

25 QUESTIONS CHURCH PLANTERS SHOULD ANSWER

In his book, “44 Questions for Church Planters,” church consultant Lyle Schaller approaches church planting from the denominational practice of establishing “traditional” churches that are fundamentally Christendom-oriented where the focus is on property and buildings. The view of National Ministries’ church planting team is that we are operating in a largely post-Christendom age where the focus has shifted toward missions and disciple-making. This foundational shift raises a new set of questions for church planters to consider.

With this thought in mind, we considered questions proposed by church planters, Greg Kappas and Gary Rohrmayer. However, after reviewing Kappas and Rohrmayer’s questions within the current context and our concerns, we decided to put forward our own set of questions. Our questions are applicable to any church model, in any social or cultural context and wherever the new church is planted. This commentary looks at the questions church planters should answer as they seek to develop a successful church planting strategy. These questions are crucial to the process and will help church planters establish a solid foundation on which they can build.

1. Who will pray for you?

A church planter needs a lot of prayer support starting with the casual or occasional contacts he may meet in the early stages of the process. Communicating at least monthly with these contacts is acceptable and advisable. A second, more critical level of prayer support should come from persons who are likely to have more regular contact with the planter. This is usually the core group or start-up team who will work with the planter on starting the new church. Contact with this group needs to be frequent and personal (such as in group meetings and during extended times of prayer). A third level of support should come from intercessors. Though often few in number, intercessors have a close relationship with God and may feel burdened to pray for the planter. They work behind the scenes but are trustworthy, humble people with whom the planter can share personal and specific details about the plant. Planters should to pray for their intercessors and communicate with them regularly especially as prayers are answered.

2. Who will support you financially?

Traditionally, church planters have looked to outside sources, like National Ministries and others, to provide financing for new church plants. Without apology, we believe the church planter should raise a significant portion of the support needed. A key test to determine if the planter will be successful is whether or not he is able to raise the financial support needed to launch the church. This is a critical test because it can determine if the planter has the skills required for a new church planting project. If the planter cannot raise sufficient support, it may call into question as to whether or not the planter can grow and sustain a new church that will also be self-supporting. The planter must be able to convince people to give and continue to give throughout the life of the church in order to encourage good financial stewardship once the church is started.

How the planter raises support depends on the planter. Some planters may choose to work bi-vocationally, a model favored by the apostle Paul. At times, it may be helpful to plant bi-

vocationally, especially if the “other” employment offers high visibility in the community (i.e. substitute teacher) or provides regular contact or communication (i.e. social service agency) with the intended target audience. Other planters may have a spouse who may choose to work to support starting a new church. Still others may seek contributions from family, friends or extended networks to raise the on-going support. Additional sources of support may come from a sponsoring congregation, a partner congregation, association, or region. Regardless of which course taken, the planter must be able to “sell” the new church’s vision and the plan in order to raise support for it. National Ministries has a list of resources on raising support.

3. Who is your target community or audience? What is your vision for a church in this community? Who are the key people you need to involve in the work?

A church plant that proposes to reach everybody is not practicable. No one can effectively reach every group or sub-group, culture or sub-culture in a community. Who do you want to reach? Are there unchurched groups in this community? Who else is reaching out to them or a different target group? How effective is their outreach? Is the community large enough to support planting another congregation? Who can help you learn more about your target group? What assumptions are you making? These related articles, “What is Church?” and “What is a New Church?” are available on National Ministries’ church planting Web page.

4. Where can you find people who will be receptive to you?

The planter may elect to go forward only to find that a particular target group may not be receptive to the vision for the new church. In that case, like plowing concrete, you can spend time and energy with little to show for it. In almost every community, however, there is one person who will be receptive to the planter, initially. How do you find this person? What do you need to learn from them about the community or culture? This person will likely know the community, your target audience and have key contacts in the community. This person can open doors for the planter, which in turn, will provide access to others. This person may be one of the first to believe in the planter and the vision for a new church. Jesus told his disciples to find such a person and stick with him (Luke 10:5-6). If you are unable to enlist the support of such a person in your target community, it may be better to either change target groups or move on to another community.

