

# + Why Church Plants Fail

The *start* of a conversation

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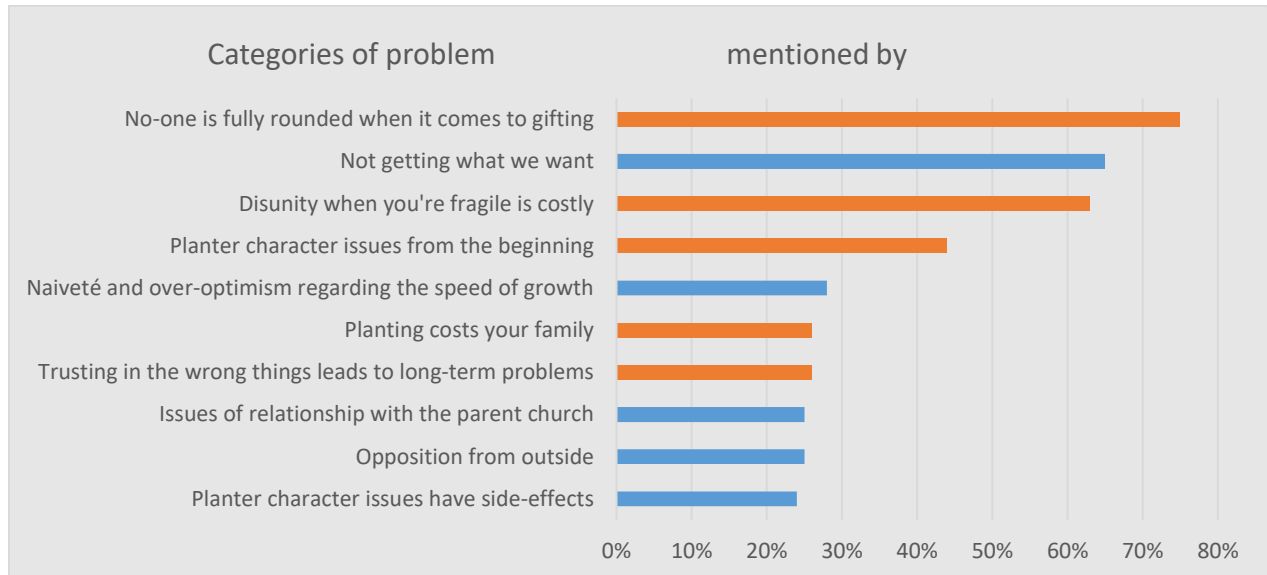
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# 1. ANALYSIS & PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

Data *analysis* consisted of 2 stages

- 1) a simple breakdown of the data with the planters' subjective evaluation as to why they considered the plant to be struggling, or had closed down, as well as
- 2) a subsequent re-coding of the data, particularly from a number of the open questions, to explore other secondary factors that were mentioned.



- There were 12 main categories of problem mentioned: 6 related to problems inside the plant and 6 outside. Of the total 310 problems mentioned during data collection, 60% were inside and 40% outside.
- It was rarely one category of issue that caused the difficulties, indeed the average number of 'issues-per-plant' was 4.3 (though one plant listed 9) and
- 75% of the respondents listed issues of gifting of the planter as one of their challenges. It should be noted that usually this was a self-reflection.
- Below are the 12 main categories of problem with a summary of each and an accompanying discussion question:

## 2.1 Problems WITHIN the plant

60% of the total 310 issues mentioned

### 2.1.1 – Planter character issues from the beginning (44%)

Planting is a ministry area with a greater than usual level of 'risk', and so it seems perceived competence was at times valued over and above the godly character of the planter. They had a track record of completing a task well, but at the expense of those whom they were

leading. Respondents variously described themselves as ‘driven’, ‘angry’, ‘harsh,’ ‘overly-confident’ or ‘impatient’. A number commented that the pressure (whether real or perceived) to succeed led to these issues being more evident.

- *Do you agree that at times competence is prized more highly than character? Why is this? How can we make sure planters have a real and vibrant walk with the Lord?*

### **2.1.2 – Planter character issues have side-effects (24%)**

The aforementioned initial issues, at times, resulted in further problems down the line, particularly in terms of burn-out and isolation. Sometimes that was the outworking of a perfectionism that meant the planter was unwilling to delegate and train others up, or else simply a workaholism that sought to maintain the (often perceived necessary) pace of the early days of planting. Isolation was particularly common for driven planters and those not linked in with a network.

