

CHURCH PLANTING

ISSUE 10

Editorial

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INTRODUCTION

Joel Shorey

Director of Church Planting, Sovereign Grace Churches (Newark, DE)

A quick search on Amazon reveals almost 900 books on the topic of Church Planting. A quick Google search results in many conferences on the topic every year. At every major Christian conference there are countless church planting tables to choose from. The church planting universe is large—really large. And with the abundance of resources, there are many opinions on effective church planting.

This reality caused me to pause when the SGC Leadership Team asked me to be the Director of Church Planting for Sovereign Grace Churches. I was one of the pastors at a church fully committed to church planting for over a decade. I personally led a church planting team. I had read dozens of books on the subject.

But still, I felt overwhelmed at the thought of being on point for this important area in Sovereign Grace. There is not enough time in the day to get my mind around the infinite church planting universe and fully understand all of these perspectives and strategies. And if there was enough time, I know I would not have enough mental capacity to grasp it all.

If that's what the job was, then "No, thank you."

But as I talked with the Leadership Team, and as I gave thought to who we are as a denomination, I quickly realized that there was no need to master all of these perspectives. While there are many valuable things to be learned from these different resources, the mission that we are on together is actually very basic. *Planting churches is not complicated.*

When we see the basic principles in God's Word, and when we consider the church planting lessons that we have learned over the last 40 years as a denomination, we quickly realize that the mission we are on is fairly simple

and very clear. We are committed to plant churches the Sovereign Grace way, and we want to make that way abundantly clear.

It is not innovative. It is not new. It is not rocket science. It is, however, informed by God's Word, proven, and effective. And it is simple enough to be captured by a list of Twelve Church Planting Priorities.

These priorities do not capture the only way to plant churches, but they are what we believe to be most biblical and the most tested and proven way for planting churches within Sovereign Grace Churches.

This journal is our best attempt to capture the beautiful heart of God for church planting and the pattern we follow in Sovereign Grace Churches in our attempt at being obedient to this call. We hope and pray that this journal serves you and your local church family. May it be a tool that helps us to plant many more churches together that reach the lost, disciple and equip the saints for the work of ministry, and that go on to plant even more churches, all for the glory of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a small "e" at the end.

TWELVE CHURCH PLANTING PRIORITIES

Priority #1

We prioritize faith-filled risk in church planting over waiting for ideal or comfortable circumstances.

Priority #2

We prioritize church planting as a mission for every church over delegating it to select churches or specialists.

Priority #3

We prioritize church plant endurance over a high church plant rate.

Priority #4

We prioritize both evangelism and growth toward maturity from the first days of a church plant.

Priority #5

We prioritize godliness over gifting in church planters.

Priority #6

We prioritize pastoral experience in Sovereign Grace over individual zeal.

Priority #7

We prioritize preaching and pastoring over entrepreneurial creativity.

Priority #8

We prioritize vocational planters over part-time planters.

Priority #9

We prioritize church plant teams over solo planters.

Priority #10

We prioritize cooperative denominational planting over deferring to a planter's individual vision.

Priority #11

We prioritize denominational and church plant team support over individual fundraising.

Priority #12

We prioritize denominational equipping and ongoing care over an expedited assessment and temporary support.

FAITH-FILLED RISK FOR CHURCH PLANTING

Mark Prater

Executive Director, Sovereign Grace Churches (Glen Mills, PA)

Church Planting Priority #1

We prioritize faith-filled risk in church planting over waiting for ideal or comfortable circumstances.

In his commencement speech to the 2021 graduating class of Purdue University, Mitch Daniels said, “The biggest risk of all is that we stop taking risks at all.” I want to modify that well-constructed sentence and apply it to our shared mission to plant churches as one means to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ. “The biggest risk of planting churches is that we would stop taking risks to plant churches.” This modified sentence captures why the first priority in our list of Sovereign Grace Church Planting Priorities is, “We prioritize faith-filled risk in church planting over waiting for ideal or comfortable circumstances.”

The word “risk” conjures up all kinds of words: careless, reckless, or fool-hardy. Please don’t hear what I’m not saying; our risk to plant churches must be prayerful and thoughtful. It must be faith-filled and defined. We don’t believe we should take risks with a church planter’s character, his theological convictions, or his ability to build a church with Sovereign Grace values and virtues. We don’t want to be fool-hardy with people’s lives or with the Body of Christ’s finances.

However, we do believe we should be willing to take risks by sending our best pastors to plant churches. And we should take risks by sending our best church members to participate on church planting teams. We also want to be sacrificial in our giving by investing our financial resources to see new churches planted. In other words, we don’t want to wait until circumstances are ideal or comfortable before we plant churches. That leaves no room for risk, and therefore very little room for faith.

Here is the question I want to answer: Why should we, as a family of churches, continue to take prayerful, faith-filled risks to plant churches?

Risk is Biblical

As we read our Bibles, we find people who were faith-filled risk takers for what God had called them to do. Abraham was 75 years old when he took his family and left his home for the promised land “not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8). Paul and Barnabas are described in Acts 15:26 as “men who risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The pages of Scripture contain many more examples.

My point is this: men and women throughout redemptive history took prayerful, faith-filled risks to advance the purposes of God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ in particular. These brothers and sisters provide an inspiring risk-taking example for us to follow as we continue to advance the gospel through church planting in our day.

Risk is Historical

Taking faith-filled risks to plant churches can be found throughout church history, and it marks our own history in Sovereign Grace. Our first church plant was in Cleveland, Ohio and throughout our 43 year history, we have planted 122 churches throughout the world. Each of these church plants represent risks that pastors and church members have taken to start a new church with the desire to reach people who don't know Jesus with the good news of the gospel.

In other words, taking risks to plant churches is woven into the very fabric of who we are as a family of churches. Sovereign Grace wouldn't be Sovereign Grace without risk taking for church planting. It is a heritage to be remembered and a model to inspire us for the future.

Risk is Counter-Cultural

We live in a risk averse culture. We get in our cars and put on seatbelts. When we ride our bikes, we put on helmets. Before we board a flight, we are screened

and at times patted down. We save our money to ensure our financial security. As parents, we try to shield our kids from any hardships.

These are responsible things, to be sure. But we must be mindful that we don't allow our desire for security to lead to fear or complacency. There is a slow and subtle effect to our risk aversion. Christians, and pastors in particular, ought not surround ourselves with some form of bubble wrap, thinking that we can remove risk from our lives. This is the great risk of not taking risks.

And so it is when it comes to church planting. We are prone to wait until things are comfortable and ideal. We can delay church planting until the finances are solid, the church is problem free, and the pastoral team is strong. Again, these things aren't wrong, but ideal circumstances don't require faith or risk. A life without risk is more of a mirage than a reality. Church planting has always required risk, and it always will. It is one of the most counter-cultural things a church can do.

My prayer is that Sovereign Grace would become like my friend Francis Mariano in the Philippines. Francis was sent from Jeffery Jo's church to plant a church in another part of Manila called Imus City. Francis has a rickshaw, which is a motorcycle with another seat that can hold 3 people max. Yet every Sunday, Francis and his wife put their 6 kids in the rickshaw and head off to church. There are no seatbelts, or helmets, but there is a pronounced joy. Just getting to church requires faith-filled risk, and yet, they are more aware of the joy of church planting than the risks.