There is another approach to finding a receptive person. The planter, by nature, may find that certain people are naturally drawn to him. With whom do you feel comfortable? What types of people do you attract? Are these people in your target group or community? The more you have in common with people, the quicker they are able to share your vision and mission as your core group in the new church. If you can not find people with whom you feel comfortable or with whom you have something in common, you may need to find another community.

5. What are the components of your strategic plan? How will this plan enable you to fulfill your vision for the church?

Some planters use an operational model favored by most churches today which calls for the inclusion of programs like Sunday school, Bible study, a nursery, youth groups, men’s and women’s groups. While a church plant can include such programs, focusing on programs alone might not help you fully achieve your vision or be at the core of your strategic plan.

If you want to make disciples of people who are not yet Christians, you must have a good strategy for reaching and engaging them. How will you build intentional relationships with them? How will you engage them in spiritual matters? The planter needs to spend at least 50 per cent of his time engaging those who are not yet Christians. How will the new church form a community of spiritual pilgrims? How will the new church make disciples of these new people? These are the basic elements of the strategic plan for the new church. The plan would also need to take into consideration the target audience and the cultural context of the new church.

6. How will you select your start up team and your leaders?

These are two separate issues. A start-up team, also known as a core group, is composed of those persons who partner with the planter to start a new church. This team will do the hard work, including canvassing neighborhoods, completing surveys, preparing materials, spending time engaging not yet Christians, building relationships, initiating discussions and asking questions that encourage spiritual pilgrimages. Since many new churches (i.e. traditional or attractional models) start in temporary facilities, when the new church goes public, it is the responsibility of start-up team to set-up and tear-down, as well as offer hospitality to individuals and groups whenever and wherever the church meets.

Leaders, on the other hand, may or may not come from the start-up team. Leaders are needed for the general duties of launching the new church. There are two criteria for leaders: 1.) someone who understands the work to be done and is able to train new people (multiplication of ministry) to assume the responsibility for work; and 2.) someone who embodies all the core values of the new church. For instance, if a core value is reaching “not yet Christians,” a person who does not engage or relate to them on a regular basis would not make a choice for a leader. In the long run, a person who is not a model disciple in the new church should not be chosen as leader. Also, a person who is not training others for ministry should not become a leader. Be sure to publicly praise the start-up team as well as those who provide leadership.

7. Who should be part of your start up team? Who are your leaders? How will you measure their ownership of the vision and values?

In most instances, the start-up team will have demonstrated leadership capabilities by serving in their positions. However, a clear separation between the start-up team and the leadership must be made. It may be that a leadership team is only needed until the initial hurdles have been cleared. Don't be too eager to establish a leadership team with a formal structure, including an official constitution and by-laws. The leadership team's structure should flow out of the mission and ministry of the new church and take into consideration its unique ministry setting and missional needs.

In most instances, the initial vision for the new church belongs to the planter who must convince others to adopt the vision. The planter's success depends upon his ability to persuade others to accept the vision of the new church as their own. Owning the vision will motivate and keep the start-up team and the leadership team on target. Be careful to assess the extent to which a person “owns” the vision. Verbal assent is not enough. A person who fully owns the vision and the values of the new church will demonstrate this by his life choices, time commitments, ministry commitment and energy level. The planter needs to make a regular assessment of the start-up and leadership team members as to their true commitment as opposed to simple compliance.

8. How will you gather people?

There are two different models for gathering people---small group model or large group model. Small groups permit a closer, more relational focus which allows small group leaders to develop more readily. Large groups allow the focus to be on the planter who directs the programs, projects and systems. Is your intent to gather people into several small, relational groups or in one large group? Is your intent to work with leaders of small groups through which ministry can take place? Or is it your intent to provide direction to a large group which has been recruited and mobilized for ministry? How you gather people will determine your ministry's direction, your role as pastoral leader and the type of ministry you will have in that location.

9. How will you welcome new people into the church?

If you choose to gather people in small groups, the small group becomes the model for welcoming and including new members. If you gather people in a large group, you will need to establish a formal system for welcoming, assimilating and recruiting new members for ministry. Regardless of which model is used, small or large group, group members must exude hospitality through which new people can experience Christ's presence and thus, feel a part of the group. This is especially true for large group gatherings. National Ministries has information and training materials on hospitality.

