

How to Start a Church

— Henry Vosburgh —



Editor's note: *With IFCA International's heavy emphasis on Vision America, it begs the question: "how do you plant a church?" Here is one answer.*

There are vast numbers of "How To ..." books in the marketplace addressing nearly every subject known to man. An article titled as this one might become lost in the shuffle. What's more, for anyone who understands the complexities involved in starting churches, to claim that this subject can be addressed in such limited space could be perceived as presumptuous.

Yet, there is validity in boiling down complicated discussions to some sort of bare essence. And I believe that the steps for starting a church are really quite simple. However, actually taking these steps will be far more involved than what this article might imply, for each church starts in its own context, circumstance, and situation. When the discussion expands to incorporate these concepts, no exact pattern exists because each church starts differently than the next.

What this article proposes is that no matter the context, circumstance, and situation, starting a church properly will take three main steps.

STEP 1: ESTABLISH A UNITED CORE OF BELIEVERS.

This step takes into account the basic doctrine concerning the local church, that it is an organic assembly of believers, a corporate entity of called-out ones placed in a given locality as a testimony of God. For example, the result of the Gospel witness at Pentecost was the formation of the local church at Jerusalem. And as it became established, the unity of the church was a vital mark of its existence (Acts 2:44-47).

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It is important for us to note the key areas around which a new group of believers is to unify. The reality is that bonds and ties of all sorts – right ones or wrong ones – can unify a group of people. So what are the right unifying connectors with which to start a church?

Unity in Doctrine

Any church must be comprised of people possessing common beliefs regarding the faith. Since Vision America is all about the planting of IFCA churches upholding our expression of biblical Christianity, the

IFCA doctrinal statement is presumed to be the foundation upon which our church plant projects will build.

Unity in Purpose

This is a point that tends to vary, for it addresses why a church is being started. Not everyone chooses to become part of a new church for the same reason. Not everyone is in need of the same things. This variability, however, cannot supplant the purpose of the church as a whole. There is a clear biblical purpose for the local church. And it is around this purpose that each believer is to unify, regardless of what motivates their arrival to that new church.

Unity in Goal

This point addresses a target for the church, answering the question of where it is going. For example, is it the church's goal to become a viable Bible-believing witness for the proclamation of the Gospel and the edification of the saints in that community? Or is the church's goal designed to meet the needs of but a few (the proverbial "us four and no more")? If a group does not agree on what the new church is to become, it is destined for a disappointing and divided future, short as it will likely be.

Unity in Direction

This point addresses the strategy of how to fulfill the purpose and move toward the goal. Ten believers in agreement about a church's purpose and goal can still be divided if each one tries to achieve these by different courses. As communicated in

Amos 3:3, a group of believers must be “agreed” in order to “walk” together; this is unity in direction.

Unity in Commitment

I have met many believers who are very earnest in seeing the need for an IFCA church, and as soon as someone comes to plant it, they promise to be a part! They see the need, but do not possess the commitment. Planting a new church involves sacrifice of all kinds – time, labor, resources, etc. A unified commitment is the glue that holds the other elements together. Without it, the new effort will fall apart.

It is a proper exercise for any group of believers seeking to start a church to identify, record, perform, promote, and enforce each of these areas that demand unity. Possessing a common faith and collectively understanding the biblical purpose of a local church, a group of believers will commit to move together in the shared direction toward their mutual goal.

STEP 2: RECOGNIZE SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

I recall a few occasions where I have met believers who have communicated, with a measure of sanctified pride, how their church started without anyone taking the helm, without anyone asserting themselves into a position. They seem to indicate that anyone doing so would have been deemed aggressive and unlike a servant. Yet compare this to the Scriptures. In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas were working their way back through parts of Asia Minor, retracing their ministry steps just prior to the close of the first missionary journey. At the very earliest stages in starting these churches at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia, they installed elders to lead these new groups of believers (Acts 14:21-23). Clearly, Paul and Barnabas recognized that spiritual leadership is an important dynamic to starting a new church.

Churches can be started as daughter ministries. Churches can be parented by a consortium of churches banding together. Churches can be started by an agency

of some sort. And churches can be started in pioneer fashion without a network of support. Regardless of the profile, without leadership the work of the new church will have no lasting sustainability.

Sole Leadership

It is often that a new church will unite behind a church planting pastor. It recognizes and submits to his direction, for the church in its infancy realizes that it is to learn and be guided by the man God is using to father the work into existence.

Plural Leadership

There is a great benefit when a new church has available to it a number of men who provide leadership. The responsibility for establishing the church becomes a shared one, allowing for the collective wisdom and gift-mixes of a team of leaders to be exercised in the new church’s development.

Imported Leadership

In those cases where a group of believers starting a church lacks a man or group of men who are Scripturally qualified to lead,

it is recommended that this group seek the participation of other leaders who can help to direct the plant until such time as local leadership can be established. Creating a steering committee of concerned pastors or otherwise qualified spiritual men can be a very effective way to bring leadership to a new church plant. Partnering with an organization that can provide a representative is another way to import leadership to a group seeking to start a church.

Each group should evaluate its needs by looking at its own capacities and incapacities. Doing so will reveal how much leadership can be provided from within the group, as well as reveal if they need to seek leadership from a source other than themselves.

STEP 3: INITIATE THE MINISTRY

Once a united core of believers is established and the necessary element of leadership is recognized, it is now time to begin the work of the ministry. The local church's witness is now to become activated. It is to begin engaging its mission field. As it does, it will encounter lost people who need to hear the Gospel. It will also encounter Christians who need to be discipled. In either case, that church – established as a unified core of believers and possessing spiritual leadership

– is ready to start its work. Soul by soul, household by household, the new church advances yet one more step by initiating ministry with each life it touches.

We are never to cease initiating ministry.

This step is the final one of the process. And this raises a question. When does “Step 3: Initiate the Ministry” cease or find its attainment? This step never ceases or finds attainment as long as that church remains on the earth with souls to reach and believers to disciple. This is the tragedy of the “maintenance ministry” church – being a church that simply plateaus in its work.

We are never to cease initiating ministry. Even in the most hypothetical of circumstances, if we have brought every living soul of our immediate community to Christ, there is always another soul, household, or community nearby that should be reached.

It has been statistically verified that the bulk of evangelistic enterprise done

by the American church today largely occurs within the first ten years of a church's existence.¹ On the one hand, this indicates to us the necessity of Vision America within our fellowship: if this is the means for successful evangelism, we should endeavor to maximize our effort in starting new churches. On the other hand, this indicates to us that our existing churches should never truly stop planting themselves as a witness in their communities. It's so easy to become sidetracked from that which we start out to do. May IFCA International be a leader on both counts – new churches being started, and existing churches always initiating new ministry!

ENDNOTE

¹ For confirmation that younger, newer churches grow more than older ones, see Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 44; and Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 46-48.