Risk for the Greatest Cause

One of the greatest privileges I've had in ministry is to plant a church. In 1996 my family, along with a small church planting team, was sent from Covenant Fellowship Church in the Philadelphia area to plant Providence Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There were risks that Jill, our three girls (who were 16, 14, and 10 at the time), the church planting team, and I needed to make to see a new church planted in the South Hills of Pittsburgh.

After working for a pharmaceutical company for 14 years, my salary decreased by two-thirds. If you didn't know, church planters don't make the same salary as those who work in the pharmaceutical industry! We moved from a church we loved filled with many friends to a city where we had no history, family, or friends. Our church planting team consisted of 10 adults. It was a wonderful team, but notably small. They took risks by leaving what was familiar and moving to Pittsburgh where they needed to find housing and new jobs.

Why would my family take this risk? Why would our small team take this risk? Because we believed that any risks we took were for the greatest cause history will ever know: proclaiming Christ to every tribe, tongue, and nation. The risks we took were dwarfed by the greatness of the cause.

The risks we took to plant Providence Church are not unique because many people in Sovereign Grace have taken similar risks to see 122 churches planted in our short 43 year history. Pastors and people who participated on church planting teams uprooted families, left what was familiar, moved to places they never thought they would live, and found new jobs because they believed those risks were worth it in light of the greatest cause.

They didn't wait until things were comfortable. They took risks when it felt risky. May our family of churches never stop taking great risks for the greatest cause of all.

Burn Your Boats

On a Sunday in September 1996 when my family and church planting team were sent out from Covenant Fellowship to plant in Pittsburgh, Alan Redrup, a Covenant Fellowship pastor and friend said to me, "Mark, you've burned your boats." It was a timely and appropriate word picture that conveyed the reality that there was no turning back regardless of the risks that were before us.

My prayer is that many more people in our family of churches will burn their boats, even in the face of genuine risk, to plant more churches for the purpose of reaching those who don't know Jesus with the good news of the gospel. Why is this my prayer? Because the biggest risk we have in planting more

churches in the future is that we would stop taking risks to plant churches.
May that never be in Sovereign Grace!

Rather, may it be, that we take the greatest risks of all for the greatest cause
of all—the cause of advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ through the planting
of churches.

CHURCH PLANTING IS FOR ALL CHURCHES

Mike Seaver

Lead Pastor, Risen Hope Church (Summerville, SC)

Church Planting Priority #2

We prioritize church planting as a mission for every church over delegating it to select churches or specialists.

I never liked the 1985 song by John Fogerty entitled “Centerfield.” The song speaks of a kid who is warming the bench at a baseball game, but he is “ready to play today.” It’s not that wanting to play is a bad thing, but it’s the position that he keeps vying to play. He wants to play centerfield. If you are a bench warmer, the one place that you should not play is centerfield (and maybe shortstop). It is one of the busiest positions that takes the most athletic ability to cover the most ground in the outfield.

The centerfielder is the leader of the outfield. He is also one of the best hitters on the team. A little league bench warmer rarely contains that quality. Just consider these names who all played centerfield: Ty Cobb, Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio, Willie Mays, Ken Griffey Jr., and Mike Trout. I rest my case. Centerfield is not the first place a bench warmer should go, but the last. Every little league baseball coach will tell you that a bench warmer is put in right field, where a rare left-handed batter will pull the ball, and a little league right-handed batter will rarely know how to slap the ball that way.

“Put me in coach, I’m ready to play today. Look at me, I can play *right field*.” That is how the song should go.

However, there is something I do really like about this song. It is the persistence of the bench warmer to get in the game. He wants to be part of the game, and he is even going to talk with his coach about it. He wants to contribute to

the team. In Sovereign Grace, there are no bench warmers when it comes to church planting. There are no churches that are looking at more experienced Sovereign Grace churches as the “starters” and they just need to grab another handful of sunflower seeds and relax for another inning.

No, church planting is a whole denominational effort. Every Sovereign Grace church is in the game and on mission. The Leadership Team puts it this way:

We believe that every Sovereign Grace church should support and pursue church planting. We are a church planting denomination that has always desired to reflect the New Testament model of sacrificially sending local resources to establish new churches. We believe this mission requires the faith-filled participation of every local church in Sovereign Grace.

Since our inception, Sovereign Grace has cared about planting churches. For over forty years, we have prized supporting and pursuing church planting. This means that the Sovereign Grace church of a thousand members may be able to send out church plants faster and have more resources, but it also means that the SG church of a hundred members will have a heart to come alongside church plants in their region and still be in the game.

It’s obvious to most of us how large, seemingly-wealthy churches can be in the planting game. But what does it look like for all of us to be in the game? What part can smaller churches play? And what would that look like?

It looks like prayerfully walking forward in the mission of God however he calls your local church. It is making resources available to support the gospel going forward in new church plants across the United States and across the world. Let’s consider a few of these resources:

Long-Term People Resources

A church plant is made of people and a church planting team is one of the most valuable parts of starting a new church. An invaluable part of our mutual work is the sacrificial sending of people to be part of a core church planting team. It is like the Antioch church that sends out “their best” on mission for

Jesus to be known in new places.

We must adopt the vision that we are all potential church plant team members. And we must genuinely believe that it is compelling and desirable to consider joining a plant. This allows each member of our churches to prayerfully consider their one involvement with each church plant, “Is this the one I’m supposed to go on?” God may call them to stay, support, and send. Or he may call them to go.

Short-Term People Resources

There are also those who are called to go temporarily and help support a local church plant for a certain number of weeks, months, or years. They can help a plant get established in those infant moments. This can also look like mission teams from other local churches within the region. This support can be of great value, particularly in spreading the news, handing out invitations, or even sharing the gospel themselves.

Training and Deploying Church Planters

Church planters are formed by years of pastoral experience. Churches that plant often sacrifice by sending a local elder (or two) to establish this new work. Not every Sovereign Grace church has these men to send, but every Sovereign Grace eldership can prayerfully ask the question: “Is there a guy here who should plant a church in the coming years?” We can put that before the Lord and listen to faithful leading.

Financial Resources

Church planting is expensive: new pastors, new equipment, and new rental locations can be costly. This does not even include the cost of taking a congregation and allocating their financial wisdom and generosity toward the new church and away from the sending church.

In Sovereign Grace, we commit to support our churches with regional monies and national grants. However, even if our region is not planting a church this year, we can “be in the game” by assisting other Sovereign Grace plants who

are just getting started. We can sow generously into this mission knowing that one day it will be our region that is planting.

Equipment Resources

Most church plants need a lot of equipment to get started. Soundboards and speakers, children's ministry toys and curriculum, tables and chairs, signage and websites, and the list goes on of a church plant's equipment needs. Established churches and local Sovereign Grace members can help provide any of these resources for a young church plant. Many established churches have used equipment laying around that can greatly benefit a new plant and shift money to other areas of need.

Counsel and Wisdom Resources

Sovereign Grace church plants benefit from monthly Church Plant Coaching as well as a one-year Church Plant Cohort, which gathers all pending planters. Sovereign Grace Central pays for the majority of these resources for our planters because we see that an infant plant is at its most vulnerable state in the first two years. We want to give counsel, care, and wisdom to our church planters so they will mature and become established churches that end up planting other churches in the years to come.

Every Sovereign Grace church is needed in the game and on mission. We have no bench warmers. You can support church planting in Sovereign Grace. Yes, you, solo pastor. Yes, you, church member. Yes, you, young man or woman. The question isn't whether or not you ought or can.

The question is whether or not God is calling you and your church to be in the game. Put us in, coach! We're ready to play today! God leads and he calls. He will send us to the harvest field.