10. How will you grow and disciple your start-up team, leaders and new believers?

As followers of Jesus Christ, we never get to a point where we can afford to stop growing. Your start-up team members should demonstrate a sincere commitment to their on-going spiritual growth and development. Evidence of God's indwelling Spirit should be seen in the lives of both the team members and the leadership. This same standard should be incorporated in the vision for the new church and for new believers. Missional activity is an excellent starting point to grow new believers. The extent of their effectiveness in missions may also uncover their leadership potential.

11. What is your plan for the spiritual development of your members?

What are the characteristics of a person who is growing spiritually and who embodies the vision and values of your new church? What is needed for the new church to grow to spiritual maturity --- is it discipling, mentoring or coaching? Is it important that a spiritually mature person be able to pray, both privately and publicly? Is it important that a spiritually mature person be a good listener, demonstrate hospitality, care for those who are without God, be able to testify about God's goodness and grace, be able to relate to the unchurched and to recognize potential in others? You should have a plan in place before you start gathering people. Often planters will gather people, only to put "gathering" on hold because they didn't have a plan already in place for making disciples of them. National Ministries has materials and training on disciple-making.

12. How will you determine the style of worship in the new church?

Worship is the opportunity for the community to affirm that Jesus is Lord and celebrate what God has done. Ask yourself, "What would worship look like for this group of new believers?" Not everyone will respond to one particular method of worship as an expression of their faith. Therefore, it is best to forgo any preconceived ideas or fondness for a particular format, style or approach. The worship style should be an expression of the people and reflect their cultural norms.

13. How will you foster a sense of community and promote a feeling of “openness” so that people feel welcome?

In the early stages of a new church, members who spend a lot of time together on church matters naturally develop a tight bond that can give the appearance of a closed community of believers. Moreover, these members may not even realize the need to reach out to new people, having lost the concern as well as the vision for including them. After a new church reaches a certain size, members may no longer feel a responsibility for growing the church. That task is too often left to the planter. Growth stagnates whenever members become comfortable with the status quo. The planter must continually spur the members to reach out to the not yet churched outside its doors. What will you do to encourage members to relate to those outside the church? How can you invite and include them in church activities? How will you foster a sense of “openness” within the community? How people become part of the life of the congregation clearly relates to your vision for the new church and whether the leadership owns the vision.

14. Who will be responsible for recordkeeping for the new church?

In the early stages, when people are caught up in the excitement of the new church, it is easy to forget to keep records. Good recordkeeping will provide documentation that supports the long-term memory of the new church. Good financial recordkeeping will enable the planter to gauge the church’s financial status. In most cases, it is wise to have someone other than the planter or the planter’s spouse keep the records. The planter should not be burdened with this additional task.

15. Who will be responsible for the financial affairs of the new church? Who will sign checks and ensure that bills are paid?

Once there is a treasury, a treasurer should be selected to receive all monies and pay the bills. Under no circumstances should this be the responsibility of the planter or the planter’s family. The Code of Ethics for Ministers makes this very clear. Writing checks and paying bills should be handled by a trusted person within the core group or leadership team who can who is able and willing to handle the job. This person should be a mature disciple who embodies the vision and values of the new church.

16. What will be the missional focus of the new congregation? How will you involve people in global as well as home missions?

Church planters must be able to discern the needs within a particular community or group. The list of needs can vary and require more resources than the new church can provide. A new church can not meet every need; therefore, it must narrow its focus to no more than one or two pertinent issues. For what will your new church be known? How will your new church make a difference in your community? New churches are able to not only reach out to a community with God’s love but also transform that community for the better. By limiting the missional focus, the planter will enable the new church to operate more effectively.

The members of your new church may have contacts and connections that may enable your church to have a world-wide impact. Within our global economy, with its constant travel, international trade and global communications, the doors of opportunity are open for your church to have an impact in other parts of the world. A church whose vision focuses solely on local needs will miss the opportunity to expand its mission beyond its borders. Focusing on both home

and global missions will enable the church to expand its ministry base by utilizing the diversity within your new congregation. How will you develop the missional focus for your vision? How will you mobilize people for missions? National Ministries has information and materials on missional church planning.

