

# *Planting Papers*

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## **Planting Papers Issue No. 7**

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# More Churches or New Churches?

*by Stuart Murray*

Books and articles on church planting oscillate between two main kinds of imagery. Some use horticultural language (planting, soil, harvest etc.), others prefer family patterns (mother church, daughter church, pre-natal and post-natal problems etc.). Remarkable ingenuity is evident in the choice of chapter headings and the application of such imagery to various aspects of church planting - although sometimes other imagery is used to describe the "launch" of a new church or "satellite" congregations.

Such imagery is helpful provided it remains illustrative and does not box in the topics under consideration or hinder creative thinking. And the occasional accidental mixing of metaphors can be quite amusing!

So I should be on familiar ground if I employ in this article two concepts from the discipline of genetic engineering - especially since both plants and human families have been influenced by developments in this science. I am writing this a few days after most national newspapers carried articles on developments that will enable parents to choose the gender of their children, accompanied by various opinions regarding the social and ethical consequences of this. Another technique, once restricted to the realm of science fiction but already applied to horticulture and applicable in principle to human beings, is "cloning" - the production of a genetically identical copy of an original. What these techniques have in common is the ability of experts and parents to predetermine the kind of "offspring" that will be created. Both result in new life but both have an artificial feel about them, both also raise serious ethical questions.

## Church Cloning?

An important issue that arises in church planting or the birthing of new congregations (depending on one's chosen imagery) is the extent to which it is wise for the planting agency to predetermine the nature of the new churches which come into being. If a local church plants another church, should it be a clone of the planting church? If a mission team plants a church, to what extent do they decide its ethos, structure and practices?

Of course, the influence of the planting agency on the new congregation is bound to be substantial - just as the children inherit characteristics from their

parents and learn from them through nurturing in the early years of life. The only exception to this in church planting is where a new church emerges from the split within an existing church and consciously develops a different ecclesiology - although even here there are frequently numerous similarities. Church planting is not "creatio ex nihilo"!

**But how similar should the new church be to the planting agency?** Several factors affect this issue, including (among others) **location, motivation, personnel and structure.**

## **Location**

If the new church is planted near to the planting church or in a similar community, little thought may be given to developing a different kind of church. But if the new church is planted to reach a different social group or in a different kind of community, very careful thought may be required if the new church is to be effective. This is particularly important when new churches are planted to reach specific sections of a community that the planting church has been unable to reach effectively. A very familiar scenario is a middle-class church planting on a council housing estate: in this situation cloning will achieve little.

## **Motivation**

If a new church is planted out because the church building is too full, there is little incentive to think radically about the form of this new church. There may well be an expectation that planting out will lead to growth, but if the mother church was successful, why make changes in the way the daughter church functions? But if the new church is planted with the purpose of reaching those who do not find the style of the mother church conducive, then more radical options may be considered.

## **Personnel**

If the leaders of the new church are relatively inexperienced or untrained and are encouraged to remain dependent on the oversight of the leaders of the planting agency, there is less likelihood of significant differences emerging in the new church than if mature leaders are involved. The degree of freedom in the relationship between the new church and the planting agency will also significantly affect this.

## **Structure**

Ultimately it may be a question of vision. If the perception of those who initiate church plants is that the primary need is MORE churches, they are unlikely to give too much attention to whether these new churches differ from existing churches. Denominational loyalty, doctrinal convictions, trusted traditions and the daunting challenge of ecclesiological renewal all tend to inhibit the asking of radical questions. It is enough to gear a church up to plant a new

church without raising controversial questions about the nature of the church. After all, if the new church is allowed to develop its own identity, the planting agency might need to face searching questions about its own way of doing things.

## Developing New Churches

But perhaps the genius of church planting is the opportunity it offers to develop NEW churches, to experiment, to ask fundamental questions about the nature and function of the church and its role in society. Rather than producing clones, perhaps planting agencies might have the courage to let new churches develop in new ways rather than attempting to predetermine how they will function.

