

Should We Help Build a New Church?

What makes Christian churches unique from other organizations is helping Jesus make new and better disciples and celebrating his presence with us. Christians distinguish themselves by going, baptizing, teaching, and sharing the living presence of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20). Everything else the church does can be done better by having more and stronger disciples. The church needs to grow as the body of Christ in strength and numbers.

Church planting has always been a primary means of fulfilling the Great Commission. The nature of the church calls for congregations, like individuals, to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). The apostles in Acts were not content to simply convert individuals; they founded new churches, trained leaders and moved on (e.g., Acts 9:31 and 14:21-23). Every Christian church should make planting new churches one of its highest priorities.

Numerous church studies show a direct link between the rate of church growth or decline and the rate of starting new churches.¹ In other words, churches that start new churches grow significantly themselves. Healthy congregations and denominations have a natural drive to reproduce themselves.

A new church might not be right for you, but it will help bring many others to Jesus. Over half of the people in our country are not actively and happily involved in the life of any church! Starting new churches is the most effective way to reach more people with the Gospel and incorporate them into thriving congregations where they can grow. New churches reach unchurched people who are not drawn to currently existing churches. The “freshness” of new churches often even appeals to those who dropped out of church long ago.

Planting new churches can help us become more inclusive in terms of racial or ethnic background, generations or age levels, socioeconomic class, theological views and liturgical styles. For example, growing Hispanic populations can often best be reached with new churches. New churches are free to try new styles of worship, new methods of education, new music and other “nontraditional” ways to reach new groups of people. New churches reach new generations, by creating “new groups for new people.” Starting new churches also helps reach people where they are when population centers shift.

Planting churches does not mean neglecting the revitalization of existing congregations and, in fact, may help existing congregations deepen their discipleship and servant ministries. While existing churches may fear competition, new churches teach us how to reach and hold new members rather than passively waiting for new people to come through our doors. Even having two churches of the same denomination nearby is desirable because it increases overall awareness of what the church offers and offers opportunities for partnerships in mission and ministry. And increasingly, people like to be able to choose between churches of

¹ The 2020 Task Force Report (www.episcopalchurch.org/congdev/2020full_rpt.html) states: “the largest proportion of any numerical expansion [65%-80%] is likely to take place in new congregations, which means that every effort should be made to make new church development a major priority of the church as a whole, and of dioceses in particular” and “we expect that dioceses and existing congregations will be the primary sponsors of new congregations.” The report estimates that less than 300 new Episcopal churches were planted during the last 20 years.

the same denomination in an area. The most effective churches do a few ministries very well and reach only up to three percent of the local population. Few churches have all of the resources or skills to serve everyone in an area. They know there is lots more room for other churches.

“See how the fields are ripe for harvesting” (John 4:35) but new churches are a major investment – generally costing \$750,000 to \$1.5 million for building and clergy. We need to begin to lay the groundwork for planting new churches with effective planning and oversight, and not simply ignore this call. Over 5,000 new churches are started annually in the United States and we need to be part of this to obey the Great Commission and to flourish. Planting new churches reminds us what it really means to be disciples of Jesus.