PLANTING CHURCHES THAT LAST

Eric Turbedsky

Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Orange (Orange, CA)

Church Planting Priority #3

We prioritize church plant endurance over a high church plant rate.

There is something to be said for an ambition to establish as many churches in as many communities as fast as the Lord will allow. People are perishing. We have been sent. Why not plant now and ask questions later? “As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Rom. 10:15)

Yet urgency is not the only principle that guides our ambition to fulfill the Great Commission. As much as we want to see churches established, we must also be committed to establishing churches that endure.

Church Planting in a Throwaway Culture

Bigger. Faster. Easier. Cheaper. All qualities we value in a throwaway culture. Here in California, recycling is almost a religious practice. It takes away the guilt that we experience when we choose that paper cup or trade in our phone. We tell ourselves that it’s ok. It was designed to be disposable.

However, it’s different with the church of Jesus Christ. His church is not disposable.

This doesn’t mean that every local church will endure. In fact, as I write this article, I continue to meet with a nearby church that is preparing to close her doors. These are the last weeks of a 25-year-old church and I am happy to report that much of what I observe is beautiful. They are faithful brothers and

sisters and their pastor and his wife are loved and held in high esteem. They are finishing well, but this is not what they had planned. We are all learning to trust in God's providence.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Cor. 3:6–7)

Church planting in a throwaway culture can challenge even the most well-intentioned Christian. Why wait? Why not try? Isn't it better to try and regret than to regret not trying?

We might even believe that the worst that can happen is that the church plant closes and everyone finds another church home. But this isn't true. Lives can be wrecked. Alienation can set it. And the testimony of Christ can be tarnished. Worse things really can happen.

Our efforts to plant more churches must be guided by the same values that guide our efforts to lead established churches. This is countercultural, even for church culture. But every new church is planted with the hope of one day being an old church. Churches are designed to endure.

Gospel-Centered Growth

Church plants are built upon the gospel. You might think that this is a given, but let me offer you a few alternatives that often attract our hearts: a charismatic leader, a core team, a great children's ministry, trendy branding, effective advertising, a respected network or denomination, and money. These are just a few of the many things that I have been told are non-negotiables. A church plant won't make it without them.

Yet the original church planter, the Apostle Paul, said that "no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." He continues by warning us of the allure of other options. "The fire will test what sort of work each one has done" (1 Cor. 3:11, 13).

Why do church planters need to be warned? Because sometimes it can seem as though the gospel is not enough. I remember our early years in Orange, California. Many of our most promising guests left because we didn't offer much in the way of children's ministry. It was so tempting to invest our hearts into every kind of program or event or a wish for a better facility. And I'm not saying you shouldn't find a better facility or develop better programs. I am saying that we must not invest our hopes into anything other than the power and promises of God to build his church upon the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord (Matt. 16:18).

As the saying goes, "What you win them with is what you win them to."

Pastoral Duties

Though it may seem obvious, it must not be presumed: every church plant is a church.

Yet too often a discussion regarding the work of a church planter misses the most important work of all. He must pastor the people God joins to his new church (1 Pet. 5:1-4). There isn't some sort of grace period in which he can delay his responsibilities to shepherd the flock of God. A church planter has many priorities and plays many roles. Pastor is number one.

I suspect that some of the confusion over when a church planter becomes a pastor lies in the very definition of the church itself. And here is one of the many strengths I appreciate about Sovereign Grace Churches. We know what we are planting.

Therefore, we are committed to testing and affirming the call of a man to pastoral ministry before he begins church planting. This takes time and resources. This requires patience from all involved. This limits our pool of potential planters. It can begin to feel like we are searching for a needle in a haystack. This is why planting churches is a prayerful work.

“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’” (Matt. 9:37–38)

The wait is worth it, for in the end our church planters must be “. . . faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). The mandate is to make disciples who mature and grow and live lives worthy of the gospel (Phil. 1:27). This is why church plants need pastors with boots on the ground on day one. There’s no mystery as to what should be going on inside every new church. God is using every member to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11–16).

Church planters are shepherds.

Long-Term Vision

Most of what we do when we plant a church isn’t even done for us in the here and now. It is for people we haven’t met yet, for Christians who are churchless and pastorless. We plant for people who today are enemies of God, not asking for a Sovereign Grace Church.

We send and invest and labor and sacrifice, all in the hopes of establishing a local congregation that will endure for generations. Around our church, we call this the principle of “last man standing.” This is to combat the double-sided error of overestimating what we could accomplish in the short run and underestimating what we could accomplish in the long run.

This is one of the reasons why I love my neighborhood, where there are a number of churches approaching their 100th anniversary. Since I arrived, many have attempted to plant new churches here. I lost count after twenty and today only one remains. My neighborhood has put on a masterclass in the contrast between fast and slow, short and long-term visions.

As my friend Ricky Alcantar explains, “The effectiveness of an embassy is not measured in a handful of days or weeks. The effectiveness of an embassy is often measured in years or decades or longer.”

Everything in our Bibles encourages us to take a long-term perspective on church planting. We count the costs. We remain steadfast. We fight for unity. We celebrate faithfulness. We consider others more important than ourselves. We ask for things that only God can do. We persevere. “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9).

The whole world is watching us plant churches, not on some spreadsheet or map but in their local community centers and movie theaters and school cafeterias. But, most of what God is going to do is likely far off in the future.

We are not in a hurry because we aim to plant churches that last.

EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLESHIP FROM DAY ONE

Mike Seaver

Lead Pastor, Risen Hope Church (Summerville, SC)

Church Planting Priority #4

We prioritize both evangelism and growth toward maturity from the first days of a church plant.

Does the church have a mission or does the mission have a church? It's a question I've often pondered, discussed with other pastors, and prayed over. I'm resolved that the answer is "both."

Sure, the church has a mission, but before the church ever had a mission or even existed, the mission of God was to gather a people for himself to be "a kingdom and priests to our God" (Rev. 5:10).

The resurrected Jesus put it this way:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18–20).

Jesus calls all believers to be disciples and to make disciples. The church is the vehicle for the gospel of our King to go to the world. God has chosen no other vehicle. There is no "Plan B." The church of Jesus is the tool for the mission to go forward to the ends of our street and the ends of the earth.

From Day One: Evangelism and Outreach

This emphasis on God's mission greatly informs the early days of a Sovereign Grace church plant. We are not merely starting worship gatherings. We are not merely taking a group of people from one community to begin church programs in another community. No, we are on God's mission to proclaim the gospel to new neighborhoods, cities, states, and countries. We are representatives and ambassadors of the Kingdom of God to this new place. And while it is new to us, it is known and seen by the Lord. He may be saying to us like he did to the Apostle Paul, "I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18:10). So we "go" faithfully because we have a faithful God who goes before us.

I've had the privilege of planting Sovereign Grace Church of the Lowcountry in Summerville, SC. (I know, it was a long and unwise name. We are now called Risen Hope Church.) In our early days we prayerfully considered how to be on mission both individually and as a congregation. For me, I knew a lot about sports and found that joining a Fantasy Football League at a local cigar shop was a way to get into the lives of folks that I thought would never step into our church. By God's kindness, we saw David¹ come to know Jesus. We baptized David. I officiated the wedding of David and Lisa at the cigar shop. Our "cigar shop friends" Wayne and Tom heard the gospel many times. We prayed for Steve's wife to be healed of her chronic pain. David, Lisa, and I sought to be salt and light amidst smoke and swear words. God was on his mission.

