

## THE BIRTH OF A NEW CHURCH

I've watched and experienced the "birth" of new churches many times. It's always exciting! The partnership that helps each one grow and mature and produce other churches is demanding—but gratifying as well.

I remember a time when our own church congregation was experiencing a vibrant life of its own. God brought a family to attend our church that had been longing to experience this same Life-in-Christ with a church family. They did indeed experience Christ in a loving and meaningful way. And they came to long for people in the area where they lived to know the Lord as they knew Him. We were invited to lead a Bible study in their home. Soon the group began to grow, experience God together and long for more. At that moment we witnessed the birth of a new congregation—in God's fullness of time and in His way.

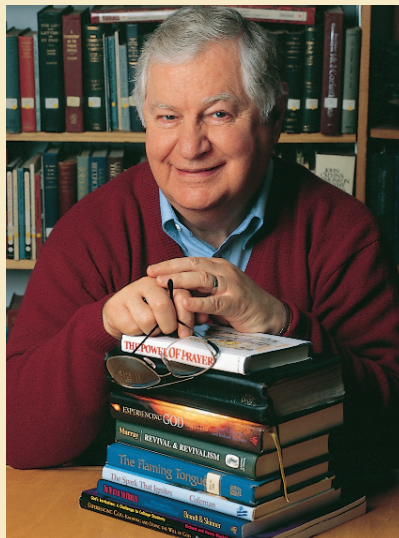
We can find a similar church planting story in the Bible. After an incredible encounter with Christ, the woman at the well went into Samaria to tell others of her experience. They, in turn, came and urged Jesus to stay with them there. And, of course, after His visit they too came to experience ...*the Christ, the Savior of the world* (John 4:42).

Soon many of the villages of Samaria had heard. Philip went and shared Christ with them. *And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. And there was great joy in that city* (Acts 8:6,8). But, what is especially exciting is that ...*the churches throughout... Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit they were multiplied* (Acts 9:31).

Seeing new churches started and growing is as natural in the purposes of God as breathing or having children. It's natural for a couple to have children, and it's natural for a healthy church to "birth" other church plants.

Then—as is the case with a family that has a child—a church family should give of themselves to see their precious child grow and mature and eventually have children of their own.

When our church came alongside the activity of God in the lives of His people, and we sensed their desire for a newly planted church, we committed ourselves to be *on mission* with God in the birth of that church. In addition, we continued to walk and nurture them



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into a congregation of healthy, life-filled people of God who would likewise look to see where God was at work. In time, they too would grow to have a spontaneous response to those God brought their way who desired lives and communities transformed by Christ. This created—by God's initiative—a "natural" church planting movement. And this has been God's way from the beginning.

It's not natural for churches to lack the desire to have children (plant churches). When a church has a vital shepherd's heart, the joy of seeing new church plants is contagious—and very exciting. Sometimes God desires that several churches unite together in partnership to share in a church plant. As a pastor I always experienced great joy

as each new church desired to be *on mission* together with us when we began to see God working in other places. Several even sent out some of their members who lived in the area where the new church plant was located. The family functioned together and in a continuing way.

Our partnerships spawned youth camps, men's ministries, women's ministries and a variety of retreats. We shared resources and personnel in revivals and special events. We always invited them to hear special guests with us. All of this created a life in our churches that kept attracting others to have and experience what they saw and felt when they were with us. To me, this is what God intends. It is demonstrated throughout the book of Acts, and it needs to be experienced once again in churches today.

I must emphasize that with every new church plant the partnership is crucial. You cannot "bring a child into the world" and then abandon the child. Healthy growth in the life of the new church is very demanding but incredibly rewarding. Keep a parent's heart, and help each new plant with a vital partnership until it's healthy, stable, self-sustaining, mature and able to function on its own—but in the family.

Finally, remember to avoid, by earnest choice, a selfish heart or a self-centered heart. What a church *does* reveals its heart toward God. Therefore, love in word *and* in deed. Jesus said very clearly that if we try to save our life we will lose it, but if we lose our life for His sake and the gospel we will save it (Matthew. 16:25, Mark 8:34-35). I have experienced this fully, and our church never lost when we gave our life away to plant new churches.

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