This kind of church planting is happening, of course. The emergence of new kinds of churches that are reaching sections of the community beyond the reach of existing churches is an exciting and crucial development.

Youth churches, ethnic churches and "churches for the unchurched" are examples of these. Some may question the legitimacy of homogenous churches but we need to find some way to break out of the homogenous middle-class culture ghettos that many existing churches inhabit. And there is too much life and creativity among church planters for predetermined patterns to be accepted without challenge. Some of the tensions between mother churches and their daughter congregations are caused by the new groups' refusal to be clones.

But I am concerned that the danger of cloning is widely recognised and avoided with determination. This will require humility and courage, large hearts and open minds, a readiness to trust the Holy Spirit and each other. It will mean putting the task of evangelisation and the needs of the unchurched before our cherished convictions and traditions. It will involve considerable flexibility and a readiness to learn the lessons that the Western missionary movement has had to learn about indigenous forms of the church and not importing culturally inappropriate structures.

**Why is this so important?** Because a very large number of people are beyond the reach of most existing churches - if not geographically then certainly culturally. More churches of the same sort will not do! The inner cities are desperately in need of new churches - thousands of them. But they do not need suburban church structures and cultural forms imposed from outside. The diverse Asian community will need churches that allow them to follow Jesus in ways that are relevant to their culture. Secular people to whom most existing churches are completely irrelevant at best and a positive hindrance at worst will need new kinds of communities of faith if they are to be won for Christ and discipled. Adherents of New Age ideas are unlikely to be won in significant numbers without new churches that can provide a relevant counter-cultural witness.

It is also important for the sake of the existing churches. The emergence of thousands of new churches all over Britain, churches free to experiment and to think dangerous thoughts, has the potential to bring renewal to the older churches. Fresh movements in church history have frequently had this effect. The emergence of the House Churches in the last 25 years is but a recent example of a persistent phenomenon. These churches are often known as the “new churches” and they have been on the cutting edge of church planting, but already traditions have developed that are difficult to challenge and the likelihood of cloning is as strong here as anywhere. The House Churches are as bound to middle-class culture as any group in the country. New “new churches” will be needed to bring further renewal and fresh insights.

**How can cloning be avoided?** There is no easy way to draw the line between healthy parental influence and cloning. Perhaps simply being aware of the danger is a starting point. More attention needs to be given to issues of culture and ecclesiology (these are important components now in the Church Planting course at Spurgeon’s). Church planters need to be encouraged to dream dreams and think new thoughts. An important issue is whether to plant from “strength” or from “weakness”. Starting a new church with a large group from an existing church may provide greater security and lead to faster growth. Many strategists advise this approach. But the danger of cloning is much greater here. Starting with a smaller group which has a commitment to raising up indigenous leaders from the target community may be more risky and may take longer, but more radical questions about the nature of the new church may be asked. Exciting alternatives may emerge.

There are some exciting examples around. Perhaps these can provide stimuli not to imitate them but to search for relevant forms of church life that will impact our diverse communities and demonstrate the good news of the kingdom, whose King was never predictable, was often uncomfortable to be with and yet had phenomenal drawing power.

*Stuart Murray helped to plant the Tower Hamlets Christian Fellowship and was on the leadership team there for twelve years. Since September 1992 he has been Course Director of the Oasis/Spurgeon’s Church Planting and Evangelism Course.*

# “From the Sharp End”

## Planting in Penarth - Plans, Pains and Progress

*by John James*

TABS PENARTH - Are pleased to announce the birth of their two new congregations at Cosmeston and Dinas Powys. Both children and mother are doing well!!

### Plans

Both our ‘branches’ as the Church Meeting decided to call them evolved differently. Tabs Penarth has been a steadily growing church for the past twelve years with most of the growth being evangelistic - we are approaching 300 baptisms during this period. Current membership is 430. We have 16 fellowship groups. The leadership have been influenced by church growth principles and have the model of cell - congregation and celebration before us in our planning. Church planters will know the term **radial model** where congregations are added in other areas to reach those communities. However, they remain part of the same church, led by a team.