However, God's mission is not just an individual endeavor. Our church sought to love the Sangaree community where we were located. We served Sangaree Middle School in whatever way they desired. We assisted with setting up classrooms at the beginning of the year. We helped do cafeteria duty for teachers to get a break. We brought treats to teachers simply to express thankfulness to them. We helped them in ways they thought would best serve the students.

We also walked through tragedy together. Their School Resource Officer committed suicide and a 7th grade English teacher was dying of cancer, both within the same year. We rejoiced as that 7th grade teacher came to know

1. Names have been changed in this article for confidentiality.

Jesus as her Savior and was baptized in the Atlantic Ocean in the midst of her cancer treatments. We grieved with them upon her death months later.

From Day One: Discipleship and Growth

In Sovereign Grace, we certainly prioritize evangelism from the very beginning of our churches being planted. However, evangelism is only one part of our priority of disciple making. We don't just want to make converts, we want to teach people how to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Disciple making is not just a good idea, it is obedience to the Lord's command. We must focus on taking people from "spiritual infancy" to "spiritual maturity." In this way, we help them live as "spiritual children of God," helping them understanding the foundations of the faith. We want to take "spiritual children" and help them grow into "spiritual maturity" who take responsibility for their own growth and the growth of others. These are the saints who reproduce and bring up their own "spiritual infants." They become disciples making disciples for God's glory in the power of the Holy Spirit.

David and Lisa have now been part of Risen Hope for close to ten years. David has gone through men's discipleship groups. Lisa attends a Community Group while David works late hours at his job. David leads the lawn care team and smokes his cigar while riding the mower. Lisa edges the bushes. Spiritual growth has come as they have sought the Savior in their local church while going through the pain and suffering of aging, working hard jobs, and plodding along on the everyday journey we all relate to. They have humbly sought counsel. They have studied and applied God's Word to their lives. They are doing the slow and sweet work of faithfulness to Jesus in ordinary life.

It Takes Two to Obey

This evangelism and discipleship planting principle is designed to protect a new church plant from leaning so far in one direction that they fail to do all the church is called to do. If we don't apply careful thinking, planning, and diligence to this, the plant often ends up taking on the preferences of the planter of the original team.

There is a better way. There is a way that better reflects the call of Christ for the church and the health of congregational living. We must reach the lost. We must connect with the community. We must disciple those God saves. We must nurture and teach and deploy for more of the same. This is the call on church plants. And this call cannot wait or be delayed. This must be our occupation from the first days of the plant.

In Sovereign Grace,

We define discipleship as involving both evangelism and training toward Christian maturity. We believe that church plants should prioritize evangelism and outreach to the unchurched right away since that is our calling as witnesses of the gospel. We also believe that church plants sometimes provide a church home for those who cannot find a church in their area that share their theological or ecclesiological convictions such that they can grow and serve faithfully in Christ. Yet we do not actively seek transfer growth from faithful churches in the same area. Nor do we postpone evangelism or equipping for godliness to a later stage in the church's life but pursue both from the earliest days of a church plant.²

2. Sovereign Grace Churches, "12 Priorities of Sovereign Grace Church Planting." Unpublished paper.

GODLINESS OVER GIFTING

Andy Farmer

Community & Care Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Church Planting Priority #5

We prioritize godliness over gifting in church planters.

I started serving Sovereign Grace in church planting strategy back around 2007, which was something of a heyday for us as a family of churches. We were very much in the conversation with the emerging church planting networks and denominational church planting arms at that time. It was heady and exciting to be in the vanguard of what was clearly an emerging force in church mission.

But we were always a bit on the outside of what was really going on. Not surprising, really. We were small. And our approach ensured we stayed relatively small; we planted slowly. If church planting were a horse race, at the finish we would have been described on the call as “well out of the running.”

In a prominent research report on church planting back in the day, a group of over forty church planting leaders was asked to fill out a questionnaire on the top issues a church planter faces. The results were dominated by things like Leadership Development and Reproducing Culture, Systems, Processes and Cultures, Casting Vision and Avoiding Mission Drift. All worthy tasks, even necessary tasks. Church planters should have gifts that facilitate these goals.

As a clear sign of our stature in the planting world, we were not asked to participate in the study. But had we been asked, what would we have added to the conversation? I think back then, and even to this day, the answer would have been one word: godliness.

There are clearly certain gifts needed to launch and build a church. Planting requires a specialized skill set that even gifted senior pastors don't always possess. Planters have to do some things distinctively, many things competently, but all things eventually. Specialization isn't an option. So we look hard for gifting in assessing planters. However, we look harder for godliness since gifting without godliness is hazardous.

What is godliness? Rather than squeeze this massively important concept into a few sentences of my own words, let me give you some favorite words of others on the topic.

From John Owen we learn that godliness prizes what God says matters most. "The chief duty of faith and love is to lead us to prefer Christ above ourselves, and his concerns above our own."¹

Fellow Puritan John Flavel reminds us that godliness prizes a vital relationship with our God: "Everything is well, and shall be well, when all is well between us and God."²

John Newton eloquently describes the trajectory of life when godliness is our goal.

I will venture to assure you that though you will possess a more stable peace, in proportion as the Lord enables you to live more simply upon the blood, righteousness and grace of the Mediator, you will never grow into a better opinion of yourself than you have at present. The nearer you are brought to Him, the quicker sense you will have of your continual need of Him, and thereby your admiration of His power, love and compassion will increase likewise from year to year. ³

1. John Owen, *The Glory of Christ (Abridged)*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 68.

2. John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981), 183.

3. John Newton, *The Voice of the Heart*, (Mullberry, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 110.

Charles Spurgeon pleads for godliness in the pastor:

Urgently we do need a revival of personal godliness. This is, indeed, the secret of church prosperity. When individuals fall from their steadfastness, the church is tossed to and fro; when personal faith is steadfast, the church abides true to her Lord.⁴

With this understanding of godliness, why is it to be prioritized in a planter? The theme of godliness is woven through Paul's first letter to Timothy. We can get a pretty good outline from how the Apostle instructs a young pastor. Here are four reasons why godliness gives a planter what can't be got by gifting.

- Gifting creates opportunity and impact, which begets attention. Godliness comes with peace and dignity, which engenders trust (1Tim. 2:2).
- Gifting allows us to communicate great truths. Godliness puts us under great truths (1 Tim. 3:16).
- Gifting makes us effective in the task of planting. Godliness trains us to endure through the trials of planting (1Tim. 4:7–8).
- Gifting fuels great excitement and vision. Godliness infuses great contentment and confidence (1 Tim. 6:7).

This isn't to say that gifting is unnecessary. It is vital. But churches can't be built on it without godliness in their leaders.

Consider the body of a car. Technically a car "body" includes both the chassis and the exterior. In a basic sense, the body of the car is everything designed to be moved down the road by the engine and drive train. Gifting is kind of like those parts of the car body that are exterior and visible, that give the car its functionality, its style, its distinctiveness as a vehicle.

4. Charles Spurgeon, *Only a Prayer Meeting*, (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), 11.

But the car body also includes the chassis—the metal framing of the car that gives it shape and substance, that ensures it can do what it’s meant to do. A planter’s gifting is like the exterior of the car, it communicates what people can expect in their experience under his leadership and care. Godliness is like the chassis of the planter. It is what people will rely on for safety and durability under the leadership of the planter.

In reality, a planter needs both. Gifting and godliness must be welded and bolted together so what is being built has both the essential drivability and the durability for calling our church planting efforts successful. But to build a car, just like to design a planter, you start with the chassis—you start with godliness.

