



***What Are We Starting***  
by Glenn Smith

One of the key questions that church planting teams need to ask and answer is “What are we starting?” The answers obvious, a church, right? Yes, but what kind of church? Now I’m not talking about Baptist Church, Presbyterian Church, Bible Church, Community Church, etc. I mean, what is your **model** of church? *I find that most church planting teams do not think carefully enough (if at all) about this question!*

As I observe church planters around the world, I see almost all of them starting one of three models. First, many planters start **the model they have known and experienced**. Whatever church they have come from and have found meaningful, they unconsciously try to replicate it! Actually, they don’t know any different. They rarely reflect on their “mental model” of church.

All of us have “mental models.” Peter Senge defines a mental model like this:

*Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. Very often, we are not consciously aware of our mental models or the effects they have on our behavior.<sup>1</sup>*

If you have had a strong, meaningful experience in a particular church or just a long history in a particular church, you are likely to be holding tightly to that mental model of church without realizing it. Thus when you go to plant, your expectations and vision will be shaped by that mental model in strong and often unconscious ways.

Because of the power of mental models, many planters replicate what they have known and experienced. This is not necessarily a bad thing because many of the strengths of the past church may carry over to the new church. However, the new church will probably be planted in a context different from the past church, with different leaders and a different target community. This can be a recipe for failure, or at a minimum frustration. Usually the same weaknesses are replicated without the planter being aware of it. For this reason I hear many planters lament around the second year, “I don’t like the church I’ve planted.”

Second, many planters **create a reaction model**. These leaders are very conscious of their past church experience because it was so negative or painful. Sometimes this leads to a “holy discontent” with the status quo. God will often use this. I have heard Bill Hybels talk about the founding of Willow Creek this way. He described the church he grew up in and how embarrassed he was to bring a non-Christian friend to the services because they were so culturally out of touch with the unchurched. He created Willow with that reactionary framework. The result was a very culturally relevant church for the emerging baby boomers of the day. However, most church planting leaders are not clear or focused on what they want to create. They know what they *don’t* want, but they have no clear vision of what they do want to start. As a result, they usually flounder without

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<sup>1</sup> Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990, p.8.

focus or a meaningful vision. Frequently I've seen these planters "throw out the baby with the bath water." In other words, they discredit or dismiss the good things from their former church, as well as the bad. Unconscious of their mental models, they eventually recreate the same dysfunctions in new forms without realizing it.

Finally, many church planters just try to **copy a success model**. They become so enamored with large successful churches like Saddleback, Mars Hill, Northpoint, Fellowship, etc., that all they want to do is create the next one! They assume that if they do everything exactly the same way, they will have the same results. I have never seen anyone do this and accomplish the same results or anything close to it.

Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying. We should study churches that we believe are strong and effective. We should try to learn everything we can from them. We should look for "best practices" to discover everything we can to be effective in kingdom service. However, we make a grave mistake when we try to copy some other church or someone else's ministry.

A few years ago I had a seminary student who was about to graduate contact me. He told me that he was going to East Texas to plant a Willow model. Intrigued, I began to ask him a series of questions about the small town context and the unique culture of East Texas. I love East Texas and there is a growing need for new churches there. However, as I listened to this prospective planter (who had absolutely no doubt about his plan), I discovered that he had actually never been to the Northwest suburbs of Chicago where Willow is located. He had never preached to a crowd of more than 75 people, though on many occasions he had unsuccessfully tried to attract more in his pastoral assignments while in seminary. It became painfully obvious that this well intentioned but misguided young pastor was simply trying to copy Willow. My concluding comments to him were these – "I believe that you will have great success if you can overcome two major obstacles. One, East Texas is not the Northwest suburbs of Chicago and two, you are not Bill Hybels. If you can overcome those barriers, I think you will do great!" He left with a rather puzzled look on his face. As far as I know he never pursued his plan.

Stuart Murray makes an excellent observation. He says,

*Contemporary church planting does contain some new elements, and it is being advocated and practiced in a context that presents different challenges from those faced by previous generations of church planters. There are instructive parallels and transferable principles, but historical precedents are no substitute for contextual analysis, spiritual sensitivity, and faithful but realistic strategic planning.<sup>2</sup>*

I believe Murray captures three essentials in church planting, **contextual analysis**, **spiritual sensitivity**, and faithful but realistic **strategic planning**. We must seriously analyze the context in which we are planting. One of the reasons Hybels was so successful at starting a culturally relevant church is because he and his team interviewed numerous unchurched people to understand their issues, their concerns, their perceptions

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<sup>2</sup> Murray, Stuart. *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*. Scottsdale, PA: 2001.

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of church, and their desires. His team then asked “What kind of church do we need to start to best reach these people who are unchurched in our community?” That is contextual analysis.

Spiritual sensitivity is vital as well. Where do you see God at work? What doors are opening? Where is their spiritual receptivity in the community? Years ago Charles Brock was working in Central America. He talked about how he would wait for the element of the miraculous in every community where he went to plant a church. “One day I thought that a church needed to be started in a specific area of the city. As I went to that area to explore one day, I passed through another community where I saw a woman in a second floor window. I didn’t think much about it, until I came through the region again on my way home. Here she was again in the window.”

“As I got just past her, she called out to me, ‘Sir, are you a Bible man?’ I said, ‘Well, I teach the Bible.’ She asked, ‘Would you teach me and my family?’ I had thought the other area was where I was supposed to go, but it wasn’t. It was here with this family. It catalyzed quickly, because God had prepared it.”<sup>3</sup> That is an example of spiritual sensitivity. Where is God at work in your context? Find Him, and join Him.

Lastly, Murray talks about strategic planning. To develop a good plan it requires that church planting leaders **think!** We must learn to think! I’m continually amazed at how few church planters really think carefully and thoroughly about their new work. Maybe it’s the nature of church planters – most are “ready, fire, aim” sort of people. They often pull the trigger before they know what they’re doing. They rarely take the time to think deeply until they are experiencing enough disappointment and pain to look for help.

Our training entitled *The Essentials for Starting a Missional Church* does not promote any particular model. We try to encourage planters to think carefully about what they are starting. We believe that to be truly successful, you need to create a model that uniquely fits you and your context. We offer **principles of design** to enable the planter to design a unique church. I believe that God has a unique vision for every new church.

Think carefully and deeply about what you are starting. Don’t just try to copy someone else. Don’t just react. Step back and examine your mental model and the mental models of those on your team. Enlist a good coach who will help you think deeply. Know what you want to start. This will be the foundation of your vision for your new church!

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, Carol. “Let’s Stop Planting Sterile Churches!” *Dawn Report*, June 2000.  
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