Dinas Powys is a village of 10,000 souls, three miles from the Tabs Church Centre. There was no Baptist Church in the village. It is however well churched, but it is recognised by the churches as being without a ‘renewal emphasis’. Over 50 of our members with their 20+ children live in the village. Four healthy fellowship groups functioned effectively which included some members who travelled from Penarth and Barry. For a whole year before planting, the groups met together from time to time for worship and fellowship, to develop a corporate identity.

Full consultations were held with all of the churches in the village. A series of letters were circulated to them inviting comments and suggestions. A discussion took place at the Ministers’ Fraternal, where honest exchanges were made including the feeling of being threatened. Eventually we went forward with the blessing of all those who had been party to discussions including the Brethren and the high Anglican Church. Some, like the Reformed Presbyterians and Roman Catholics, made no response to our overtures. We listened to the

comments made by other churches and made adjustments to our plans, including where we would meet so as not to cause unnecessary offence.

Our other baby is being nurtured at Cosmeston, the site of a medieval village and a very popular park and lakeland. New housing estates are still being constructed adding to the more established homes with a couple of thousand residents within a few minutes walk of our meeting place. The development here is a very different story from Dinas Powys. The Borough Council constructed a very fine new community hall and invited us as a Church to be involved in the Management Committee. This invitation came because of our very successful development of a branch Sunday School in a very needy part of the town - again at the invitation of the town mayor, nine years previously.

We accepted the invitation and our full time pastoral and community worker became Chairman of the Management Committee. This led to our being invited to use the building as a place of worship and community activities.

At this time Tabs Penarth felt that this challenge should be considered by the Penarth Council of Churches. Together we decided to make a beginning as a possible local ecumenical project. The first service was held at the beginning of Lent 1992. Unfortunately, Tabs were the only church that encouraged and released members to attend regularly. The other churches just felt that they were not strong enough to do so. Therefore by the beginning of Advent the same year, the Council of Churches asked us to take responsibility for the congregation. Twenty committed members had faithfully held the fort and had seen the first conversion and baptism, together with a 'back-slidden' Christian restored. We therefore judged it right to continue and structures were put in place. The congregation comprises two fellowship groups meeting in the area, a vital element to development and pastoral care. We must say that this was very much like a baby being left on the doorstep, rather than something that we had conceived strategically.

## Pains

Both our babies are growing - in their own ways. Just like children they are very different and we refuse to make unfair comparisons. Cosmeston is the smaller, but saw the first conversion, but they know the pain and frustration of being a small congregation, with few musicians amongst them. The experience of being an embryonic LEP was a disappointment, but we remain committed to working together as closely as we can with the other churches.

In Dinas Powys the wonderful hall rented to us, is right in the centre of the village, but is already proving too small and we are looking for an alternative meeting place. The first fruits of evangelism have been harvested and we look forward to the first baptisms. Though it must be said that the year of preparation was very fruitful evangelistically. They can claim children being born before the

congregation came to life itself! Of the initial four fellowship groups, three strong groups have now been established with some members moving to groups in Penarth and Barry.

The real pain however is felt by the loss of fellowship on Sunday morning, when the congregations meet separately. The Penarth congregation (mum, if you like) has continued to grow and the physical gaps are being filled, but the pain of losing so many vital members (70 adults and 20 children) is enormous. It has served to challenge us in the Centre to re-address the way that we do things.

## Progress

Both congregations now have their steering groups in place releasing more gifts. Both have Elders of Tabs exercising oversight of the congregations together with members who are on Tabs leadership. A preaching team of four regular preachers has been formed. I prepare the comprehensive teaching materials in series, which is circulated at least a month before the series commences, enabling the other preachers (teachers) to make the material their own. It means that our systematic teaching programme is enjoyed by each of the congregations. We meet on Sunday mornings in congregations, but every Sunday evening we celebrate together.

