

## THE PROFILE OF A CHURCH PLANTER

### Part Three of Three

*By Glenn Smith*

In the first article of this series I addressed the need for some essential personal qualities. In the second article I identified the critical starting skills that were needed by (and possibly unique to) church planters. In this article I want to look at 4 Sustaining Skills that are necessary if a church planter is going to continue on as the pastor of a new church once it is established.

The first skill is **Entrepreneurial Resilience**. Many years ago Dr. Charles Ridley identified this as a critical quality of church planters. He described it as the ability to stay the course in the face of major setbacks, disappointments and opposition. Webster defined resilience as the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. Simply stated, church planters have to be able to roll with the punches while staying the course.

I have come to learn that while you can provide good training and preparation for church planting leaders before they embark on this adventure, it is still an ADVENTURE! There is still a lot of “unknown.” Every church planter I have ever worked with has discovered that there were things that even the best training did not prepare them for. Often this involved painful or frustrating experiences that were not totally foreseen. This requires resilience!

Most church planters get into church planting with great hopes, dreams, and expectations. Invariably their actual experience falls short of what they hoped for in some ways. Gathering their initial following proved to be much more difficult than expected. Non-believers were not as responsive to the gospel as they had hoped. The core leaders that they were depending on didn't follow through on their commitments. The finances did not come in to the degree needed. They quickly hit a plateau that they could not break through. Relational conflicts began to surface. People whom they thought were supporters turned on them and began to criticize or attack them. The list goes on and on. Most church planters who are honest with themselves want to quit at some point, and unfortunately, many do. But to be an effective church planter you must have entrepreneurial resilience.

Do you have a behavioral pattern of great perseverance and overcoming obstacles? Are you able to remain optimistic and determined in the face of resistance? Are you a learner? The best church planters don't just keep doing the same things while expecting different results! They learn quickly how to assess and overcome obstacles. So much more could be said here, but if your new church is to survive, thrive, and sustain, the leader must persevere in these ways.

The second sustaining skill is **Disciple-Making**. Too often church planting leaders are satisfied to measure success by their ability to gather a following and see this number

grow consistently over time. While that is important in church planting, it is not the ultimate measure of success. The real question is, “Are we making disciples?”

Disciple-making is the ability to guide a person from the “pre-Christian” stage to the point of being a growing, missional follower of Jesus Christ. I describe a disciple as one who is intentionally and increasingly becoming more like Jesus in his or her behavior, attitudes, ambitions, priorities, and love. A disciple is also one who is intentionally living on mission, making disciple-making disciples. I deeply appreciate the challenge that Dallas Willard has given us to not be satisfied with simply having good church members, but to be intentional about making disciples who live like Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

I have discovered that we can grow large churches without making disciples! However, for a new church to thrive and honor God, we MUST make real disciples. We must model (as pastors) a zeal for making real disciples. We must measure our success ultimately not by the size of our church but by changed lives. We must equip others to make disciple-making disciples as well.

Is this a practice of your life? Do you have a plan or system for making disciples? Do you envision disciples reproducing and multiplying? Along with Willard, a few of my favorite resources include Neil Cole’s “Life Transformation Groups,”<sup>2</sup> Greg Ogden’s book *Transforming Discipleship*, and Robert Coleman’s classic *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. For more information on the current state of discipleship in America see George Barna’s *Growing True Disciples*.

The third sustaining skill is **Leadership Development**. This is different than one’s own personal leadership skills! To build a community of faith the church planter must be a developer of others. It begins with disciple-making. If we do a good job of disciple-making we will discover that potential leaders will emerge. As we identify these potential leaders we must be intentional about helping them develop their abilities and capacities to lead others.

I have discovered many pastors and church leaders who can lead followers. However, I have discovered few who can develop and lead leaders! This is totally different! The church planter must develop leaders. One of the great tragedies that often happens in a church plant is when the planting pastor is so busy doing so many different tasks that they are unable to lead effectively while maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

I have seen three common problems within church planting pastors. First, they are not good disciple-makers. Leadership development begins with disciple-making. Leaders emerge when we are making disciples. Second, they do not want to give the ministry away. This is usually caused by a need to control or a belief that others cannot do an adequate job (e.g. meet our standards). Third, they have no clear plan for developing and mobilizing new leaders. However, if we want to sustain a healthy church, we must become effective at developing and multiplying leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.cmaresources.org](http://www.cmaresources.org) for information on Life Transformation Groups.

The final sustaining skill is **Futuring Skills**. We live in a world that is rapidly changing. Because of globalization and the rapid development of communication technology, some researchers estimate that information is now doubling every 18 months. Never before in American history have we had to cope with the accelerated pace of change that we deal with today. And it's not going to slow down. This significantly affects the people and the culture that we seek to reach with the gospel.

Several years ago I began to realize that many of the churches that we had been involved with in the planting process were rapidly growing out of touch with their changing environment. It was as if these new churches (which began as intentional, culturally relevant churches) were quickly becoming obsolete. Often the planters were so focused on their "model" that they did not see the culture moving away from their "model." I realized that we needed to help planters see much more than a model.

As a result we changed our entire approach to training church planters. We began to major on "principles of design" that could transcend culture. We began to focus more on ecclesiology. We began to challenge planters to envision the Kingdom of God becoming powerfully manifest in culture and society instead of simply envisioning a successful model. Based on this theological foundation we began to encourage planters and leaders to anticipate strategic societal shifts and cultural changes, to read and think about the future, and to learn to adapt to change quickly. However, this must be grounded in a solid theological foundation. Otherwise planters will simply be chasing fads.

Futuring skills (as I use the term) is the ability to anticipate and foresee cultural movement, to envision the Kingdom of God becoming visible in specific settings, to easily adapt to change, and to help others anticipate, prepare, and embrace change. I also use this concept to teach planters and church leaders to look for and identify pockets of un-reached people in their immediate context, to live missionally. As cities and communities experience rapid change, this is crucial.

I've come to believe that every American church needs to complete a re-focusing process at least every 3 years. Most churches do not evaluate, much less re-focus effectively. This is especially true with new churches, because they think they are NEW, thus relevant! There was a time in American culture when futuring skills were not too important. However, that time has passed and we will never return to it. Futuring skills are only going to become increasingly important as time goes by.

This concludes our 3-part series on the profile of a church planter. Obviously much more can and should be said. However, I hope this serves you well as you grapple with these issues. These personal qualities, starting skills, and sustaining skills have been serving us well in our church planting efforts. Let me wrap up by saying that every church planter needs to go through a quality assessment process PRIOR to planting their new church. Not all assessment processes yield the same fruit. We have now assessed close to 500 church planters, and would be delighted to serve you in this way. For more information contact us at [info@nciglobal.org](mailto:info@nciglobal.org) or go to our website, [www.nciglobal.org](http://www.nciglobal.org). God bless you in your Kingdom ventures!