- *How do you think we can help planters to pace themselves well and not to burn out? Why do you think there's often such isolation?*

### **2.1.3 - Disunity when you're fragile is costly (63%)**

Problems of unity were the second most common issue raised for why plants struggled! Causing church disunity is a strategy of Satan and so a problem in any context, let alone a small fragile church without strong relationships or shared histories. The ‘disunities’ mentioned ranged from theological, to relational to issues over ministry philosophy. It was an issue for core teams, but particularly an issue when individuals were appointed to leadership positions who were at odds with the planter. The context of COVID-19 and associated disunity over mask mandates, vaccines, church compliance, etc., also complicated matters.

- *Why do you think disunity was so common in the study? How can we create and maintain unity within a plant?*

### **2.1.4 - No-one is fully rounded when it comes to gifting (75%)**

As they reflected on the plant struggling, ¾ of those surveyed mentioned their own deficiencies in gifting (this does not mean that 25% thought they were perfectly gifted though!); some were able preachers or pastors but lacked evangelistic zeal or an ability to get alongside those in the local community, some were visionary pioneers and so struggled when it came to building a team. Others were significantly lacking in administration or leadership gifts. A number reflected that, given another opportunity, they would have built up a stronger core-team, rather than seeing themselves as omni-competent. It's also true that different gifts are necessary for phases of the planting journey.

- *How much of our usual model is about one omni-competent person? How can we develop 'core-team' training to enable a healthier leadership structure?*

### **2.1.5 - Planting costs your family (26%)**

Marriage is often hard, ministry marriage perhaps harder and church planting ministry marriages perhaps even harder still! Just over a quarter of the planters noted the significant (and at times very significant) strain upon their marriage and family life, even for those who had already engaged in significant church ministry beforehand. Of those planters who were married (for an average of 10 years), 83% had young children meaning the cumulative effect of a busy home and church family life, brought significant strain upon the planter and their ability to lead.

- *How can we help them to make sure the success of the church does not become more important to them than their family? How can we include the whole family from the earliest planning stages?*

### **2.1.6 - Trusting in the wrong things leads to long-term problems (26%)**

Ministry worth doing that has eternal fruit usually takes longer than we expect and yet we live in a world of quick returns and impatience. Just over a quarter of the planters spoke of their need to learn patience, trusting God for his methods, rather than relying on human wisdom and the next 'silver-bullet'. There is no doubt a significant tension here as often a planter needs to justify their external funding with a 'return on investment' and so need to be seen to be growing and thriving. Other planters commented that their driven-ness to succeed meant they began to be overly directive and lacking in grace.

- *What 'silver-bullets' are planters generally tempted by? How can we be a community that seeks to trust God for his fruit in his time?*

## **2.2 Problems OUTSIDE the plant**

*40% of the 310 problems mentioned*

### **2.2.1 - Naiveté and over-optimism regarding the speed of growth (28%)**

A surprising number of respondents appreciated the opportunity to be able to talk about their story, describing the topic of struggling plants as a 'taboo' subject. They were happy that others might learn from their hardships. Having perhaps heard the super-star examples, they had gone into the task expecting there to be quick and significant growth. The culture of planting—including both the highlighting of unusual successes and the 'hiding' of failures—lead to a significant level of naiveté.

- *Why do you think we don't (usually) hear much about church plants that don't go that well? How can we get better at learning from the hardships of others?*

### **2.2.2 - Strategy issues of our 'tribe' (22%)**

Sometimes planting was driven not by churches with local knowledge, but rather wider networks with the bigger picture in mind. This, at times, led to complications in a variety of ways. One good example to illustrate this idea was a fruitful plant in a suburb that lasted 8 years and yet during its 8 year life 38 other plants started and stopped within the same area. With little local knowledge and rather than attempted collaboration, 38 other groups planted (including about ½ originating from overseas), meaning there was a constant movement of 'early-adopters' from plant to plant looking for the best ministry.