So mother and babies are doing well and already we are considering the next addition to the family. Perhaps two more babies this year and at least one other each year during the Decade of Evangelism. Motivation is the key. We use Colin Marchant's *Ten Commandments for Church Planting*. Our first motive must be compassion for the lost. Every church planting endeavour must be tested by this question: "Will those outside the Kingdom be helped to enter the Kingdom through this new church?" "Will those who are without hope and God in the world, have more chance of finding hope if we start this new congregation?" If we cannot answer "Yes, this is our motive", then all the other good pragmatic reasons for church planting are irrelevant. But if we can say yes to this acid test then we will find several other reasons for planting congregations which will spur us on to do so.

*Rev. John James is senior pastor of Penarth Tabernacle Baptist Church, South Glamorgan.*

## 1:3:6 Talks to 'The President'

*1:3:6 Group interviewed the B.U. President, Eric Westwood, a few weeks before he was due to step down from the post and resume his role as Missioner for the Northern Area Association.*

*Editor - From your travels as B.U. President, could you give us a brief overall picture of the diverse circumstances in which church planting is taking place throughout England?*

**President** - It seems to me that in the majority of cases, church planting is really the result of the vision of a particular minister or group of people within the life of the church. At the moment churches as a whole find it difficult to grasp the whole concept of church planting, and particularly to gain any enthusiasm for it.

Another interesting factor is that it is not always the ministers of the largest churches which are catching this vision for church planting. Quite a number of ministers of larger churches are struggling to be convinced that this is how they ought to be operating. Very often in the larger churches there is a tendency to build up rather than plant out.

I think it is also important to stress that most of the places where church planting is happening are places where we are seeing the migration of Christians into new areas. It is much more difficult to think about church planting in a situation where the population has been static and where there is some economic depression - as we know it is difficult to plant churches on some of the old housing estates. So there is a sociological factor with the migration of Christians into an area that stimulates and creates the opportunity for church planting.

*Can you think of an example of that?*

Morpeth has been one of those situations where the whole possibility of creating a church plant arose through the moving in of Christians. The main strength of the growth of that church has been the migration of people into the area. There have been people converted and added to the church but essentially it's been a migratory situation.

***What are some of the major problems being encountered and are there particular examples you would like to mention of churches overcoming these problems?***

One of the basic problems is the mind-set of the mother church. Most churches find it, at least initially, very threatening to think of a group of their members going out to form another church. We become accustomed to the comfort of having people there, especially if some of those people proposed to move are the most capable leaders. This obviously is difficult for the mother church to adjust to and means a change of attitude, a change of pattern in what is done. Ministers who come up with the idea of church planting frequently find this is one of the barriers which is there.

The second problem area that we have in planting churches is the question of Baptist identity. Because of the changing situation, culturally and theologically many of the folks who come into our Baptist church plants aren't Baptists, but are from other backgrounds. So they come with their presuppositions and some with their own agendas and it is not always easy for the church then to identify itself as a Baptist church and to work out Baptist principles as we understand them. Morpeth again is an illustration of that. Many of our new churches are finding this difficult to cope with and react in different ways.

I think another area is the whole question of the establishment of a church without a building. Most new churches have to start in schools and community centres and there is a certain ambivalence in people's minds as to whether they should seek to retain worship within that context or look for a building. As Baptists we tend to have the mentality that we have to have a building in order to have a church. This is an area that we need to think through. I know of a church - not Baptist - Perrivale Mission Church which is celebrating its 40th anniversary without a building of its own - it still worships in a community centre.

The fourth difficulty is the question of leadership. How do you structure the leadership? Who chooses it? Is it imposed by the mother church? Is it elected by the body that has been created? Where do they, as it were, get their authority as a leadership?

One example, featured in the last issue of *'Planting Papers'* is Peter Shepherd's church in Middlesborough which encountered all of these problems. The mother church found it very painful to release the group. They are still actually working through the question of leadership. The question of Baptist identity means that one or two who have been linked with it have withdrawn, or drawn back because they don't feel they really want to be Baptist. That presents its own pain and hurt when the majority feel they should pursue one particular identity.