Getting back to the heyday, I was vividly reminded of how we were perceived in the church planting world when a prominent church planting leader, learning I was from Sovereign Grace, said, “If I want to plant a church, I want one of my guys. If I’m going to let my daughter marry a planter, I’m going to want one of your guys.” (Not a bad thing to be known for in church planting.)

It is surely true you can be godly without being a church planter. (Let’s all thank God for that!) But, in Sovereign Grace, you simply won’t make it as a church planter without being godly. And let’s thank God for that, as well.

PASTORAL EXPERIENCE OVER INDIVIDUAL ZEAL

Joel Shorey

Lead Pastor, Redeemer Fellowship (Newark, DE)

Church Planting Priority #6

We prioritize pastoral experience in SGC over individual zeal.

In 2018 I had the privilege of planting a Sovereign Grace church. But that was not when my burden for church planting began. No. Actually, by the time I actually planted, I had prayerfully considered planting in Sovereign Grace Churches for over 15 years.

I began the church planting conversation in 2003 when I was a college student and member at a church in Gaithersburg, Maryland. I then continued the conversation when I joined the pastoral team of Covenant Fellowship Church in Pennsylvania in 2005.

The two biggest questions in my young mind were “when?” and “where?”.

I had a lot of youthful zeal. I wanted to get to work. I was impatient. And to tempt my young heart even more, there were other denominations that I could have joined that would have celebrated my zeal by eagerly sending me out quickly. Even as a 22 year old! Nonetheless, the slower pace of Sovereign Grace planting tempted my young pastoral heart towards frustration.

However, I have now been a Sovereign Grace pastor for 20+ years and a church planter for 7 years. I am unwaveringly full of gratitude toward the Lord for utilizing local and extra local leadership in having me wait 13 years before being sent out.

There is nothing that has served me in church planting more than being a seasoned pastor who was well equipped by older and wiser men. A decade plus of serving on a Sovereign Grace pastoral team was the greatest tool that God used to prepare me for what I have faced in planting.

Why? Well, because the best planters are first experienced and faithful pastors.

Planting with Pastors

Conversations about church planting often begin to sound like something that requires herculean skill and effort. They make you assume that a planter needs to be a super-pastor in order to succeed in the work of church planting. This is not true. We believe that church planting work is simply pastoral work. We shouldn't make it more complicated than this.

Are there additional responsibilities? Yes. Is there a pronounced need for leadership and evangelistic skill? Yes. Is it demanding on the schedule? Yes. Some entrepreneurial instincts are helpful, for sure. But when it comes down to it, the biblical call to plant a church is simply the call to be the pastor of a new church in a new location.

Church *planters* are first and foremost new church *pastors*. And this should form our thinking about the man. He need not be the next Charles Spurgeon or George Whitfield. We do not need world class leadership. We need pastoral faithfulness.

This should also cause us to value pastoral experience for the planter. If planters are pastors, then let us plant with faithful and proven pastors. It should make sense to us that the strongest church plants are going to be done by men who have extensive experience in pastoral ministry. They are not exceptional in every area, but they are experienced. There are a number of reasons for this.

Planting with Pastoral Experience Earns Trust

Following a man on a church plant requires a lot of faith. Significant sacrifices are made when people sell their homes, find new jobs, and move their families into new communities. It's costly, and risky.

And yet the risk only increases if the man that they follow is inexperienced and unproven in his ministry. Now, not only do they have questions about the viability of a new church plant, but also about the wisdom and skill of the man most responsible to lead them on that plant.

Planting with men who have multiple years of vocational ministry enables those who follow him to do so with a greater degree of confidence. These men have experience. They have learned from other pastors. They are not learning for the first time the skills of preaching and pastoring in the pressure cooker of planting. God has grown and strengthened these skills in the context of team ministry, and now they are able to be expressed in a new context as a planter.

Not only will this serve the plant team, but it will also bless those who visit the church as guests. People are very perceptive to a church planter's pastoral sensitivities. If the church is being led by a young man who just got out of the Pastors College or seminary and who is still learning how to structure a sermon or how to do basic biblical counseling, visitors will feel wary of following him.

But if they encounter a man who has already learned (though imperfectly!) these basics of pastoral ministry, they will often willingly learn from and follow him.

Planting with Pastoral Experience Frees a Planter to Focus On the Right Things

While church planting does not require super-powers, it does require additional effort and energy. Planting a new local church requires administrative skill, pastoral insight, and evangelistic zeal.

If an inexperienced pastor is still learning how to keep sermon prep below 30 hours a week and still figuring out how to shepherd a church through stormy cultural times, then he is going to have a hard time giving sufficient effort to being evangelistic and setting a gospel culture within the church.

Multiple years of vocational pastoral experience enables the planter to have some established tools in his tool belt that free him to focus on the additional

responsibilities which are necessary when planting a new church.

Pastoral Experience in Sovereign Grace is Good Stewardship by Sovereign Grace

Beyond just vocational ministry experience, we believe that the more time a planter has in pastoral ministry within a SGC church, the greater the likelihood that he will plant a church that truly reflects SGC values. And this is wise stewardship.

Every church in Sovereign Grace is free to plant a church at any time. However, if that new church is going to be a Sovereign Grace Church, it needs to be planted by a man who has proven experience as a Sovereign Grace pastor. He will have a proven track record of modeling the values and virtues of our partnership.

Though we celebrate faithful church planting in the wider body of Christ, we take as our particular calling the planting of churches that will thrive in the values and virtues that we prioritize as Sovereign Grace Churches. This is best done with zealous, gifted, called, tested, and experienced Sovereign Grace pastors.

PREACHING AND PASTORING IS THE MEANS

Ricky Alcantar

Senior Pastor, Cross of Grace Church (El Paso, TX)

Church Planting Priority #7

We prioritize preaching and pastoring over entrepreneurial creativity.

Eventually, everything new becomes old. Eventually, the “new” way of planting becomes the “old” way of planting. I’ve ministered just long enough to see it.

I’ve seen preaching de-emphasized in favor of “dialogue” only to be replaced by loud and brash rock ‘n’ roll preaching only to be replaced by culturally conversant messages peppered with quotations from pop music and philosophy. I’ve seen people emphasize small groups, then de-emphasize them, then turn them into evangelistic teams, then turn them into Sunday school. I’ve seen churches scramble to find meeting spaces that felt like shopping malls only for the next wave of churches to look for “real and authentic” spaces like former night clubs only for the next wave of churches to turn back toward historic church design.

That’s why in Sovereign Grace we are committed to emphasizing something that does not shift or change, something that does not fall out of vogue, something that is worth emphasizing. In Sovereign Grace, we emphasize faithful preaching and pastoring over entrepreneurial creativity.

The Pull Toward the Next Big Thing

These cultural currents and movements are not new at all. In fact, they’ve been a temptation for the church from the very beginning. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul calls out the temptation for divisions around particular leaders

(see 1 Cor. 1:10–17). But Paul’s concern is that when even a good thing like a beloved leader becomes an ultimate thing in a church, we’re in profoundly dangerous territory.

It is essential for a church to be centered on the right things, especially for a church plant, at its earliest stages. And what is the right thing for a church to center itself on? Paul models it:

“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1–2). Paul could have used “lofty speech” or “wisdom”—meaning he could have played the Corinthian game of dazzling with rhetoric, using clever ideas, and amassing followers in the Roman style. But instead, he rejected it all and centered the church and his ministry around the cross.

