

REDEEMER VISION PAPER #4

WHY NEW CHURCHES?

Church planting lies at the foundation of Redeemer's vision. Why?

1. Christ-formation in an individual happens best not through programs, but through a local church. Evangelism aims to get people to make a decision to follow Christ. Experience, however, shows us that many of these 'decisions' disappear and never result in changed lives. Why? Many decisions are not really thorough spiritual conversions, but often only the beginning of a journey of seeking God. (Other decisions are very definitely the moment of a 'new birth,' but this differs from person to person.) Many people come to full faith through a process of mini-decisions. Only a person who is hearing the gospel in the context of an on-going worshipping and shepherding community can be sure of finally coming home into vital, saving faith. This is why a leading missiologist like C. Peter Wagner can say, "*Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven.*"¹

2. Numerous new churches are the only way to really expand the number of Christians in a city. New churches reach the non-churched far more effectively than longer-existing churches. Dozens of studies confirm that the average new church gains most of its new members from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches over 10-15 years of age gain 80-90% of new members by transfer from other congregations.² This means that the average new congregation will bring new people into the life of the Body of Christ at 6-8 times the rate of an older congregation of the same size. Why would this be? As a congregation ages, powerful internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of its resources and energy toward the concerns of its members and constituents, rather than toward those outside its walls. This is natural and desirable, to a degree. Older congregations therefore have a stability and steadiness that many people need. Many people will only be reached by churches with deep roots in the community and with the trappings of stability and respectability. However, these dynamics explain why a majority of congregations that are 25 years old or older are in numerical decline. New congregations, in general, are forced to focus on the needs of their *non*-members, simply in order to get off the ground. Consequently, they do a far better job of outreach.

Our conclusion—the only way to significantly increase the overall number of Christians in a city is by significantly increasing the number of churches.

3. Many new churches are the only way to reach the sheer diversity of the city. New churches have far greater ability to reach the constant stream of new generations, new immigrant groups, and new residents that come to a city. For instance, if new white-collar commuters move into an area where the older residents were farmers, it is likely that a new church will be more receptive to the myriad of needs of the new residents, while the older churches will continue to be oriented to the original social group. Again, if an all-Anglo neighborhood becomes 33% Hispanic, a new, deliberately bi-racial church will be far more likely to create 'cultural space' for newcomers than will an older church in town where Anglos will have far more power through their longer tenure. Finally, brand new immigrant groups nearly always can only be reached by churches ministering in their own language. If we wait until a new group is assimilated into American culture enough to come to our existing churches, we will wait for years without reaching out to them. New

¹ C.Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Growth* (Glendale: Regal, 1987), p. 168.

² Lyle Schaller, quoted in D.McGavran and G.Hunter, *Church Growth: Strategies that Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 100. See C.Kirk Hadaway, *New Churches and Church Growth in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

congregations actually *empower* new people much more quickly and readily than do older churches. Thus, they always have and always will reach them with greater facility than long-established bodies. This means, of course, that church planting is not only for 'frontier regions' or 'mission fields.' Cities will have to maintain vigorous, extensive church planting to even maintain the number of Christians in a region.

We believe that one church, no matter how big, will never be able to serve the needs of such a diverse city. Only a movement of hundreds of churches, small and large, can penetrate literally every neighborhood and people group in the city.

4. New churches are the only ministries that become self-supporting and expand the base for other ministries in a city. A city needs many ministries--youth work, schools, missions to new groups, and so on. All of them are 'charities' which need to be supported from outside of their own staff and workers. Once such ministries are begun, they need outside funding from Christian givers indefinitely. (This is not a criticism of such ministries. See our paper on 'Why to Launch New Ministries.') A new church, however, only requires outside, start-up funding at its beginning. Within a few years, it becomes the *source* of Christian giving to other ministries, not the *object* of it. Because new churches bring in large numbers of non-churched people to the work of the kingdom, church planting is by far the fastest way to grow the number of *new givers* in the kingdom work in a city. New church development is the best way to help all the other numerous ministries in a city to thrive and grow. They need a constant stream of new Christian volunteers, workers, and givers to keep them going. New churches are the head waters of that stream.

5. New churches are one of the best ways to renew the existing churches of a city. In a discussion on new church development, the question often arises, "But what about all the existing churches in the city? Shouldn't you be working to strengthen and renew *them*?" Planting lots of new churches *is* one of the best ways to renew existing churches. First, the new churches bring new ideas to the whole Body. It is the new churches that have freedom to be innovative and they become the 'Research and Development' department for the whole Body in the city. Often the older congregations are too timid to try a particular approach, absolutely sure it would 'not work here.' However, when the new church in town succeeds spectacularly with some new method, the other churches eventually take notice and get the courage to try it themselves. Second, new churches surface new, creative Christian leaders for the city. Older congregations find leaders who support tradition, have tenure, like routine, and have kinship ties. New congregations, on the other hand, attract a higher percentage of venturesome people who value creativity, risk, innovation and future orientation. Often older churches 'box out' many people with strong leadership skills who cannot work in more traditional settings. New churches thus attract and harness many people in the city whose gifts would otherwise not be utilized in the work of the Body. These new leaders eventually benefit the whole Body city-wide.

Conclusions: We firmly believe that the vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for reaching a city. Nothing else--not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, mega-churches, consulting, nor church renewal processes--will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow raising statement for many, to those who have done any study of the subject, it is not controversial.