***What do you feel are the best ways that church planting strategies and programmes could be facilitated and developed?***

One of the first areas is this continual feeding of information like we receive through the 1:3:6 and also through the Missioners Group. The more information we can get about church planting, the possibilities and what it involves the better. From information comes inspiration. We need to share more. There is a link up that is growing between the Associations through Missioners and others involved in church planting, so we are able to feed ideas to one another.

We have more difficulty in creating support structures for one another. At the moment it is all very informal. How the denomination can create support structures is a very big issue at the moment and not very easy. The financial aspect is involved in this, as well as the information area. I believe that as we are looking again at what Home Mission actually involves, we must take into account this whole area of church planting. Steve Ibbotson has said, "Church planting is not a bandwagon, it's a ground swell." That ground swell will need a greater measure of support.

It is good to see that some Associations are beginning to take seriously the planning and projection of church planting and encouraging it within the Association. Obviously these whole strategies have yet to be worked through.

***From your experiences during your time as President, do you have any serious questions or misgivings about how church planting is being done?***

I have no major misgivings about church planting as long as we understand what we are talking about. Again, it comes back to our conception of what churches are meant to be in a local community. We can be fearful of it, because we are thinking of something far greater than what it really needs in a given situation.

So I have no fears about how it is being done amongst us as Baptists. Again it seems to me that those who have been involved and are increasingly involved in church planting are trying to think through very seriously what it's all about. If anything, we are probably over-cautious!

Generally speaking, I would think there is still lack of commitment across the denomination. There are those who actively criticise it. We are a bit fearful of what it might involve for us. Although we are committed essentially as Baptists to being evangelical and even evangelistic, there is still a certain holding back in terms of positive evangelism in our society.

Are we really convinced that the main need of Great Britain at the moment is the Good News and communities that express it? I think we have a fear of spiritual entrepreneurs - people who do something a little out of the ordinary. We

have a difficulty coping with them within our structures. My dream would be to have more people who are prepared to move into new situations as we did in Brazil and as some of the groups here do, with the committed intention of planting a new church.

***What advice would you give to a church considering planting?***

Three simple words: "Go for it." But clearly it is necessary to thoroughly research the area, examine the possibility and need, as you wait upon God. It is important to seek advice from others who have done it. Most of all, it is essential that some people are prepared to pay the price, because you cannot build a church with people who are not prepared to make sacrifices. Someone has to pay the price. It is costly, but it is the most satisfying thing that you can do on earth.

***Amen. Well, that's a good note to end on. Thank you, Eric.***

## An Exciting Development - Consultants in Church Planting

Stuart Murray is at present receiving three or four letters a month from churches across the country who are in the process of planting out. Often these churches request input from someone experienced in church planting.

In response to this growing demand, 1:3:6 Group has drawn up a list of people who would be willing to act as consultants for churches needing teaching and advice on church planting. Their expertise is varied and they are based in different areas. They will work in conjunction with Stuart Murray at Spurgeon's College. Their names are:

- Geoffrey Reynolds (Area Superintendent)
- John Claydon (Missioner)
- Eric Westwood (Missioner)
- Harry Weatherley (Missioner)
- Stuart Woodward (Practitioner)
- Peter Nodding (Practitioner)
- Graham Licence (Rural Church Planter)

# Dawn Update

*by Chris Forster*

In 1968 a report given at the World Council of Churches predicted that World Christianity would represent 8% of the world's population by 2000 AD, it added that there were no mission strategies or plans that could avert this situation. It is now estimated that by the start of the next millenium Christianity will represent more than 35% of the world's population, a higher percentage than it has ever been before. This is thanks partly to the 'AD 2000 and beyond movement', a global network of 'Great Commission' strategies.

The focus of many of the 'AD 2000 and beyond movement's' strategies has become what the movement calls its 'saturation church planting track', which is aiming to see a church for every distinct community, group of people and subculture in the world.