The Beautiful Foolishness of Preaching the Cross

The first way to minister powerfully is to emphasize faithful cross-centered preaching. Paul says that while the cross seems foolish to some, it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18). And it is far more effective than relying on human wisdom.

What seems “strong” to the world in fact isn’t as strong as we think it is. Paul works through the greatest sources of human “wisdom” in the wise man, the scribe, and debater and asks a simple, but cutting question—did any of them save us? The answer, of course, is no. None discovered the way of salvation, atoned for our sins, or brought us to God. So, why then, would we turn from the cross to the methodologies of the world?

Instead, the message of the cross is what has true power, with Paul calling Christ, “the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:24–25). Here then is why we build around faithful preaching—because we truly believe that the seemingly foolish message of the gospel revealed in Scripture is more powerful than anything else, more wise than anything

else. And if we truly want powerful churches we must anchor them not in the power of human wisdom but the power of the cross.

If you were to examine Paul's teaching you wouldn't find a trendy set of culturally-driven messages. Instead you'd find him teaching about uncomfortable subjects like sexual purity (1 Cor. 6), weighty theological subjects like resurrection (1 Cor. 15), pointed subjects like financial generosity (2 Cor. 9). And if you were to examine his teaching further you'd see that for each one of these he took pains to connect to the cross of Jesus Christ. His teaching might not have wowed the Corinthian academy, but it changed lives.

The Beautiful Weakness of Pastoral Ministry

Paul's approach in planting the church in Corinth is fascinating because Paul is brilliant, highly credentialed, and from high social standing. And this was a city that loved and gravitated to the brilliant and sophisticated. And yet he never appeals to these credentials. Rather, he rejects the world's methods entirely.

What then did Paul do in Corinth? What brilliant strategy did he deploy? Simply this—ordinary and faithful pastoral ministry.

- He baptized or guided people to baptism (1 Cor. 1:16).
- He worked hard at his own sanctification and godliness (1 Cor. 4:6).
- He treated the people in the church as his children and instructed them (1 Cor. 4:14).
- He corrected people when needed (1 Cor. 4:21).
- He desired to spend lengthy amounts of time with members (1 Cor. 16:7).

His job description, in other words, was in many ways that of a faithful ordinary pastor. He did not have methods that others cannot emulate. He did not require an enormous budget for elaborate props like tanks or roller coasters on stage. He did not build his strategy around a flawless video recording of

his services. His manner of ministry was not built on a certain level of cool or charming for social media followers.

And he did this very intentionally, embracing his weakness. He didn't hide his physical handicaps or pain. As he said later in 2 Corinthians, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). And this was not only the way he lived, it was the way he ministered—using what seemed weak to showcase the power of God. You could say rightly that his ministry was cross-shaped. It was ministry in the mode and model of the cross—weakness to the world that held God's hidden power.

Not Easy, But Straightforward

An older pastor once told me that pastoring is not easy, but at least it's straightforward. I think the same is true of planting. It can be complicated. There are facility agreements, and team spreadsheets, and budgets, and counseling issues, and outreach strategies. Those things are not easy. But when viewed biblically, they are straightforward—we preach the beautiful foolishness of the cross in the beautiful weakness of ordinary pastoral ministry.

Let there be no misunderstanding: Creativity *does* have a place in planting. Entrepreneurial drive and skill *does* have a place in planting. But the cross of Jesus Christ puts them in their rightful place. Those things are not the content of our ministry, with a small application of the cross added to make them Christian. Instead, the cross is the content of our ministry to which we apply our hard work, our creativity, and our skill, as we preach the cross. Yet, we must be cautious that even a good desire for innovative strategy does not subtly overtake the cross, nor empty it of its power.

Everything Old is Renewed Again

The latest methods or fads in the world all seem "new" but are really old and faded. Ecclesiastes says of them: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). What seems radical and fresh will rightly feel stale as we find the latest movement or trend years, decades, or centuries earlier. It's been tried and abandoned before.

The world considers the ancient story of the cross and the ordinary work of pastoral ministry to be old and outdated. Yet, it is fresher and newer and more powerful than anything in the world today. As we look at the preaching of the cross, we find that it renews and brings hearts to life in a way nothing else can. As we look at the ordinary work of pastoral ministry we find that this simple, cross-centered ministry in the mode of Jesus and Paul and others actually showcases the power and strength of God.

May the preaching of the old, old story then be our message and our methodology so that the power of Christ might abide with us. May it be true of every new church we plant from here until Christ returns.

PRIORITIZING VOCATIONAL PLANTERS

Jeremy Oddy

Pastor, Crossway Community Church (Charlotte, NC)

Church Planting Priority #8

We prioritize vocational planters over part-time planters.

We believe all church planters are pastors. This must be said and made clear in the current church planting landscape. Yet, doing pastoral work in an established church is not the same as planting a church that does pastoral work. They require different skillsets and mindsets.¹ But we don't want to separate the two. This is why protecting the church planter's time is a high priority in Sovereign Grace.

In order to free a church planter to the pastoral ministry to which he has been called, we believe that it will be most advantageous to the new church plant if the planter is able to focus his time and energy fully on the work. While we will affirm part-time or bi-vocational church planters if the context requires it,² we aim to plant with vocational pastors as often as possible.

Why? The answer is directly correlated to the responsibilities required not just to plant a church, but also to pastor a church.³ By God's grace, a church planter who can devote his time to the mission of the church and the condition of the church should successfully lead a healthy, sustainable church plant.

1. David Whitehead, "How Is a Church Planter Different than a Pastor?", Redeemer City to City, 11/13/23. <https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/how-is-a-church-planter-different-from-a-pastor-1>

2. Acts 18:3

3. 1 Peter 5:2–4; Acts 20:28

Types of Church Planters

Over the last two decades, I have had the privilege of meeting with dozens of church planters. Some are good friends of mine. Generally, I have observed three types of church planters: the “Highly Missional” type, the “Highly Pastoral” type, and the “Balanced” type.

Each of the first two types—while gifted—faced significant challenges. The Highly Missional type often lacked pastoral depth to sustain a church. The Highly Pastoral type struggled to catalyze the missional momentum necessary to plant. In contrast, the Balanced type, combining both the missional and the pastoral skills, typically planted churches that were both healthy and enduring. Not only is the Bible clear on church planters as pastors,⁴ but our experience also supports this reality.⁵

Bi-vocational Church Planting is Acceptable

Although we believe bi-vocational church planting has some limitations, there are times and contexts when it seems wise to plant with a bi-vocational planter. This kind of openness and flexibility is needed to make us malleable for gospel opportunities and needs.

According to some respected church planting gurus, there is a trend towards bi-vocational church planting that is not necessarily due to a funding issue, but more of a missiological strategy to be sought after.⁶ This can be a good thing, in measure.

It can be especially appropriate to plant with bi-vocational church planters for endeavors best characterized as “exploratory work.”⁷ Subsequently, we

4. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5

5. See the articles in this journal that highlight how we prioritize pastoral experience (Principle #6), as well as preaching and pastoring (Principle #7).

6. Daniel Im, “Tomorrow’s Church Planting,” Daniel Im, 04/15/16. <https://www.danielim.com/2016/04/15/tomorrows-church-planting/>

7. An exploratory work is a church planting initiative such as campuses, mission churches, or missional strategy that aims towards it becoming a new church in one of our regions. Please see our Sovereign Grace *Book of Church Order*, 2025, 6.5.4.2.

would expect a bi-vocational church planter to eventually become a vocational church planter as the “exploratory work” becomes a new church. However, careful consideration and awareness of the limitations and potential challenges is necessary before initiating a bi-vocational approach so that the work is pursued realistically and with faith.