- *What are the barriers to collaboration between like-minded churches? Do you think some areas are 'strategic'? Why? Why not? How can we build stronger networks between like-minded churches in a geographic area?*

### **2.2.3 - Issues of relationship with the parent church (25%)**

Parenting, especially through the teenage years, is often complicated. The same is true within a church planting context with a ¼ of the respondents commenting that a relationship with a parent church (or indeed wanting a relationship with a parent church) was a significant issue. This ranged from those who realized they had impatiently pushed for independence, to those who wanted more clarity on what support they would receive in the long-term, or indeed the parent not delivering on what they had promised, whether in terms of people, finances, or mentoring.

- *How can parent churches have both clarity and charity as they send plants off? Have we any good stories of using Memorandum Of Understanding in this context?*

### **2.2.4 - Careless contextualisation (7%)**

There is significant overlap here with strategy (2.2.2) and trusting the wrong things (2.1.6), however a few explicitly mentioned that the model they were planting with did not fit the area that they were planting into. Some came with assumptions and experience of a different context (whether economically, educationally, or ethnically) and they found what they had planned didn't work. Some had simply adopted a model from someone else, not considering the different make-up of gifts of the core team, leadership team or indeed themselves as the lead planter. This impacted different aspects of the plant, including their leadership strategy, the financial model employed, as well as fruitful methods in seeking to engage with an area.

- *Where do we get our planting models from? How can we get better at understanding the areas into which we're planting as well as the models needed to reach them?*

### **2.2.5 - Not getting what we want (65%)**

Unsurprisingly, planters spoke of unmet needs as the plant closed down or limped along. These varied from not enough money to support them, not enough people to undertake the necessary ministry (for example leading the worship or kids groups) or no available building to meet in. Some of these could have been foreseen and potentially planned for, however there were also a number of surprises that caused problems. These included illnesses within the planter or their family as well as the challenge of COVID-19 and associated lockdown complications.

- *What is resilience and how can we grow in it? How do you feel about being resilient? How adaptable ought our planting models be when things don't go as we hoped?*

### **2.2.6 - Opposition from outside (25%)**

Opposition (though often largely unexpected) was, for some, very painful. The ultimate source of much of this was Satan, however this was experienced through varying human agents such as local government, local communities and neighbours, but also other faith groups and even at times denominations and local churches. *Some* of the local churches were from a similar theological background but feeling overshadowed and anxious, whilst others were from a different theological tribe and so feeling judged and threatened. For those experiencing this opposition it was very time consuming and emotionally painful.

- *Why does opposition feel so hard? How can we get better at preparing for it and dealing with it?*

## **3. CONCLUSIONS and FURTHER QUESTIONS**

- The majority of struggling plants were a complicated tangle of different issues, encompassing both the sin or deficiencies of the planter and the core team, but also context-specific issues relating to their location and model.
- Problems within the church plant were slightly more common than those outside the church plant (60/40).
- Sometimes failure *is* indicative of people not seeking the Lord, not listening to His voice, the advice of other Christians or being obedient to him.

- On reflection, it's clear that whilst a number of the issues raised are specific to planting, the majority are simply about the hardship of church ministry battling against the world, the flesh and the devil.
- Whilst it's helpful to look at why things don't always go as planned, there's a danger of downplaying the sovereignty of God even if a church plant does not last. Many who had closed or who were considering it, saw that the Lord had been powerfully at work even through hard times whether in the church as a whole or themselves as planters.
- It seems to me we ought to specifically make space for, respect, look after, listen to, and learn from those who have significantly struggled, both in for the purposes of creating a better culture of vulnerability and honesty, but also in helping up-coming planters have more realistic expectations of what church planting involves.
- Further study would be useful to broaden and deepen our understanding of the issues, particularly this side of the pandemic.

### **Further questions**

- *What criteria do we use to define 'success' and 'failure' in the church planting world? Are these the correct terms? Why or why not?*
- *What reflections do you have from the results of the study?*
- *What resources could be produced as a result?*

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## Appendix 1 - Methodology

### 4.1 What did we do?

An in-depth online google survey was designed<sup>1</sup> encompassing a variety of open and closed questions to gather both *quantitative* and *qualitative* data. Alongside this, a number of follow-up 'zoom conversations' were undertaken to bring further clarity on significant topics. Stories were collected between December 2019 and October 2020.

