

Short-term but vital

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue



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I sat down next to a pastor at a conference and between bites of salad, our conversation turned to the subject of new churches. My lunch partner shook his head. “Our presbytery has thrown so much money into starting new churches. It’s a waste! One church in particular has been around for five years and *still* isn’t self-sustaining. They’re going to close soon,” he scoffed.

I stabbed at my lettuce and struggled to contain my frustration. I often speak about new communities at conferences, so I hear people cry, “Waste!” often. Governing bodies become angry at the energy, time, and money that go into new churches, especially when they don’t see a payoff right away.

If I didn’t work closely with people who planted new congregations, I might have nodded my head in agreement. But having listened to the struggles of church planters and having walked alongside them when new communities close, I see things differently.

I’ve learned that pastors who start new congregations take incredible financial and emotional risks. They often begin with a three-year grant and a denomination’s expectation that they will soon raise six figures. Raising that much money while forming a worshipping community can be daunting to even the most gifted church planter. Often they sacrifice their savings or work full-time without pay to start the community. They implore investors, grantors, and donors to give to the work.

If we compare church planters to traditional pastors who walk into jobs with incomes, property, musicians, and active members and still have difficulty moving their congregations from a deficit to a balanced budget, we get a sense of how difficult the job can be.

The risk is emotional as well as financial. Pastors who start new churches sense that God is calling them to the work. They have faith that they can do it. They ask people to be a part of something new, making projections and praying earnestly that the Spirit will move all who are involved.

Often the pastor's vocational identity becomes wrapped up in starting a new congregation. When the community doesn't meet its projections, planters can become anxious and fearful. If the fledgling group folds, pastors feel they've let people down. They even worry that they've let God down. Having colleagues scoff is like watching friends dance on their graves.

It's hard to know exactly what percentage of new churches actually take root. We don't have a good way of tracking new communities, because some of them start without denominational oversight. Sometimes denominations give seed money to explore possibilities of a start-up, but not the kind of investment that brings lasting results. I've looked at statistics from different denominations, and I'd say that about half of denominational new starts become viable worship communities after eight to ten years. That means that half of them close.

Is there a way that we can look at this important work so that we don't see the money or time as a waste but as an important part of the Spirit's movement?

Sometimes the pastor is just not suited for church planting. But more often, communities form, and members participate in meaningful worship and important ministry. They just can't figure out a way to become financially sustainable.

The Phoenix Project, for example, offered a safe and comfortable space to explore faith for people in transitional housing and rehabilitation, and those reentering society after incarceration. Church planter Meredith White was a combination of stunning liturgist and gritty personality. She could move from high church worship to a biker bar with ease.

But when the church's money ran out, it had to close in spite of its important work.

“On my best days,” said White, “I’m able to recognize that we did not fail—we succeeded every time someone came through our doors and discovered—rediscovered—the love of God and their own ability to participate in what God is doing in the world.”

Instead of thinking of these ventures as failures and a waste of money, we must celebrate the start-ups for what they are—vital short-term ministries. Most of the money we invest goes to pay the salaries of pastors who are doing important outreach.

Perhaps when we plant congregations, we should plan on starting two congregations, realizing that one will probably be long-term and the other short-term. Above all, we can support colleagues when a church closes, celebrating and mourning with its pastor and participants. We can honor how wrenching it is to walk away from a dream and respect the learning that takes place.

“I’m still bitter that we can’t figure out how to support this kind of ministry,” says White, but she adds: “but with every attempt we learn and do better.”