**How do we define a successful church plant?**

As we look at the church world in the U.S. it is easy to get into comparisons. This church is 5 years old and already has 2 campuses and this weekly attendance. On the other hand, it also happens that this church plant only got to 150 and then stayed there until…. There is also a struggle in urban America today to see large churches planted to the size and significance of a Redeemer (NYC) or a Capitol Hill Baptist Church (Washington DC). Earthly comparisons are the killers of heavenly design.

Several key ingredients must be present in order to see a successful church plant but first and foremost there must be a call of God on the lives of men and women to commit to plant the gospel in a community and see Christ build His church for His glory. The point of church planting is to see the power of God in the gospel penetrate and impact a community in a way that they will never be the same, and are taken up into this new family – the church. The church is formed by disciples from a local community that are called to covenant together to live out the “one anothers”, to grow in their love for God and in their love for their neighbor as they fulfill the Great Commission of Christ. Foundational in church planting is the anointing and call of God for Him to use a church planter and team to build Christ’s church in a focused community for his glory.

We must remember that we are vessels that God is using. We are not the point. “God does not exist to make much of you. He exists to make much of himself.” – (Max Lucado) Church planting is a holy venture in the hands of our God to build His church. Regularly we must ask ourselves:

What is God’s plan for His church, for a given community?

How is He calling us to engage, serve and see a church planted?

What will it cost for a church planter and team to live out this call?

Who are God’s partners for this kingdom venture?

In the Lord’s design the successful church planter is obedient to live out and boldly share the gospel of hope in a given community. In John 4, we see Christ intentionally going to a well at Sicar to meet a woman who would be God’s chosen vessel to open up a community to the good news of the Messiah. This was definitely an unexpected move for the disciples but one that Jesus used to show God’s mercy and power to transform lives. Christ goes to the well and engages a Samaritan woman saying:

“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:13-14)

Using the well and His need for water as a bridge He moves to talk about her soul and need for eternal life. The gospel must be planted in order that people might be saved and transformed. Church traditions and great services do not change lives, the gospel of Jesus does, and we must have that as foundational in our church planting. Regularly we must ask ourselves:

How is the gospel being lived out in our lives?

Who is experiencing and being impacted by the gospel we are carrying?

How many people have I initiated a gospel conversation with this week?

How many are responding to the gospel we are preaching?

Once the gospel is planted, we must see the core team of believers with the pastor diligently committed to discipling the new believers in Jesus in their context and culture. Even after the conversion of the woman at the well we see Jesus staying on 2 days to no doubt teach and explain His kingdom. Taking time and building gospel relationships will lead to faithful follow-ship. Discipleship, is not a class or program, it is a transformational relationship by which we as mature believers are modeling, sharing and teaching others about our Lord. Paul in Colossians 1:28 shares; “He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” This affirms for us the imperative of sharing Christ but also of committing to nurture and grow disciples into full maturity. We cannot in church planting be content in seeing numbers on Sunday morning services. We must like Paul, contend against culture and press to a greater prize. Building mature disciples takes a commitment to quality and attention that through multiplication can lead to numbers, but not instantaneously. A church with disciples will always have good leadership, but a church with immature believers will struggle continuously. Regularly we must ask ourselves:

How are we as leaders making disciples in our focus community?

How much of our time is invested with leading men/women to go deeper with the Lord and grow in prayer?

Who are the new disciples that are in our plant and how are they beginning to disciple? (family, friends….)

How will we know that a new believer is mature and growing in their faith?

As men and women are growing in follow-ship they need a community of faith to grow and be an integral part of, for the glory of God. Hebrews 10:24-25 exhorts use to gather regularly as the local church for the Word, worship, prayer, fellowship and baptism/Lord’s supper (Acts. 2:42-47). The believer has the need to serve others, care for one another and use his/her gifts for the edification of the whole body. Attending a big gathering for preaching and worship is encouraging, but it is not the only vital part of the local body. Praying for one another, encouraging one another to be more like Christ, sharing Christ and living on mission in the world can be done daily in many places. Christ commands his followers that; “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)

The Great Commandment is lived out in the body, not just in a hour a week on Sunday but through a daily commitment to live out our faith together. By this expression others will see and know the gospel in our world. Authentic Biblical gathering of a local church does not need a big sanctuary. It can also meet in a restaurant or in a living room. Discipleship and true fellowship can be facilitated by smaller gatherings but are not exclusive to this setting. During my son’s last year in High School we had weekly IHOP breakfasts in which I focused on discipling him. I covered key principles every week from the Word on a napkin. This was a unique way to connect with him and pass on the basics of faith and life. Is discipleship happening in our planting? Regularly we must ask ourselves:

How many men and women are in discipling relationships with one another in our community?

What are they covering in those discipleship times?

How will leaders grow beyond the basics of the Christian life?

How can discipling relationships be an integral part of our small groups, Sunday School, ministries.. etc.?

How will the next generation of disciplers come to be?

A natural result of maturity and health in discipleship and church planting is reproduction. In John 15 Christ points to fruitfulness saying, “this is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:8) Many times the vision of church planting is that of arriving at a self-sustaining, large enough state to hold your own in a given community. For us, the best way to plant a church is for the church to reproduce itself. It is healthier and more viable to start from the beginning. Churches plant churches. Some churches have existed for years and have not reproduced. Our prayer would be that you at least have made disciples that were sent out and are serving our Master in other cities and lands. A vision of reproduction in a new church or established church will move it to look outside its area, give to new mission efforts and pray more for the spread of the gospel into dark areas locally and around the world. Regularly we must ask ourselves:

Does the vision of reproduction drive all the ministries of our church?

Who in our church would God be calling out to plant in the future?

How can we nurture the healthy reproduction of disciples, leaders and missionaries?

When do we plan to reproduce and plant a new church?

Success in church planting is not an enigma, but is an act of obedience that results in new believers, new disciples, new leaders, new ministries, new groups and new congregations that are living out the Word and making disciples among the nations. The quality is gospel driven and the quantity is kingdom driven. Following the pathway is tough at times, but evangelizing, discipling and gathering believers who identify and live out a call to be the local body of Christ is worth is all.