Although we need both approaches, we will continue to prioritize vocational church planting as the Sovereign Grace norm. And as we do so, our partnership will naturally continue to assess and equip planters. But we are committed to more. We want to participate financially in the plant to enable these faith-filled bi-vocational planters to experience increased opportunity for gospel ministry without splitting their time.

Vocational Church Planting is Advantageous

Planting as a vocational church planter allows for the time, the focus, and the energy to better steward four biblical responsibilities. These responsibilities are naturally more difficult for bi-vocational or part-time planters to balance.

Caring for His Soul

A vocational planter, first, has an advantage with his time and energy to care effectively for his soul.⁸ He doesn't have to divide up his responsibilities. In fact, one church planter recently shared how important it was for him to be a vocational pastor so he could have the space to focus on his relationship with Christ and to depend on Christ. He knew he would be under spiritual attack and he recognized his desperate need to abide in Christ. This helped him to resist the temptation that he must “perform” and “produce” results due to the pressure that comes from church planting.

Caring for His Family

Second, a vocational planter is best positioned to provide consistent care for his family.⁹ These relationships are a high priority. Assuming he has a wife and children, they are a big part of the church plant, too. They can't be on

8. John 15:5; 1 Tim. 4:16

9. 1 Tim. 3:5

the periphery of the church plant; this new church is “their” church family, not just “dad’s.”

Vocational ministry positions him best to be faithful as a husband and father while continuing to be faithful to his other roles as a church planter who is pastoring a new church. The blessings that come from vocational ministry when considering this responsibility are self-evident.

Caring for His Church

Third, a vocational planter has an advantage with his time and energy to care faithfully for his church.¹⁰ After his relationship with Christ and his relationship with his family, he has been called to shepherd the flock—this flock. It doesn’t matter if it’s ten people or a hundred people; the calling is the same. In accordance with God’s Word, he will need to feed them, care for them, protect them, and lead them.¹¹ He will need the time, energy, and space to create structures and contexts (i.e., Sunday worship service, small groups, and equipping) to pastor and administrate his church.

Caring for His Mission

Fourth, a vocational planter has an advantage with his time and energy to zealously care for his mission.¹² The Lord has called a church planter to establish a work that bears witness to Christ and His kingdom in a particular town or part of a city. He needs to know this missional “harvest.”¹³ Not only does he need to know all the demographics and statistics that are relevant for the mission, but he needs to know the people and the needs of the community. Specifically, the church planter needs to be able to articulate how the gospel is explicitly good news to “these” people in “this” location at “this” time.¹⁴

Furthermore, it is vital that the church planter gives sufficient time and

10. Eph. 4:11–13; Titus 1:9

11. 1 Pet. 5:2–4; Acts 20:28; Titus 1:9

12. Acts 17

13. Matt. 9:37–38

14. Acts 17:16–34

energy to equip the church, both lay members and lay leaders, for missional living. This may be the most important single way a church can implement a missional mindset.¹⁵

These four critical advantages of caring for his soul, his family, his church, and his mission provide the reasons and evidence for preferring and prioritizing vocational church planting. It is the application of wisdom and experience aimed at the success of the church plant and the church planter.

Church Plants and Church Planters that Last

Naturally any church or denomination that seeks to plant a church wants to do it well. They want churches that remain faithful to the gospel. They want churches that last. We agree, but we aim for just a little bit more. Of course, we want to plant healthy churches. But we also want to plant with healthy church planters—church planters who last. And we’re persuaded that vocational planting is the best mechanism to get us to that worthy and God-glorifying goal.

15. Timothy Keller, *Serving a Movement: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 55.

CHURCH PLANTING IS NOT A ONE-MAN SHOW

Jared Mellinger

Lead Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Church Planting Priority #9

We prioritize church plant teams over solo planters.

A few years after I became a pastor, a book was published called *Church Planter*. The cover was striking: a shadowy, battle-worn reaper stands in an open field with a stern look on his face and a large scythe in his hand. The man appears more likely to be in a horror story or a post-apocalyptic movie than on the cover of a Christian book about gospel ministry.

The image is striking not only because the church planter is surrounded by darkness—dark clouds, a dark field, and the man himself dressed in darkness—but also because he is entirely alone. His work is apparently a solitary work, done in isolation from others.

Is that how we should think about church planting? Is church planting a one-man show? Does the health of a church plant depend on one person?

God's Word on Teamwork

In Scripture, the gospel does not advance through the individual church planting hero, but through teams of men and women laboring together for the gospel. There might be unique situations where a church planting missionary is laboring in relative isolation before a team is developed. And yes, in every church plant the leadership of the planter is vital. But wise church planters will prioritize the development of a church plant team. It is not good for man (including church planters) to be alone.

Teamwork and delegation are not new ideas, they are biblical ones. Jethro's advice to Moses applies to many solo planters: "[You] will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone" (Ex. 18:18). Nehemiah could never have rebuilt Jerusalem's wall on his own, and many of our church planters have joined him in experiencing the blessing of teamwork.

Ecclesiastes 4 contains a general principle that applies to many forms of cooperation and teamwork. There is something far better than the toil and frustration of working alone.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a three-fold cord is not quickly broken (Eccl. 4:9–12).

Derek Kidner says these verses reveal "the poverty of the loner" and "depict the profit, resilience, comfort, and strength bestowed by a true alliance."¹

This principle applies to New Testament mission, as well. Jesus discipled a group of twelve men. When the time came to send them out, he sent them not in isolation but two by two (Mark 6:7). In the book of Acts we see that Paul's approach to planting churches involves a large network of coworkers who minister together for the advance of the gospel. Romans 16 mentions many of these friends and fellow laborers by name.

Both biblical principles and our experience as a family of churches demonstrate the importance of strong teams in church planting. It's been said that church planting is a team sport—it's like football, not golf. Churches with a vision for church planting will be churches that have a vision for identifying, equipping, and sending out strong church plant teams.

1. Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 50.

A Weapon for the Kingdom

There is a Peanuts (Charlie Brown) cartoon where Lucy demands that Linus change TV channels, and she threatens him with her fist if he doesn't. Linus says, "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" Lucy responds, "These five fingers. Individually they are nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold." So Linus says, "Which channel do you want?" He turns away and looks at his fingers: "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

An isolated church planter, however gifted, is limited in what he can accomplish alone. But a church plant team organized and unified as a single unit is a unique weapon in the spread of the gospel. There is power in teamwork.

- A team is able to model our Shaping Virtues² from the start, displaying the beauty of a community transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- A team is able to accomplish far more than one person by multiplying labor and involving everyone in the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11–12).
- A team provides support when we would otherwise grow weary in the many demands and trials of church planting.
- A team confirms the planter's ability to lead and the willingness of others to follow his pastoral leadership.
- A team demonstrates that the gospel is for all kinds of people: men and women, young and old, rich and poor, various ethnicities, backgrounds, and temperaments.
- A team leverages diverse gifts and strengths in the body of Christ. "As it is, there are many parts, yet one body" (1 Cor. 12:20).

2. The Shaping Virtues of Sovereign Grace Churches are humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, and godliness. These qualities are the fruit of the gospel wherever it is proclaimed and applied.

