio and is now averaging 400 people in attendance each Sunday and has planted daughter churches in their area. Since then this St. Louis church has sponsored several church plants in other parts of North America. This model shows the impact when a large church determines that a major part its mission is planting churches in other parts of the continent.

The sixteenth model developed several years ago when an elder in one of our St. Louis churches became enthusiastic about the fruitful church planting efforts in our region. When he moved to Cleveland, OH he found that the PCA had no churches in that region. First, he pledged to provide a major portion of the start up costs for a church plant. Second, he immediately began a Bible study group that became the core of the new church. The Mission to North America's Church Planting Assessment Center identified an ideal church planter and soon worship services began. This model shows how a motivated layman can become the prime mover in planting a church.

Because the former president of Covenant Seminary wanted to see churches planted in the Midwest through the leadership of our graduates, the seventeenth model developed in 1989. During that year he raised most of the funds necessary to provide me with a full-time associate for church planting and together we developed a Midwest strategy. This man subsequently spent much of his time traveling the 15 states of the Midwest serving as a catalyst with the Mission to North America Committees of the presbyteries. We then conducted several vision setting and training seminars for the church planting leaders of the Midwest so a goal was established to plant many more churches in the Midwest. We began with 98 churches in 1989 and now have an additional 102 churches. This method of creating the position of Coordinator for Church Planting for a region or network of churches has proven fruitful in the numbers of churches planted not only in the Midwest but around the continent.

The eighteenth model involves our efforts to develop within Covenant Seminary a Church Planting, Growth, and Renewal Concentration. A student can take several of the program's courses in church planting, growth and renewal and then do an internship that trains him in outreach and assimilation ministries. This program has been fruitful to the point that 24% of our Covenant Seminary MDiv graduates who become pastors in the PCA plant churches. Another 5% plant churches overseas with Mission to the World. This is a model that proves the effectiveness of seminary education in preparing men to plant churches.

The nineteenth model: An influential layman in our Presbytery believed the Lord wanted us to plant a church in the city of St. Louis that focused on mercy and justice ministries. So he

contacted other churches around the nation that had developed similar models. As a result, he recruited a pastor to plant in an area of St. Louis that was ½ white and ½ black. That church is now around 600 in worship on Sunday mornings with 200 more meeting for worship at a location on the south side of the city. This is another model of the essential part that visionary Ruling Elders have in church planting.

The twentieth model: One of our St. Louis pastors, who is now with the Lord, led to Christ a young man back in 1992 during the first couple of months of his church plant. He disciplined him, instructed and modeled for him how to conduct evangelism, ordained him as a Ruling Elder at the church, sent him to Covenant Seminary for his MDiv from which he graduated in '02. His church then gave this graduate about 70 people to plant a few miles south in Fenton, MO in 2003. This is a model that shows the power of evangelism and discipleship in developing the next generation of church planters.

Church Planting is the most effective means to increase giving to missions of all sorts. For example, the 13 Washington, DC church plants that we initiated from 1977 to 1986 resulted in 2006 Benevolence Giving of \$1,048,788. Even better news is that these churches give more and more to missions each year.

The most fruitful means of winning the lost to Christ is by the ministry of church planting. In our national PCA church plants conducted over the last seven years, an average of 6.6 professions of faith occurred during their fourth year of existence. It is difficult to discover the number of professions in our established churches on an annual basis but I estimate it is no more than 1/3 of that number.

It is my prayer that over the next several decades the PCA will use these twenty methods, plus others we have not even considered, to plant thousands of Christ-centered, Biblical and Reformed churches. This movement will serve as an instrument in the hand of God to win North America and the nations to Christ.