To achieve this goal the AD 2000 network is encouraging the church in every nation to adopt what has become known as the DAWN Strategy.

DAWN stands for 'Discipling A Whole Nation' and seeks to mobilise the whole body of Christ in a nation to provide Christ-centred cells, congregations or churches for every class, kind and condition of person in the country.

Research is used to show where new churches are needed and existing churches are encouraged to exercise their responsibility for the community around them. An explosion of church planting is promoted to fill in the holes in the spiritual map. Experience has shown both in the West and the Two Thirds World, that working towards goals for the establishing of new churches is a more effective way of evangelising an area than working towards a goal for new converts alone.

Challenge 2000 was set up to promote the DAWN strategy in England. Work has been going on for over two years now, but DAWN only really received a public profile in February of last year at a large congress which included 32 denominations and many denominational leaders. At that congress goals were set to see 20% of the population attending church by the end of the century by planting 20,000 new churches.

It was decided that the strategy would be pursued both through denominational structures and through local churches. Some decisions that affect

church planting are best taken at denominational level, but most church planting over the last 20 years has been initiated locally.

Most of the major Protestant denominations in England have now put church planting firmly on the agenda, with national and regional church planting conferences and seminars, officially adopted policies on church planting and college courses in church planting.

To promote DAWN at a local level the Challenge 2000 office is promoting, resourcing and initiating what are being called 'District' or 'Disciple A Whole Neighbourhood' strategies. For these a group of churches takes on a corporate responsibility for a town, local authority area or even a city or county, and works to provide a strategy which includes research, prayer and leadership training to reach everybody in the community and plant new churches in the areas where they are most needed.

There are over 40 locations around the country where such local DAWN strategies are being worked towards. In around half of these the plans are embryonic, with a small group of committed leaders involved in a couple of the elements that go into a full strategy (ie. research, prayer, leadership training, evangelism and church planting). The other half have achieved a wider local endorsement and are on their way to integrating these elements into full district strategies.

The areas covered by such strategies vary immensely. South Wessex E.A. have decided to take on DAWN for their region which covers all of Dorset and spills over into the surrounding counties, but some are smaller town centre strategies such as Brixton, a ward within the London borough of Lambeth.

While there is a common pattern in all these local strategies, each is developing its own flavour and tackling issues in its own way.

Those working on DAWN in St Helens wanted to make it as easy for churches to be involved as possible and have managed to include over two thirds of all the town's churches in some way or other. In Reading on the other hand, churches that want to be a part of the decision making process and benefit from pooled resources and a training programme have to pay a fixed percentage of their annual income into the project.

Burton-on-Trent has its own town based leadership training programme to serve the DAWN process locally, whereas in the South West, Moorlands College is helping a number of towns in the same way by running leadership training courses with local churches.

Local DAWN strategies are being worked out in many environments. In urban centres like Liverpool, Coventry and parts of London, in commuter towns like Guildford, in larger rural towns like Yeovil and across rural regions such as

East Anglia, where a plan is underway to see an evangelical church in every village across the region.

Sadly space does not permit full details of these local DAWN strategies. If you would like to know more about DAWN then please contact the Challenge 2000 Office which will be able to answer specific questions and put you on their mailing list for the DAWN News Bulletin.

*Chris Forster is the Challenge 2000 Co-ordinator.*

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## Mainstream or Back-Water?

*by Phil Jump*

It was a reaction of quite visible and genuine surprise that I received when I told my good friend, colleague and founder member of 'BACUP' (as it was then known) that I would be declining his invitation to join the network of church planters. Even the bargain offer of a reduced subscription for theological students could not woo me into the fold. So why the surprise? - after all you can't just join an organisation because your friend happens to have started it. Well his reaction was somewhat understandable and justified; after all hadn't I always been hugely enthusiastic about the potential of church planting? - wasn't I even then taking a leadership role in a newly launched church planting project? - That may have been true but it was exactly that commitment that lured me away from and not to the organisation.

