

Who Can Plant a Church?

In order to engage in church planting effectively, it is important to consider who can plant a church. Do only churches plant churches? What about denominations? What about an individual? For that matter, must an individual be ordained, formally trained, and sent out by an agency of the denomination? In both the New Testament and today, we see several patterns regarding the *who* of church planting.

Teams Plant Churches

Schenk and Stutzman declare, “In the book of Acts and in the Gospels, we find that the pattern of team ministry was followed consistently.”¹ In many cases in the New Testament, God raised up apostolic teams to plant new churches. As we have seen, this was the apostle Paul’s practice. Paul consistently utilized team ministry in his church planting. In his intimate circle were Barnabas, Silvanus, and Timothy. Working with him as independent coworkers were Priscilla, Aquila, and Titus. Finally, Paul worked with a series of local church representatives that included Epaphroditus, Epaphras, Aristarchus, Gaius, and Jason.

The churches, Ollrog argues, put these persons at Paul’s disposal for limited periods. Through them the churches themselves are represented in the Pauline mission and become co-responsible for the work. As a matter of fact, not being represented in this venture constitutes a shortcoming in a local church; such a church has excluded itself from participating in the Pauline missionary enterprise.²

Individuals Plant Churches

When Philip went to Samaria (Acts 8:1–40), there is no indication that he was sent by anyone other than the Holy Spirit. As he won converts, the apostles sent Peter and John there, but Philip had already been baptizing converts and planting the new church.

Although an individual planting a church is the most common method today, it is the least common in the New Testament. This does not imply that it did not happen. Early church history reflects that several of the apostles set out in different directions to plant churches. This should remind us of the importance of bringing a team to plant—or developing one soon upon arrival.

Laypeople Plant Churches

Aquila and Priscilla are two names that appear frequently in the New Testament. They were laypeople, probably a married couple in business, and they probably started the church in Ephesus. They show up in several different cities (Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus; see Acts 18:2–3, 18–19, 26; 2 Tim. 4:19).

They hosted a church in their home at both Ephesus and Rome (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3–5). Since there is no record of the church in Rome being “founded,” it is logical to assume that Aquila and Priscilla helped start the church that met in their house.

They had a heart for church planting and the ministry of Paul, and they “may well have financed his trip”³ to Ephesus. Richard Longenecker explains that they were probably traveling business owners:

[They] were either transferring their business from Corinth to Ephesus or leaving their Corinthian operation in charge of a manager (as possibly they did earlier at Rome) in order to open a new branch at Ephesus. Perhaps Aquila and Priscilla, who seem to have been fairly well-to-do, paid Paul's passage as they joined him on board the ship for Ephesus—and perhaps also paid his passage on to Jerusalem. Being themselves Jewish Christians, they would have appreciated Paul's desire to fulfill his vow at Jerusalem.⁴

The fact that laypeople can plant churches raises an interesting point. It reminds us that those not called to pastoral ministry can still be involved in the ministry of church planting. It is a ministry for laypeople as well as pastors.

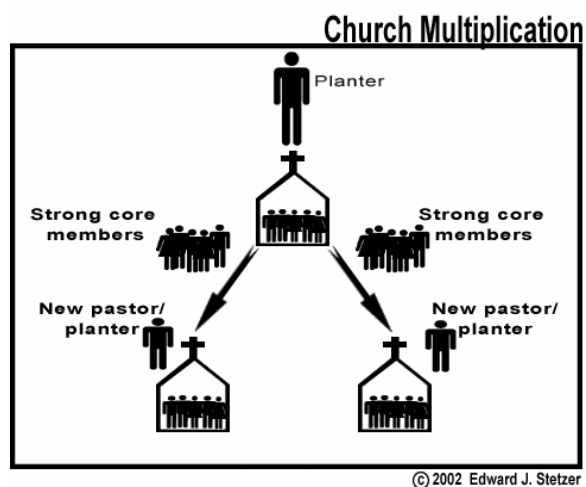
Agencies and Denominations Help Plant Churches

Many people feel strongly that agencies and denominations should not plant churches. In one sense, they want to be careful about agency or denominational support for a new church. In my faith tradition, we believe in the autonomy of the local church, and we are very skeptical of outside ecclesiastical control. In most cases, however, agency/denominational church starting is not about control; it is about start-up.