17. How will you enable and encourage members to use their gifts in ministry?

The new church needs to begin by enabling and encouraging every member to use his or her gifts in ministry. As the congregation grows, the diversity of gifts will become more evident resulting in wider opportunities for ministry. It is important to involve members in ministry early on in the life of the church because it will be harder to persuade them to participate as time passes. The reality often is that as a congregation grows, fewer members will be actively involved in ministry. The planter should never do ministry alone but rather should seek to always involve others. This should be the norm in the new church. Ministry should always be a team effort. Likewise, community ministry should always be done in conjunction with other public or non-profit groups, agencies, organizations or churches. Core group members and leaders should minister in teams and train others to do ministry. The planter should set the standard and hold others accountable to it.

18. How will you encourage new believers to multiply?

Dr. Win Arn, a pioneer of the church growth movement, talked about the “Principle of Lift” which states that the longer a new believer is part of a faith community, the more he is “lifted” out of his former culture and circle of friends. The time to encourage a new believer to reach back to his family and friends is when he is new to the faith. It is during this time that the church can utilize his “web” of relationships to multiply its witness. Who will mentor this new believer as he continues to relate to his circle of unchurched friends? How will the church encourage and support this new believer’s witness within his community? If the new believer does not share his new faith early on, the chances are that he may not share his faith with those closest to him. National Ministries has helpful material on developing an evangelism strategy and training.

19. How will you encourage good stewardship and faithful giving? What is your time-frame for the new church to become self-supporting?

A plan for developing disciples needs to include a discussion of stewardship and faithful giving. While this question primarily addresses stewardship, it encompasses the larger concern for disciple-making (refer to question 11). We are constantly surprised by pastors who fail to preach and teach stewardship. How can the membership become mature disciples if this issue is never addressed?

A related question is how best to move your church toward financial self-sufficiency? Here are a few things to consider based on your particular vision. Is the vision for your church, to: 1) have its own facility; 2) employ a full time pastor; 3) employ a worship team; 4) hire office staff; or 5) operate several ministries? What will this cost? After outlining the vision and the cost to implement and maintain it, you must determine how many members (giving units) the church needs to financially support the vision. What is the average income of your target group? What is the average percentage they will give of their income? Multiply that percentage by their income to get the average amount of their giving. Divide the total amount needed to support the

vision by the average amount of their giving. This will give you the number of people (giving units) you will need to reach self-sufficiency.

For example, to rent or purchase a building, pay utilities, hire a full-time clergy, part-time worship team, half-time secretary and part-time custodian, may require a budget of \$225,000. If the average income of your target audience is \$30,000 per year and they give 5 per cent of their income on average (some will give a tithe or more while some will give less), translates into a sum of \$1,500 per year. To meet your budget, you will need 150 giving units. A giving unit may be an individual or a family. In order to have 150 giving units, you may need an average attendance of more than 300 worshippers.

To become self-sufficient, as in the above example, you have two options: 1) to work toward the goal of having at least 300 in worship. How long this will take is determined by the success of your community outreach and the effectiveness of member invitations; or 2) to work toward increasing the level of financial stewardship. If the average giving unit gives 10 per cent of their income rather than 5 per cent, you will need to have half as many giving units (75 in this example) and half as many people attending (150 in this example) in order to become financially self-sufficient.

Becoming financially self-sufficient usually involves growth in numbers in a relatively short period of time. For example, a team of four can usually “grow” the church more quickly to 200 to 300 in attendance—often enabling a new church to become self-supporting in two years. By contrast, a solo planter can take a minimum of three years to grow a new church to 75 in attendance, and then may need seven or more years to reach financial self-sufficiency. Another factor to consider in growing a church is that the planter focuses on cultivating disciples and multiplying leaders and ministries. Stewardship then becomes more about enabling and supporting missions and less about salaries and buildings. People are much more willing to give to support a ministry that makes a difference in their life and community.

