

Church Planting and Revitalization Becomes Adaptive and Innovative Ministry

There are excellent conversations around the church and new church world about church planting—the dangers of it as force for gentrification and continued racism¹, the recognition that church planting that is about self-replication is, by nature on the side of empire rather than gospel,² and the arrogance inherent in the notion that planters can “do church” better than those already present.

We need to talk about these things. Church Planting has become a difficult term in our common life—because it has done damage, because of the assumptions above, and because it indicates, in its very name—something that comes in from outside and feeds off the local soil for growth, rather than something already present, growing up from within, and supporting a larger ecosystem.

I want to be clear. What we hope to do here is not American White Church Replication.TM As appealing as the current Church is to those who already attend each Sunday, we believe that there is deep work to be done to re-vision the way we live lives shared in common around the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We believe that work is to be done within and across races and cultures and beyond the binaries modernism offered us. We believe that the Holy Spirit is moving out beyond the mainline and evangelical establishments—we have seen Her do it, and to meet Her there, we need to leave some patterns, habits of thinking, and methods of practice behind. The trick is, we likely don’t even know what all of those are yet.

In the Church Planting Initiative, we have a process of transformation that we teach, that we practice, and that is now slowly upending our lives. The cycle works like this—listen first. Listen to God, others,³ and yourself. Focus especially when you hear disconfirming information.⁴ Focus on what happens in you, focus on what you are hearing. Hold space for it to breathe and to teach you. Create structures for this listening in your communities—in small groups create practices and boundaries for listening and speaking. This work generally starts in a small, protected community, but the muscles you build will prepare you to listen more broadly—to books, and leaders, and twitter, and prophets from all different places. And the listening must always be broadening its reach as it grows in capacity.

From listening the next natural move is confessing—in light of what we have heard, what is true? What is hard to hold and what is aching to be said. What have people told us that was

¹ <https://prismmagazine.org/urban-church-plantations/>

² Acts” A Belief Series Commentary, Willie James Jennings

³ Others here are those outside the church, those inside the church, but especially voices from the margins that you may not encounter if you don’t go a bit out of your regular walking, reading, driving, or daily living.

⁴ Her words are ever difficult to read and to hold in the most edifying way, but Simone Weil writes brilliantly about the use of our own discomforts as we attempt to await God’s coming to us. It’s worth checking out [Waiting for God](#), which is a small collection of her essays.

new information? What is true of us that we did not know before? What stories have we not heard before? Confessing is triggered by listening well, but like listening must broaden over time, so must confession. For us, as an institution in the Presbyterian tradition, and with leaders of privilege in a system of white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, total depravity is part of our confession and our direct experience of ourselves. We experience the presence of God when we are able to listen to others, and because of the light that shines—often through the disconfirming information it offers, we are invited to confess. The next step in the process requires imagination—which is often a grace beyond ourselves (and so more listening is required, which leads again to confession, so the cycle continues). Before we can change the way we gather, the way we understand church, and the way we relate to each other, we have to imagine that a change is possible. We have to envision, as plausible, a new way of life and community out beyond our current boundaries.

If we believed in the truth we have confessed and must keep confessing more fully—how then would we live? Imagining this doesn't get us far unless we try it. This phase is something families learn a bit as they are forming—what meaningful traditions and practices will we have for our family? How will we share space and share life? How will those traditions enable us to live our values? How will these traditions be informed by who our children are and who our community is becoming? This phase can build trust in families and in faith communities if it is saturated with listening and confessing. Then we can say, we tried to practice our values—this is what happened. Was it a success or failure? Who are we becoming as we live this way? As we learn new things to name and confess, as we imagine new ways to be more faithful and just, the slow work of God has space to transform us together. This is the phase where culture is created.

In the midst of all these stages and steps, somewhere along the way, we as communities become prepared for the discontinuous change that will come our way or the new voice from the outside that we must learn to hear and respond to. That change can be friendly or adversarial, holy or destructive. The change that comes for us may be more powerful than us. Right now, in the United States, there are powers and principalities that threaten change we can't, as one faith community, stop. For generations, powers and principalities have brought changes to communities and neighborhoods that one faith community could not overcome. We must stop thinking of that as failure. Always winning the earthly battle is the inheritance of whiteness and colonization, not of God. God was killed alone in a garbage dump by the empire. What we can hope for, and prepare for, is resilient communities who, by living their values together, are prepared to face change with faithfulness and unity. This is the kind of preparation that enables and empowers churches to stand fast in the midst of dictators and to undermine genocides. This kind of preparation supports a community that is invested in life or death issues. So often, we see the change coming and wish to respond quickly, which makes the response shallow, small, and short lived. Discontinuous change can only come in productive ways at the culmination of the cycle. Communities cannot engage it productively until they have been doing the full work.

We teach and recommend this cycle for doing faith communities in new ways because we are not all we need, and we do not have what we need to cultivate the future of the American church without the presence of the Holy Spirit who moves in communities out beyond our borders. This process is breaking us open so that we can build a shared life and cause with those who have known the Holy Spirit outside our walls for generations. Change is coming and the stakes are high. We know that we cannot be faithful in the American church as it is. Through this process, we hope to continually commit ourselves to the work God calls us too, and in so doing, submit to the grace of God and the wisdom of the community we must depend on to be exorcised, re-oriented, repaired, and revived into the Church.