[The Bible does not speak against] the idea of people collectively gathering and sending out people to do the work of the gospel. Paul was not supported solely by the Jerusalem church, from which he went out of on his missionary journeys. Paul traveled and was supported by many different people and churches (ex., Philippians 4:16) that he might do the work that God had for him, and even had to support himself at times (Acts 18:3). Christians gathering resources and sending out workers into the harvest is what God has called His people to do, and while local church government seems to be restrictive, the work of the Gospel is not. God has worked in many different ways throughout history, and to place restrictions on God concerning this matter could cause many to miss out on the blessing of planting a new church.⁵

Churches Plant Churches

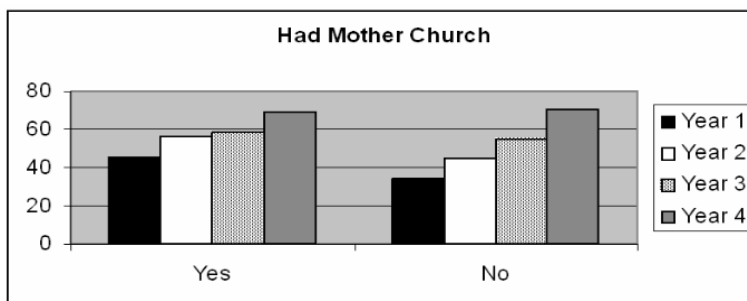
Although there is no requirement for “churches planting churches” in the New Testament, this method remains the preferred one today. In the New Testament, churches *did* commission people to plant churches, and some of their people *did* move from community to community in the process. But we cannot say that this is the only method of church planting described in the New Testament. “The real agent in the planting of the [church in] Antioch was the Holy Spirit. We see no evidence that the Jerusalem church as the ‘mother church’ or ‘sponsoring church’ took official action to send church planters to start a ‘mission’ or ‘daughter congregation’ at Antioch.”⁶



But churches can and do plant churches. The best church planting occurs when a sponsor/mother church is actively involved in the planting of new churches. This has historically

been called church extension—where a mother church “extends” itself into another location. Today, we prefer to call that church multiplication.

Mother churches tend to be involved at different levels. When new churches have a mother church sending out core members to help start the new church, it is obviously very involved. When it sends new members, the difference can be seen in the chart below. Each year the attendance of a new church with an involved mother church is higher than those without the participation of a sponsoring/mother church.⁷



Beyond the attendance numbers, church planters can be encouraged and nurtured in the environment of a new church. On countless occasions, I have sat with church planters who were discouraged because they did not have the support and encouragement of a sponsor or mother church. On the other hand, I have visited with many church planters who had the support of a mother church—and they have shared a sense of enthusiasm and excitement. Having a supportive sponsor or mother church makes a big difference, and it is the best way to plant a daughter church.

So Who Can Plant?

A former student of mine explained the issue of “who can plant” like this:

“What was the criteria that Barnabas used in making his judgments on the church at Antioch. The Bible says he ‘saw the evidence of the grace of God’ (Acts 11:23). That is the only criteria that the Bible mentions. Thus, what Barnabas did was he recognized God at work in that church plant.”⁸

Ultimately, God calls church planters and blesses new churches. God can use teams, individuals, agencies, and other churches. But without the Holy Spirit’s work we are not planting churches; we are starting religious clubs. Yet, the right question for us should not be “what human means did God use to plant this church?” Instead, like Barnabas, we should look for the presence of the Holy Spirit and rejoice over “the evidence of the grace of God.”

An adapted excerpt from Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003. Used by permission of the author.

¹ David W. Schenk and Ervin R. Stutzman, *Creating Communities of the Kingdom* (Scottsdale, Pa.: 1988), 43.

² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Missions: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 132 citing W. H. Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter* (Eukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979).

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990), 300.

⁴ Richard N. Longnecker, “Acts,” In *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin. Vol. 9, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 284.

⁵ Craig Wurst, student paper, “Who Can Plant Churches?”

⁶ Daniel Sanchez, Curt Watke, and Ebbie Smith, *Starting Reproducing Congregations* (Cumming, Ga.: Church Starting Network, 2001), 33–34.

⁷ From “The Impact of the Church Planting Process and Other Selected Factors on the Attendance of Southern Baptist Church Plants,” Ph.D. dissertation of the author.

⁸ Kevin Maples, student paper, “Who Can Plant a Church?”