20. How will you reproduce leaders?

This is a critical issue within a “new” congregation; but is often ignored by “existing” congregations. A new church of largely unchurched people may not have an experienced pool of leaders from which to draw. Few if any will have experience as a leader in a Christian community setting. Because of high member turnover in the early years of a new church, the planter may develop a leader only to see that person leave within a relatively short period of time. Among existing congregations, membership growth often comes through “transfers” who often bring leadership experience with them from other church involvement. Members who have been part of a faith community for a long period often assimilate the form and patterns consistent with church life. In either case, leadership training may be needed but is often overlooked in an existing church. A new church, however, can not afford to ignore leadership development.

To multiply ministry, you need to multiply leaders. A new church cannot venture into new missions without leaders. You must decide which leadership skills are needed for your leaders to function effectively, whether it is elemental leadership skills such as goal-setting, planning, assigning responsibilities, follow-up and evaluation; or relational skills such as listening, dialogue, encouragement, inclusiveness, group interaction, conflict resolution, training and

vision-casting. You do not have to personally embody or teach all of these skills yourself. Other team members may possess some of these skills and can help to prepare your leaders.

21. How will you handle conflict?

Most of us have preferred ways of handling conflict based on the behavior we learned and observed in our families and in other relationships. However, what we learned may not apply to every situation. Knowing how and why conflict starts and the most effective ways to resolve conflict is helpful. Also, knowing how to manage conflict when conflict resolution is not possible can also be helpful. How good are you at listening to both sides yet remaining neutral? Can you help the conflicting parties communicate the issues clearly so that everyone feels like they are being heard? Can you confront people in positive ways so that they remain open to communicating with others? These skills are critical since new churches often attract people who have been involved in conflict in their former churches. The issues that they bring with them can sidetrack the new church from its mission and ministry unless properly addressed. National Ministries has information and material on conflict resolution training for your core group or leadership team.

22. How involved are you in your ABC Region?

Historically, American Baptist churches have freely associated with one another for the purposes of fellowship and missions but no imperative was placed on pastors and their congregations to participate or not participate. The exception is in the case of church planting. Because church planting is regarded as Kingdom work, it is relational by its very nature. We need each other. Relationships offer encouragement and promote accountability. When we listen and learn from each other, we stretch and grow beyond our comfort zones where God can deal with us. What will you do to build and maintain relationships between your new church and other American Baptist churches?

23. How will you multiply?

Living organisms have within their DNA the ability to multiply. The church is no different in that it should be multiplying (not just adding) disciples, small groups, missions and ministry among the unchurched. Which group is not being reached in your community? What missional activity can you initiate to reach them? Do you need to start cell groups or house churches in apartment buildings, condominiums or other places where churches normally do not minister? Do you need to start a ministry to a new constituency in your community? Do you need to offer a second or third opportunity for worship in a different format to reach a different sub-culture? Jesus reminds us that we are to continually seek those that are “lost.” In most instances, just continuing the ministries you already have will mean that you will only reach people like those you have already gathered. Who else needs to experience the Good News?

24. How will you plan for the future?

The pace of change is so rapid in our world that we can no longer think in terms of long term planning as covering a period of ten years or more. In today’s terms, long term planning may mean over the next two to three years. More important than having a long term plan is having a growth process that will enable the church to continue to move forward while recommitting itself to new goals, plans and visions as they emerge.

Just as important is being able to respond quickly to sudden changes and new information. Irrespective of a clear process, leaders must be flexible and open to what may come. It could be an idea from a member not normally considered a leader; or an experience that a new member brings to the congregation; or even new insight from reading the Bible. How will you utilize these “revelations from God” and how will you guide needed change through your congregation? The best time to initiate change is when all is going well and members see no need for change. If members get too established, in a set pattern or mindset, this can restrict future opportunities for ministry.

25. How do you plan to maintain your own physical, spiritual, relational and mental well-being?

When you start a new church, you are embarking upon a spiritual journey that will demand a lot from you. Church planting is a marathon race, not a 100- yard dash. Many planters begin the race well but then fail to finish because of a failing in some aspect of their personal life. Take health and fitness for example. You alone must take responsibility for your health and well-being. Begin by developing a good health regimen to combat stress and fatigue. Stick to it even when you don't feel like it. This is where your discipline is put to the test. Modeling healthy discipleship will be as critical to the success of your new church as any other activity you will do. Take time to deepen your spiritual life, pursue professional growth and strengthen your personal relationships.