Three things to know before starting a church

New churches and the people supporting them need to understand the commitment they're making.

by Carol Howard Merritt in the December 7, 2016 issue

Five years ago my husband, Brian, and I moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, so that he could start a new ministry. The denominational committee overseeing the project wanted something completely different. Brian, who was bursting with creative energy, eagerly obliged by bringing together artists, activists, musicians, animal rescuers, and community organizers. Now, the Mercy Junction Justice and Peace Center bustles with people at all hours of the day and night as it extends hospitality to visitors and works for the dream of God in our city.

That's the edition of the story we often hear in new church development work—how the committee and pastor met and the new ministry flourished. It's like the Facebook edition of a marriage, sharing the happy photos and anniversary celebrations that highlight the lovely and happy aspects of marriage while glossing over the challenges and the rough realities. But like any long-term relationship, the new

church and governing body experience highs and lows.

As the years go by, people lose the honeymoon glow and begin to ask more pointed questions about money, members, and metrics. Trust may sour and criticism increase. To make things more complicated, the denominational committee that oversees the new ministry regularly rotates in new members, and they may have a completely different vision of the development. For all of these reasons, it's vital that each party understand what it's committing to and that each ministers to and supports the other.

I talked with a group of innovative pastors and members of governing bodies who support new churches. My question for all of them was, "What do we all need to know before entering into this work?"

First, they said, the committee and minister need to know that church cannot be a franchise operation that sets worship styles, ministry goals, and sustainability timelines and imposes them on every context. There was a time when the mainline church looked like an extension of a country club: white, educated, and economically secure members worshiped with a shared cultural understanding of decency and order.

New churches rarely look like cookie-cutter organizations, however. A church planter needs time to become familiar with the context. The liturgy and music, for example, may take on rhythms that might seem foreign to some who grew up in denominational churches. And instead of "reaching out" to the homeless and hungry, these congregations grow their own gardens and feed one another around their own tables. Jim Moss, who is starting a new church, realizes the importance of understanding these cultural changes. He notices that a surprising number of people hope to replicate the past, but he knows that "a church plant 1960-style isn't realistic anymore."

Second, we need to realize that success and sustainability look different than they did in the past. As church planter Luke Sumner writes, "There needs to be a willingness to rethink what success looks like . . . to throw out old ideas about metrics and benchmarks and create new ones." Sumner sees this process as a joint effort, something that the denomination and church leadership need to explore together.

Autonomy has been a past marker of success, but that is changing. Historic congregations minister with the blessings of past generations—the land, buildings, and (sometimes) savings of those who came before them. These churches aren't considered unsuccessful or failing when their budgets slip into the red. A new church, however, won't have that particular history and will need to rely on the denomination's resources. When traditional churches consistently ran in the black and collected savings, we could start a new congregation in three to five years. Now it takes eight to ten years for a new church to achieve some financial security. This doesn't mean that the new church has failed; it's a reflection of cultural shifts that affect both historic *and* new congregations. It points to socioeconomic realities too. Members of younger generations have overwhelming school debt and high rent or mortgage payments, yet make less money.

Third, the pastor and governing body need to realize that no one person has all the skills and resources to plant a congregation on his or her own. While some pastors are good at connecting with neighbors, others have musical talents, administrative skills, or fund-raising abilities. So even when the new community can't afford one pastor, it may need to add staff.

These realities make starting a new ministry difficult. Church planters and denominations must come together and realize that they're entering into an important commitment. When this happens, and we all realize that new churches need long-term support and additional staff in order to thrive, vital new ministries will take root and flourish.

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