

What is “New Church?”

Once you have clarified “What is church?” you are ready to deal with the “new church” issue. You need to remember two basic principles: first, a “new” church is not simply a “baby” church that has all the parts but just has not grown up yet. A new church is a “stage” among the various stages of the life cycle of churches.

If you are not familiar with the life cycle of churches, we would encourage you to do some reading in this field. Several useful life cycle descriptions are in current usage — all of which offer helpful insights into the various stages in the life cycle of a church.

- *Turn-Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church*, George Barna (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993).
- www.congregationalresources.org/Bullard.asp, “A Congregational Resource Guide Learning Pathway” (booklet), George Bullard (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), pp. 14-18.

Of primary importance is what new churches have: vision and relationships, in contrast to what mature churches have: programs and leadership.

Think about what that means. One implication is clear: A new church should not attempt to offer a full range of programs for all ages. A new church does not have the ability to offer everything. Another implication is built on that first one: A new church should promise things it cannot deliver. In picturing a “new church,” the planter needs to think about which pieces are critical to start the church, which programs would be the next pieces to add, when leadership and strength are available to support them, and which ones will only be offered when the church has some measure of maturity.

Another way of expressing new church is that it is a starting point from which a planter and people will build a church. Phil Alessi, a church planter coach and trainer, has arranged the eight characteristics identified by Christian Swartz in “Natural Church Development” (a guide to essential qualities of healthy churches) to describe the start and early stages of a new church. He pinpoints a direct correlation between the pieces of natural church development and church planting:

- The planter begins with two key pieces: passionate spirituality and loving relationships. The church, as a spiritual entity, cannot exist without passionate spirituality as the core of its being. And loving relationships are key to all that happens in the areas of making disciples, empowering leaders and developing ministry. This becomes the DNA of a church from the planter, planning/support team, early core group, start-up teams and anyone else who becomes part of preparatory work for the new church. However, this is not yet a new church.
- The next two pieces build on the first two: need-oriented evangelism and holistic small groups. In order to provide need-oriented evangelism, the planter and others

have clearly identified the “target audience” for this new church. The planter/pastor and core leaders know whom God is calling them to reach, whom no other church is currently reaching. In holistic small groups, the people they are reaching have opportunity to experience God’s grace that is exemplified in the hospitality and missional spirit of the community of faith. In most instances, these people will need to experience a sense of “belonging” first, which will lead them to “believe.” Only holistic small groups can provide that. However, this is not yet a new church.

- When the church is ready to “go public,” it offers mainly two things: gift-oriented ministry and high impact worship. During the period before going public, needs and ministry opportunities in the community have been described, as well as gifts clarified and leaders empowered within the start-up group. At this point, a few ministries are ready that will provide its identity in the community. So, the church will provide worship that impacts believers, seekers and others — all built upon the strengths developed in its spirituality and relationships from the first moments. While some existing churches in the area may view the new church as “competition,” the new church, by focusing on currently unreached people, will be a partner to other churches in growing God’s kingdom on earth. At this point, the community of faith is identified as a new church.
- What about the other two pieces from “Natural Church Development”: empowering leadership and functional structures? These two need to be part of a church plant from the time the planter gathers people to accomplish the vision. At each stage along the way, some functional structures must support and advance the work, constantly changing in order to provide appropriate support for the current situation of the new church. For example, a full constitution and bylaws are not needed while gathering people or even during the early months after going public. Some structures are needed, but not many. Ministry should be the focus rather than structure, which is a difference between a new church and an aging church. Leadership is critical at every stage. The ministry can grow only to the extent that leadership grows and is available. You want to multiply ministry? Multiply leaders!

Do you see what a new church is like? It is different from a mature congregation in many ways. The first principle is that a “new” church is not simply a “baby” church that has all the parts but just hasn’t grown up yet. Are you willing to do what it takes to start a new church? Are you the kind of person who will be satisfied creating and building the individual pieces? Or are you content only if all the pieces are present?

The second principle, taken directly from Covey’s *Seven Habits of Effective People*, is this: begin with the end in mind. Jesus talked about people who wanted to build a tower but needed to sit down first to count the cost. How about you? Do you want to have a growing, missional church of 200? What do you need to do and keep doing in order to gather, grow and empower a missional church of 200 people that will keep growing?

Let me raise the issue another way. As a possible planter, you may have a vision of a new church that reaches a particular target audience with a special identity and ministries. The vision needs to be tested and adjusted. Every possible planter needs to research the community. What are the people like who live there? What are their likes and dislikes? What do they see as the needs of the community, in addition to their personal needs? What is the biggest obstacle to their hearing, receiving and believing the Good News? What is their understanding of church? What strategies will be most effective in reaching and making fully committed disciples of Jesus Christ in this community?

We are often asked: “What is the model of church planting in the American Baptist Churches?” Our response has always been clear: “We do not have one model.” After understanding the context and culture of a community, a planter must determine which of several approaches (described as “modes” above) will be most effective in reaching and making fully committed disciples of Jesus Christ. When the approaches are clear, then a planter can start a unique expression of “church” that will work in a particular context. Four expressions are typical:

- Simple church (house churches): allows the Gospel to be lived out in community; provides accountability for growth and ministry; frees up resources for outward focused ministry; and allows for development of leaders. This can be replicated quickly. In major urban centers, where prices of land and buildings can be an insurmountable obstacle, house churches are a viable model of church planting.
- Single-cell church: puts high value on face-to-face relationships, and can be as small as 12-15 or as large as 150 (sometimes larger). One test of whether it is a single cell church is that there cannot be alternative programs operating at the same time. Every person is expected to support “the program” of the church. Everyone needs to feel like they belong and are included. Most churches in the United States today are single cell churches. In a culture where there is deep longing for connections and relationships, a single cell church has much to offer.
- Cell or celebration church (also called “metta” church): small group communities of faith — cells (like simple churches) — gather as a whole with other small communities of faith (cells) for celebration on a regular basis. The individual cells, usually led by non-clergy persons, are expected to grow and multiply under the leadership and care of the larger whole. There is a sense of belonging both to the small group and the whole. To date, this model has been successfully employed in a variety of cultures, as well as in a variety of settings, and can be any size.
- Multi-cell church (primarily exists as “mega” churches). Usually the pattern of a “mega-church,” many single cells join as midsized organizations, and many midsized organizations gather as an even larger whole for celebration. For example, dozens of cell groups may be part of one adult Sunday School class of 100 to 200 people. Sunday School classes may operate almost as a church-within-a-church, with its own officers, leadership, small group ministries and pastoral

care. Usually these groups operate within the building space of the mega-church, as opposed to smaller, home-based groups in the cell and celebration model.

If you act upon the principle “begin with the end in mind,” what is your goal when you start a new church? Churches that start as a single cell seldom become multi-cell churches unless there is a specific strategy for multiplication from the start. Churches that start as a simple church seldom become single-cell churches or multi-cell churches, unless there is a specific strategy for growth and multiplication. The vision, direction, skill, energy, effort and leadership needed to start one model are different from every other model. For example, Rick Warren leads a mega, multi-cell church, but not everyone has the vision, direction, skill, energy and leadership talent mix of Rick Warren.

Indeed, a “new” church is distinct. The slate is clean, ready for you to plant, water and nurture the seed, and bring it to fruition. What do you want to create when you start your new church? What is it going to require of you to make that happen? Are you willing to do what it takes to start the new church of your vision? Whom do you need to join you in order to make that happen?