### 4.2 Who did we speak to?

80 'self-identified *struggling* church plants' were studied from 26 countries<sup>2</sup> around the globe from a breadth of models and characteristics. Some plants began with a single family, whilst others launched with over 200 in the core group. Some were city-centre urban plants, some remote rural and others seeking to reach the suburbs. Some from poor neighbourhoods and others from middle-class conurbations. When they planted, 56% of respondents were over 35 years old, 83% were married, 84% had previous ministry experience, 49% were planted from a parent church and 53% launched within a planting network. 28% of the plants had closed down, leaving about 72% still meeting, though I am aware some of these have subsequently closed.

### 4.3 Limitations of the study

From the outset it's worth noting the limitations of this study,

- a) This was a small study - a sample of 80 will give us a representation of the issues, but not necessarily the whole story.
- b) *Not everyone was **able** to take part* - The respondents had all heard about the survey through various networks, whether ministry or social media. They needed to be connected and online which introduces bias. Further bias was introduced through my decisions to follow-up some people with an online interview due to likelihood of gleaning information balanced with capacity to connect.
- c) *Not everyone was **willing** to take part* (some due to a desire not to be vulnerable or willing to admit mistakes, others due to ongoing issues of shame as they wrestled with failure).
- d) Various other aspects of subjectivity in the study include:

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<sup>1</sup> With significant contributions from different networks and individuals including City to City, Acts 29 and the FIEC. See appendix 2 for a copy of the survey.

<sup>2</sup> Albania, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Ghana, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Uganda, UK and Zambia.



- I. A decision was made to not define exactly what was meant by a *struggling* plant<sup>3</sup>, but rather to listen to those who felt they had experience and a story to share
- II. A number of the planters *were* self-aware, but we need to note that we're only listening to one side of the story, very often through the eyes of the planter.
- III. All data was collected via a computer, whether the survey form, zoom conversations or a couple of more in-depth emails. Communication only via a screen will miss some aspects a face to face conversation would capture.
- IV. The majority of the data was collected during a global pandemic. Though it might be the case that these circumstances led to a greater desire and ability to engage with the study, COVID-19 also acted as a catalyst exacerbating perceived issues within the plant, as well as possibly affecting the mental health and perception of the planters. It is possible, therefore, that portrayal of problems might have been exaggerated.

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## Appendix 2 - text of the survey

*Church planting is hard.*

*Sadly things don't always go as we hoped, planned or prayed they might. In those situations it's good for us to carefully reflect and learn for the future. We hope this piece of research will be useful for different types of people; those who have planted and the plant not worked; for those in the midst of a plant but significantly struggling, and those thinking about planting and wanting to learn the lessons of the past.*

*To that end we're looking to contact planters from a breadth of planting networks and backgrounds who, for a variety of reasons, haven't ended up planting the churches that they hoped they would – either in church plants that have not lasted or those not currently thriving.*

*If that's you or you know someone who might fall into that category please pass on as appropriate &, as honestly as you can, fill out the questions below.*

*We promise that what you say will be treated in strict confidence and with anonymity, unless you are happy to share your experiences – the final few questions will touch on what that might mean.*

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<sup>3</sup> The actual words used were: "The idea is to try & speak to people who planted and either the plant did not last, or is perhaps struggling and just 'limping along', or else might be doing better now but was 'touch and go' for a season."

## SECTION 1

### 1.0 Personal details

- 1.1 Age categories (*Under 25, under 35, 36 and above*)
- 1.2 Married (*and if so for how long*)
- 1.3 Kids (*number and ages*)
- 1.4 Previous ministry experience (*with details and length*)
- 1.5 Theological training (*with details and length*)
- 1.6 How would you describe your theological stream? (*For example, Baptist, Reformed, Contemporary, Traditional etc*)