It's not that I don't want to share my ideas and experiences with others of like mind - or even that I can't afford the three quid joining fee - I can't even claim to be too busy doing other things. My problem is with the irritating and predictable tendency that we Baptists seem to have that, every time we discover a new truth or direction in our life together, we immediately have to form a 'club' of those interested. While fuelling our celebrated reputation for loving committees, such a mentality banishes to the sidelines what should be at the centre of our denominational attention, by confining it to a splinter organisation.

But don't such organisations allow these ideas to be nurtured and develop to a point where they can be introduced to the denomination as a whole? - well, yes they do but, I would argue, they also send a message to the larger constituency that this is an area for specialists and not of general interest. As a Baptist I have an almost endless list of organisations that I can be part of. For example, as a keen and regular camper, I could join the 'Baptist Campers and Caravanners Fellowship'. Such an organisation is fine - but being a camper is hardly an essential feature of my Baptist identity - it's something that I happen to be interested in and therefore may or may not want to join with other Baptists who have a similar interest.

Surely church planting is far more than that. Evangelism lies at the very heart of our heritage and present identity, and therefore any new initiative in this area cannot be treated as an optional extra. As long as it is confined to an organisation, it says to those who have never seriously considered it that this is

exactly that: O.K. for those who happen to find it interesting but something I can take or leave as the inclination suits me. If we believe that this is a vital way forward for today's church, surely we need to be doing everything we can to encourage those who are not so persuaded to recognise that God has something to say to THEM through it - and not to dismiss it as the realm of those who call themselves '*Church Planters*'.

The phrase 'church planter' brings me to my second objection to the 'club' mentality. Inevitably once we form ourselves into an organisation, the aim and purpose of that organisation gives us our identity. We become a 'church planter'. When I came to theological college I did so because I felt that God was calling me to ministry but I found that even before I could embark on a course of study, I could no longer call myself a minister. I was presented with a choice of labelling myself as a pastor-teacher or a church planter and evangelist. Once we allow ourselves to be labelled as church planters (which membership of the organisation also clearly implies) we immediately set ourselves a narrow agenda. What I call myself will affect a congregation's expectations of me and more importantly my expectations of myself. As a church planter, I am only fulfilling my vocation if I plant churches.

Church planting is a good and vital part of our evangelistic response - but it cannot always be right for every situation - in the same way that the large and comfortable congregation cannot simply disregard it because its leadership doesn't see itself as '*church planters*', equally others should not be led into such activity simply because their leader or leaders do. I would respectfully argue that if such an identity is necessary (which I strongly believe it is not) it should come out of and not dictate our response to the situation in which we find ourselves.

Once we accept the label we are also in danger of excluding those who have not been so identified. I could have undertaken the whole of my theological training without once examining the issues involved in church planting simply because I have been given the label 'pastor-teacher'. How sad if three years into my ministry the church to which I am called feels led into a church planting project and have a minister who has had no training whatsoever in this area. You may argue that my experience cited above shows this not to be the case, but my point is that those who have felt no inclination in this direction must be actively encouraged and not made to feel that it's a '*members only*' issue.

In the introduction to his book '*New Tasks for a Renewed Church*'<sup>1</sup>, Tom Wright describes the real benefit of movements of renewal to be discovered when "*instead of being the hobby horse of a few they become instead the resource-kit of many*". It is exactly such a perspective which I am arguing for. I would suggest that as long as the few 'closet' themselves within the confines of a

separate organisation, they will minimize their influence on the many and at the same time be in danger of fuelling their own hobby horse mentality.

