Are You Ready to Plant a Church?

Jonathan Stanfield 6 December 2018



If you've ever been to Italy then possibly you've joined many others in visiting the famous 'Leaning Tower of Pisa" and perhaps you've even taken every tourist's favorite photograph, an optical illusion, of you holding it up with your finger.

Interesting facts about Pisa:

- It is falling down 1/20th inch each year.
- The structure is now over 17ft away from plumb line.
- The problem is foundational – the name "Pisa" comes from the Greek for "marsh/swamp".
- It's foundations are only 10ft deep

But this is all changing – slowly, and just slightly. After a whopping spend of almost £200 million between 1993-2001, it is now leaning 20.5 inches less![i][ii]

A Picture of Church Plants

This is a picture of far too many local churches and new church plants. Although we may have the best of intentions, to get things going and to reach the lost, the 'building' goes up, but in such a way that means it is forever flawed and may never reflect the original blueprint.

> It can often be almost impossible to correct fundamental and foundational errors later on

We read this sobering caution in 1 Corinthians 3:10, 'According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.'

It can often be almost impossible to correct fundamental and foundational errors later on, even with great expertise, labour and finance. Whilst we don't need a 'word' from the Lord to plant a church, as we have all got the 'word' we need in the Great Commission and a clear apostolic mandate to do so, we do need 'wisdom' when planting churches.

Four Reasons to W.A.I.T. Before You Plant a Church

1. '**W**ent' vs 'Sent'

In some circles, new churches are actually more the result of 'splants' (a split + a plant) than plants! This happens when a group of people within an existing church wants to plant because they are frustrated with aspects of their current church. It's not that there is a total breakdown of relationship, but they want to go and do church their way.

The problem is that this underlying motivation will inevitably be reproduced in the new church. We reap what we sow. I would strongly encourage you to not only seek the 'blessing' of the local leadership when you plant, but to also address any underlying issues of the heart. Be a 'sent one'.

In the dispute between Paul and Barnabas over young John Mark, it is evident that Paul's future ministry had the 100% backing of his church. He and Silas were 'sent ones', whereas the text seems to suggest that Barnabas hadn't fully addressed issues and headed to Cyprus as a 'went one'. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia,

strengthening the churches. (Acts 15:39-41)

2. **A**postolic Perspective

One of the greatest gifts any church planter can experience is perspective from those serving on an apostolic team. We don't like to admit it, but often our zeal overtakes both our wisdom and time frames.

We read in Proverbs 14:16, 'The wise watch their steps and avoid evil; fools are headstrong and reckless.' (The Message)

> Take the time to invite the perspective of others, particularly from seasoned members of an apostolic team.

One of the greatest preachers in the New Testament had a blind spot. For him it was doctrinal. 'He (Apollos) began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.' (Acts 18:26)

Take the time to invite the perspective of others, particularly from seasoned members of an apostolic team. Proactively ask them what blind spots there may currently be in your personal life, marriage, ministry, doctrine or plans for the church plant. Much heartache will be avoided, not only by us but also the people whom we will pastor, if we address any areas in our lives that are not reflecting Jesus well.

3. **I**mitation

'And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.' (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7)

> As Dudley Daniels often said, 'It's far more important what we are born into than what we have come out of.'

What an amazing description of the saints in Thessalonica! The leaders reflected Jesus to the people and they had become imitators of them to such a degree that everyone was talking about them. There's a principle found in Genesis which we must never ignore. We reproduce after our kind. What if everyone in the church you were planting became like you? It's not that

we need to be perfect before we plant; however, if there are areas that we have failed to address in our characters, our families or our lives, then others will inevitably imitate them. As Dudley Daniels often said, 'It's far more important what we are born into than what we have come out of.'

Let's work through those issues in our lives which we wouldn't want others to imitate before we plant, otherwise all we end up doing is discipling new believers into a dysfunctional family rather than into a household of faith that is worthy of imitation.

4. **T**ests

Before boarding any airplane, I am thankful that not only have the pilots been through intensive training and ongoing testing, but also that every component of the plane itself has gone through rigorous testing. This is to ensure that it can endure the inevitable stresses of many flights and safely carry the passengers to their final destination. How much more, as those charged with overseeing God's flock and responsible for many precious saints, are we in need of tests?

Church planting is NOT an experiment. We're responsible for peoples' very lives. We must embrace and pass the tests that will qualify us for this work. Even after we plant, there will continue to be tests in the life of the church. This is not to mention that final test in eternity when the King returns. We are cautioned that our work will be tested by fire:

'Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.' (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

> We need many more healthy local churches in every nation across the world today – but the key word is 'healthy'.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned in over 20 years of pastoral ministry is that we overestimate what God might do in 1 year and underestimate what he will do in 10 years. Pisa was a great idea, but it's foundations and the context in which it was built was always going to work against it.

The Church is God's vehicle to bring the Good News of Jesus to the world and to make healthy disciples. We need many more healthy local churches in every nation across the world today – but the key word is 'healthy'.

W.A.I.T. isn't a word that children like to hear, but perhaps if we occasionally slowed down just a little bit, we'd see a far greater harvest in years to come that is both healthy and long-lasting.

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