

RePlant. Replanting churches in urban contexts

'why raising the dead is as easy (and as difficult) as giving birth'

In all of our talk about church planting, one common implication seems to be that church planting is only done into ground that has never previously been in receipt of the gospel. But, in reality, there are many places in the world where a previously thriving gospel work has now all but dried up. Take some of the great New Testament churches planted in ancient Greece and Macedonia as obvious examples. In many of our great cities there is a network of church buildings in strategic locations with little or no gospel work happening. This paper is a call for a generation of replant missionaries ready to revive God's church.

1. Pruning the vine

SCRIPTURE: Throughout Scripture the church is described as a vine (eg Ps 80:8-11; Is 5:1-7; Jer 2:21) and Jesus talks about how the vine will be pruned by him to ensure continued growth of fruit that will last (John 15:1-17).

LESSON: healthy growth will involve shedding 'deadwood' whether that be traditions and structures which work against gospel or people who attend the church but are not spiritually alive. In a replant situation a vital first step is to identify the people and traditions that are blocking growth and to look to strategies that prune the power and influence of these contra-gospel factors.

STRATEGY: Reboot

Rebooting a computer is about restarting the machine in such a way that all the clutter is removed. A reboot clears away all the irrelevant process data (cache) which is taking up space and the unnecessary internal programs running in the background and taking up processing power.

A church reboot gets rid of the clutter of cultural and praxis that obscures the process of discipleship. The church's major reboot was 500 years ago when the protestant reformation brought people back to the solas of Christ, Grace and Christ. The current church reboot is out of a consumer culture orientated 'seeker model' of church to an authentic church that takes the gospel being expressed in our context seriously. For C.S.Lewis church reboot gets us back to mere Christianity and deep church:

- doctrinal orthodoxy
- contextual clarity
- missional accessibility
- disciple equipping

Rebooting a church is a strategy that starts a church again

- rebooting retains the existing members and basic mission but restores the church's key function as a gospel witness in the wider community and a gospel builder within the local church community.
- rebooting means rebuilding how the people fulfil their mission from first principles.
- rebooting enables radical pruning by giving permission to cut everything back – whether good or bad – and allowing the best practices and programmes to be developed in natural response to the new growth.

Rebooting may mean an existing practice is reintroduced. Or it may mean that something that was considered good is actually replaced by something even better. But it most likely will mean that new ideas are introduced in response to growth that couldn't even be imagined before the growth took place. Whatever the growth, the key point is that pruning back activities gives space and resources for the new activities as they are developed.

Rebooting enables you to remove programming clutter but keep existing processes that are of benefit.

- The choice is: *keep as is; keep but recalibrate; shed*
- The questions to ask as reboot happens are:
 - is this necessary?
 - is the level of investment we're putting into this correct and strategic?
 - is it facilitating our evangelism and discipleship process?

Rebooting also gives a one time 'honeymoon' opportunity to restructure the way decisions are made by introducing new 'taskforce' groups with responsibility to reengineer part of the church. By rebooting there is a natural opportunity to reconfigure committees and groups. It is therefore vital to identify the gatekeepers who can block or authorise policy changes and to decide whether they are going to be central to the reconfigured structures or moved to a role in which they will be able to have minimal impact on your missional growth plans going forward.

Rebooting as a strategy is helped when there is:

- new leadership – a leader or leadership team willing to work with the existing congregation rather than just dump the existing members and plant in new members from outside the community.
- a mandate from those in authority – for example the appointments committee should give the new leader a guarantee that he can change anything (possibly within pre-agreed limits) and that they will not intervene. A timeframe for that guarantee, any restrictions they will make should be clarified at the start, It should also be decided how the appointments people and/or those in authority over the leader appointed (such as in the denomination) will support decisions. Making major changes agreed and clear at the start prevents lots of discussion by people in the church who will debate endlessly because they just want to resist change.
- A timeframe for opt out – it helps if there is a clear idea of what growth will look like so that at a predetermined point, such as a year in, the project can be reviewed and a decision made as to whether to continue or decide that the efforts and energies of the replant group might be better placed elsewhere. This releases the group from thinking they are locked in for life and recognises that growth is God's work that we cooperate in and not our right to demand.

2. Preparing the ground

SCRIPTURE: The agricultural theme is often used in the New Testament to describe the church – such as God's field which grows (1Cor 3:9), the harvest field (Matt 9:37-38) and the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20).

LESSON: the agricultural theme emphasises the dependency we have on God who brings the growth and the organic nature of that growth. Growth is not just a straight-line correlation of human inputs into human outputs. But that dependency on God doesn't mean we don't have to work at growth. The striking thing about Biblical growth is that God cooperates with people to bring that growth – we are described as God's co-workers in 1Cor 3:9.

But what does the agricultural theme teach us about that human role? It teaches that our work centres on first breaking up hard ground, then planting and then watering - all three of which are about enabling God's work of growth. In other words, we are the facilitators who get everything ready for God's main event of people transformation.

STRATEGY: Gospel oxygenation

Replanting a church involves getting the ground ready so a work can grow and thrive. It's vital that church re-planters concentrate in the early days on:

- giving gospel oxygen to Christian believers who have been starved and need resuscitation
- concentrating on activities which will encourage life rather than spending energy on pointless battles which have no gospel benefit
- watering people with the weekly preaching of the Word of God

Preparing the ground begins with an understanding of your environment's growth dynamics:

- A clear understanding of the growth curve of the church historically. What were the catalysts of growth, what were the factors that slowed growth and what are the current reasons that there has been little growth in the current era?
- An assessment of the church's reputation in the community amongst people who know about the church but don't currently attend. What is it known for and why? Do people think of it as a

safe place to come to or not and why? How will a replanting strategy change the reputation of the church and how can this be received as a positive move?