<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright - *New Tasks for a Renewed Church* (Hodder 1992) p. xii

*Phil Jump is in his final year at Spurgeon's College*

If anyone would like to respond to this article, please write to:  
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## Book Review

# The Myth of the Empty Church

*by Robin Gill*

SPCK, 1993, £20.00

This book promises the biggest shake up in our understanding of why churches are empty for thirty years. It is a book which will demand our attention, whether we like it or not. Since the 60's the received wisdom had been that churches are empty because of a decline in belief caused by secularization, urbanization and pluralization. Gill turns the argument on its head. It is not that a decline in belief causes empty churches but that empty churches cause a decline in belief. It is a thesis which has direct implications for the whole of church planting and one which we shall ignore at our peril.

Gill supports his thesis by reference to copious statistics which are presented sometimes in a convoluted way. Unlike others, such as the statistics produced by Currie, Gilbert and Horsley, they are local statistics, hence their complexity, and longitudinal.

They build on work he had already done in rural areas undergoing depopulation which showed that church and chapel alike went on building churches in a competitive manner which eventually were capable of seating more than the entire population, at the time when attendance was in decline. A similar picture is drawn of the urban situation. The 19th century Anglican picture is different from that of the nonconformists. But the end result is the same. Nonconformity grew later and more rapidly than the Church of England but equally declined much more dramatically and suddenly. Even groups, like the Salvation Army, experienced massive decline after initial rapid growth. Their experience has implications for the present day growth of the newer churches. The existence of thriving evangelical churches, like St Michael-le-Belfry, York, is shown to have a detrimental effect on neighbouring churches and to be incapable of bucking the trend of decline long term.

A key issue for Gill is the church building. His explanations are much more down to earth than many! He accuses Victorian nonconformists of totally identifying church growth with the church building. All that happened as a result

of planting church buildings was that the decline was accelerated, by projecting a picture of failure and emptiness, and aggravated by the problem of mounting chapel debts. He tends to suggest that planting might have been more beneficial if (a) it had gone hand in hand with pruning and (b) if it had been informed by the slightest knowledge of population shift and demographic change, all of which was totally ignored. At the end of the day, however, he seems to say that even if those factors had been different all church planting would have succeeded in doing was to spread a dwindling number of people even more thinly, thus turning up the volume on the message of failure.

Although there is plenty of relevance for nonconformists it is the Church of England which he keeps in sharper focus. Their pattern of subsidized ministry he sees as disastrous. As is their policy of a clergyman now having to look after several parishes. As far as Anglicanism is concerned he sets out some detailed ways forward. It is to be regretted that he does not do the same for nonconformists. But some of his propositions apply. We must subsidize mission not maintenance. Subsidies should be seen as seed corn to promote mission on a fixed term basis. Numerical growth and decline should be carefully monitored. The most talented ministers should be subsidized to promote growth. Duplication across denominations should be discouraged. And so on.

The statistics appear, on first reading, to support his argument. But they will take a little time to digest! The Catholic story seems also to be reasonably convincing. They have, for a long time, bucked the trend of decline by having fewer church buildings which were fully, sometimes, more than fully occupied rather than numerous buildings less than half full. Although some aspects of the Catholic story, including their ethnicity and their recent decline are not adequately handled. The thesis does appear to carry weight, especially as Robin Gill makes it clear that he is not proposing that the empty churches are the sole cause of our spiritual decline.

Gill's work must be taken seriously by all church planters. It must erect a huge warning sign against any bandwagon regarding church planting. It calls into question Peter Wagner's oft-quoted comment that church planting is the best method of distinguishing between the planting of new kingdom communities and the building of new church buildings. It calls us to address the question of leadership carefully. And it highlights the necessity of a strategy which prunes as well as plants. The one without the other will be counter productive.

We shall be debating this book for a long time to come - and deservedly so.

*Reviewer: Derek J. Tidball, B.U. Secretary for Mission*

# From the Editors

## Why 1:3:6?

1:3:6 in itself implies a growing sequence of numbers appropriate for the multiplication of churches. But the real significance is found in 1 Corinthians 3 v.6. Paul writes:-

**“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave  
the growth” (RSV)**

Thus the title “1:3:6” serves to remind us that, despite all our human efforts and diligence, we are still totally dependent on God Himself for success in church planting.

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