## SECTION 2

### 2.0 Planting details

- 2.1 Name and Location of church plant
- 2.2 Name and location of 'parent' church (*if applicable*)
- 2.3 Distance of plant from 'parent' church (*if applicable*)
- 2.4 Describe the area into which you planted (*for example was it urban/rural/suburban, social / cultural / ethnic demographics, were there other local gospel churches?*) and was this different from your demographic as a child?
- 2.5 What made you consider and then pinpoint planting in this area?
- 2.4 Describe the process of planting... Which option most closely fits your experience...
  - - pioneering planting from scratch (*just you and your family*)
  - - a few committed people from a mother church
  - - a small to medium group from a mother church
  - - come into another core group who was already planting
  - - another example (*please outline*)
- 2.5 How many people did you start with?
  - - as your initial core group
  - - at your first public worship meeting
- 2.6 What was the make-up of the core group (*social / cultural / ethnicity, married, single. kids*)? Did this reflect the demographic of the area you were planting a church in?
- 2.7 How far away did the core-group live from the meeting place?
- 2.8 How did you go about selecting or recruiting this core group? (*open question*)
- 2.9 Did you plant with a formal church planting network?
- 2.9.1 If (yes) to formal planting network what did the support you received look like?
  - - financial support
  - - training
  - - boot camp
  - - assessment
  - - coaching
  - - conferences

- - other (please outline)
- 2.9.2 If (no) to formal planting network did you receive any other coaching or training?
- 2.10.1 Open question – describe an average week for you as a church planter...  
(approximately how many hours a week would you work? How much time would be spent in making contacts with the community and seeking to witness? How much time within the study? etc)
- 2.10.2 Open question – describe your role within the church plant... (for example full time pastor, part time, teacher/visionary, ministry machine (!) etc.)
- 2.10.3 – is your plant currently still meeting? - yes                      - no
- 2.10.4 If no, how long did the plant function before it was closed down?
- 2.10.5 Who made that decision and why?
- 2.10.6 Do you think it was too soon or too late?

### SECTION 3

- 3.0 Why do you think the plant did not work as expected?  
Recognising that situations are always complicated and multi-faceted, we would love to know your reflections on why you feel the plant did not work as expected. Please be as honest and give as much information as possible
- 3.1 aspects that related to you as a planter?
  - 3.1.1 Character questions (please describe)
  - 3.1.2 Gifting questions (please describe)
  - 3.1.3 Vision questions (please describe)
  - 3.1.4 Spouse and Marriage questions (please describe)
  - 3.1.5 Relational questions – both within the church but also the local community (please describe)
  - 3.1.6 Other... eg issues of leadership, contextualisation, temperament, (please describe) ◦
  - 3.1.7 Which of these would you say was the most important?
- 3.2 internal factors within the church...?
  - 3.2.1 Disunity (please describe)
  - 3.2.2 Size of church (please describe)
  - 3.2.3 Lack of programs
  - 3.2.4 Other... (please describe)
  - 3.2.5 Which of these would you say was the most important?
- 3.3 External factors from outside the church...? (Sometimes in God's peculiar providence things 'outside our control' just happen which makes planting impossible)
- For example persecution, issues with funding or a tragedy (please describe)
- 3.4 If you were to pick one main reason as to why the plant did not go as expected what would it be?
- 3.5 Would others agree with this assessment? If not what might they say?

## *SECTION 4*

### *4.0 Reflections*

- *4.1 Did other leaders have a different view as to why the church wasn't viable? If so, what would they say?*
- *4.2 If you were to plant again - how would you do it differently?*
- *4.3 What do you think you've learnt from the experience?*
  - *- about yourself (open question)*
  - *- about church ministry (open question)*
  - *- about church planting (open question)*

## *SECTION 5*

### *5.0 How are you doing now?*

- *5.1 What support have you received in light of this? (please describe)*
- *5.2 Do you feel you have received sufficient support? If not, what would have helped? (please describe)*
- *5.3 Are you in any kind of formal paid ministry context now? (please describe)*
- *5.4 What would be the main lessons you would want to pass on to other church planters?*

## *SECTION 6*

### *6.0 As we seek to analyse findings and help churches plant again in the future, would you be prepared*

- *6.1 to possibly follow up this survey with a more in depth conversation? - if so please provide an email*
- *6.2 to be quoted in any salient findings with initials and your plant location?*

*Thanks so much for your help with this.*

*If you would like to receive a copy of the findings please let us know*

*Every blessing*