- A theology which bathes the replant in prayers as well as sweat – working ‘with all Christ’s energy working powerfully through us’ (Col 1:29).

Gospel oxygenation is encouraged when:

- evidence of new life is publicly celebrated so that new life builds vision and a momentum.
- The new vision for the church is based on the mandate of Scripture and the heart of God for the growth of his people rather than the vain ambitions of a leader.
- people of peace are drawn in and the ‘movers and shakers’ in a church community are won over.
- resources are recaptured and utilised for gospel work so people can see the difference it makes when an existing ministry such as a toddler group is re-mastered with gospel impact rather than just ‘something we do.’ Key question for ministry leaders:
 - o do you know the Biblical mandate for doing this ministry?
 - o are you compelled to do it because you can see the need for this ministry?
 - o Are you convinced and thrilled by the opportunities to extend God’s kingdom available through the strategy we’ve adopted for this ministry?

3. Knowing your role

SCRIPTURE: The responsibility for growth is given to us by God as he chooses (Eph 4:11). In particular there is responsibility for Paul to plant and Apollos to water while God brings the growth (1Cor3:6). When Jesus sent out the disciples he sent them with his authority and told them which mission field to go to and which was not there concern at that time (Matthew 10:1, 5-6).

LESSON: The skills necessary to grow healthy churches are many and varied. The brash pioneer who confidently goes into an unreached area and breaks new ground is valuable on occasion. However, for vast areas of the world, a more strategic approach is necessary where there is an existing patchwork or churches operating somewhere on a wide scale of effectiveness.

The key in replanting a church is to know what strategic Kingdom role the work you are beginning will fulfil. If there are other gospel preaching churches committed to the local area then what will you be adding? Strategic additions you may provide in addition to what gospel churches already offer include:

- reaching a different people group
- reaching people with a different outreach strategy which will link with different people
- offering a different style of worship service, evangelistic programme etc
- offering a different level of participation of people – such as a more community feel or more heterogeneous approach
- offering a different approach to teaching Scripture – such as question times, small groups or preaching style
- focussing on justice and mercy ministries

STRATEGY: UKC (Unique Kingdom Contribution)

To determine your unique kingdom contribution, ask:

- if we shut down, what gap in the gospel provision to the area would not be easily and effectively filled by other gospel providers?
- if we grow, what new Kingdom growth are we expecting to see over and above transfer growth?
- what are we doing that is different, excellent and attractive to people outside of faith?
- why do we love being part of this church in particular and others love becoming part of our church? How does our culture and values differentiate us? How do we therefore describe what’s great about our church positively? (ie not just descriptions centred on the negative ‘we’re not like them’.)

4. Reengineering the DNA

SCRIPTURE: The letters to the churches in Revelation, particularly the letter to the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:1-7) indicate the call to restore the first love at the heart of what a church is and does by 'repenting and doing what they did at first' (Rev 2:5).

LESSON: One of the factors that encourages plant growth is taking strong lines as the starting point for new growth – so introducing a cutting from a line of plants that's been thriving, has better weathered bad conditions, has fruitfully reproduced etc.

In a church growth situation, replanting gives the opportunity to choose those factors which have been shown to bring fruit elsewhere and introduce them into the replanted church. The advantage of a replant over a new plant is that there is an existing supply of people, ministry experience, building and other resources which are often ready to be envisioned, equipped and motivated with fruitful labour. The fact people are going to a church shows dedication – particularly if that church hasn't been growing. Often what they people need is to be warmed in their heart by the gospel's truth and life – and a replant becomes a living example of the valley of dry bones!

STRATEGY: Recalibration

Re-orientate and recalibrate to a changed context:

- recalibrate theology (reformation reboot)
- recalibrate values (missional reboot)
- recalibrate vision (intentional reboot)

Facilitate change of culture based on recalibrated theology, values and vision:

- meetings culture – crafting meetings to reflect recalibrated vision and values
- arts culture – using arts reflective of the people who make up the church both now and in the future
- image culture – using graphic design and branding to support recalibrated vision and values
- communication culture – communicating the message presented on website, signage, publicity etc.
- community culture – orientating towards the community, reputation for mercy and justice etc.

5. Working the seasons

SCRIPTURE: Jesus promises he will build his church but we don't necessarily see that growth all the time – a lot is under the line. That's why Paul's prayers for churches such as the church in Philippi that he planted is that their love will continue to abound (Philippians 1:9) and that their progress and joy in the faith will continue (1:25). As he says to Timothy, be prepared to preach the word in season and out of season (2Tim4:2).

LESSON: Church replanting requires patient trust in God's growth and a clear understanding that the type of growth is up to God. It's easy for our plans to be fueled by our self orientated ambitions to make our mark and 'change the world' in earthly terms rather than a desire to serve the God who is changing eternity for people one by one through us.

STRATEGY

Avoid pride; be patient; watch out for discouragement; keep prayerful; see every day as an opportunity the Lord has made rather than always wishing for more or something different; be wise in how you speak to people; ask for discernment; gather a group of supporters; open up your home and your life to all those linked to the church so you show you love them; love the area you're working in; find your identity in Christ rather than instant success; keep on your knees; trust the preaching of God's Word with the power of God's Spirit to recalibrate people's thoughts and lives.

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