- A team provides ongoing financial support for the work.
- A team expands the reach of the church into the community, placing more members of the church in contact with an unbelieving world that desperately needs the message of a crucified and risen Savior.

Healthy Core Teams

When we talk about the priority of church planting teams, we are not just aiming for any group of Christians, but for a committed, mature core group. Ideally, the team will not just be a launch team, they will be a core team—that is, they will not only be involved in starting the work, but will remain a vital part of that work into the future. A strong core team will be committed, enthusiastic, hard working, godly, generous, and mission-minded. They will love Christ and be devoted to his church.

Members of existing congregations need to be envisioned for the possibility of participating in a church plant team, and pastors need to be prepared to send out those who are among their best. It is the participation and sacrifice of the people that makes church planting possible. Pastors can have all the desire in the world to send out a church plant, but it will not happen without men and women who are eager to participate in the work.

In Sovereign Grace Churches, the church plant team most often comes from the sending church. (Some members of the original team might also come from the area of the plant.) This ensures that the team is composed of mature members with experience in the local church. It also provides a history of existing relationships that strengthen the plant.

In forming a church plant team, there ought to be some way of pastorally guiding people in their decision to participate in the plant. Church plants can at times appeal to members who are disgruntled with their current church. But, not everyone who wants to be a part of a church planting team should be.

Consideration of gifting and experience should also be considered in forming a team. Who can champion evangelism? Who can coordinate children's

ministry? Who can serve in finances? Who can be deacons, or small group leaders, or ministry leaders? Who can lead worship? Who can manage volunteers? Who might be developed into a future pastor to provide a plurality of elders? Our church planting mission is not the work of the few but the work of the many, and our goal should be to send out strong church planting teams that will continue to bear fruit in their service and outreach.

A strong relationship between the sending church and the church planter is essential in order to work with all of these members to achieve the strength needed for a successful plant.

Cheerfully Sending Our 20s and Our 50s

When Charles Spurgeon was a 25-year-old pastor leading the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, he expressed a desire to see the surrounding area filled with new churches. Earlier that year, they had planted two churches a few miles away and they were about to plant a third. Spurgeon announced that he hoped, with the help of God and the congregation, to plant 100 churches during his lifetime. In the kindness of God, he saw this dream come to pass. “It is my greatest pleasure,” Spurgeon wrote decades later, “to aid in the commencing of new churches.”³

In one sermon Spurgeon said,

It is with cheerfulness that we dismiss our twelves, our twenties, our fifties, to form other churches. We encourage our members to leave us to found other churches; nay, we seek to persuade them to do it. We ask them to scatter throughout the land to become the goodly seed which God shall bless. I believe that so long as we do this we shall prosper.⁴

3. Charles Spurgeon, quoted in Rod Earls, *Spurgeon’s Theology for Multiplying Disciples and Churches* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), xi.

4. Charles Spurgeon, quoted in Geoffrey Chang, *Spurgeon the Pastor* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2022), 241–242.

That is the way to view church planting teams—they are the good seed that we joyfully scatter to other places. I have had the privilege of standing in front of the church I serve with several church planting teams, as we send them out for the sake of Christ and the advance of the gospel. We have sent out hundreds of men and women on church plants, and I understand what Spurgeon meant when he said it is his greatest pleasure to aid in starting new churches.

It is not an easy work, and it involves the great sacrifice and cost of sending those we dearly love. But the rewards far outweigh the sacrifice. I believe that so long as our churches have a passion for church planting, and so long as we prioritize the value of church plant teams in our mission, we will prosper by the grace of God.

COOPERATIVE DENOMINATIONAL PLANTING

Nick Kidwell

Lead Pastor, Valley Creek Church (Malvern, PA)

Church Planting Priority #10

We prioritize cooperative denominational planting over deferring to a planter's individual vision.

If you would have told me even 5 years ago that I would be the Senior Pastor of a two-and-a-half-year-old church plant in the heart of Malvern, Pennsylvania, I would have thought that you were out of your mind. If I had been solely responsible for writing the script of my life, this would not have been the story that would have been written. Fortunately for me, I am not the author of my story, and when it comes to human involvement in its crafting, I am not the only contributor.

One of the things that I am so grateful for in Sovereign Grace is our commitment to partnership. I have the blessing of pastoring a young church of 110 members who are caring for former members of a 190-year-old church as we carry on a multi-generational gospel witness in our town. Church planting is not easy, but I have found it to be an absolute joy. However, if I had authored my story, I would have missed out on all of this blessing. And while God ultimately is the author of all of our stories, he uses various means to bring them to pass. Denominational care, input, and partnership has been the most significant shaping factor in bringing our church to where we are today.

There are many reasons that we need partnership when pursuing the mission of the church. When it comes to church planting, this is especially true. Proverbs 11:14 says, “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” Proverbs 15:22 is like it, “Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed.” When I consider

my planting journey, it was through the counsel of others that our plant even came to exist.

There are two types of men that pop into my mind, that could bring about fatal consequences for a plant surviving or even getting off the ground. I will call the first the Go-Getter and the second the Wait-and-See man.

The Go-Getter

The Go-Getter is convinced in their own mind of what they are to do. They have a strong vision and are determined to bring it about. However, while drive and ambition can be glorious gifts, without input from others, that ambition can quickly lead to pain and disappointment.

The Go-Getter can be an individual on their own trying to make a plant happen. They could be an individual on a team who has placed the church in the backseat as they steer the bus. They could also be a church itself, who fails to seek the counsel and wisdom of sister churches throughout the denomination.

In every case, when a planter or a local team pursues a plant driven by their own singular vision, they are cutting off valuable wisdom, and opening themselves up to unnecessary vulnerabilities. When we are not surrounded by an abundance of counselors, we are more prone to our own personal blind spots, we are leaning on our own limited skills and abilities, and we can be driven by narrow passions that can prevent a healthy well-rounded church; “In an abundance of counselors there is safety.”

But the Go-Getter is not the only reason that local and non-local denominational input is necessary. Without denominational support, a plant could fail to ever lift off the ground because of the Wait-and-See planter.

The Wait-and-See Man

The Wait-and-See man is very slow and very cautious. The Wait-and-See man might see some far off future in which they could plant, but they are hesitant to bring it about. Discernment is a wonderful thing, and time for training and growth is necessary; however, many men need the input from

others to help catch the vision for planting and to be strengthened in faith for the work that God is calling them to.

Without the faithful encouragement of others many church plants will make it no further than a fleeting thought in some one's mind. This can be true for teams as well. Many churches can be hesitant to plant, and could use a nudging by the churches around them. Whereas the Go-Getter needed some brakes applied, the Wait-and-See needs some gasoline poured on the fires of faith. Without the shepherding input of others, the Wait-and-See will easily become the never.

Personally, I was the Wait-and-See planter who happened to live under a (responsible) Go-Getter pastor. I felt called to pastoral ministry, and I loved the idea of planting, but I didn't think that I was the one to plant. However, through the abundance of counselors, both inside and outside my own local church (Covenant Fellowship), God brought about not only vision and faith, but the training and equipping necessary to bring it to fruition.

It was through the wise counsel of men from several churches in the denomination that God helped me to see that he had equipped me for the church planting role. It was through the care and counsel of several women throughout the denomination that God helped my wife, Happy, grow in faith and vision for the task ahead. Neither of us would have had vision or faith for this work if it were not for the outside input of these saints.

It was through the investment of Jeff Purswell and all those at the Pastors College that my family was readied for the work that we were going to do. It was through team collaboration and regional input that we honed in on the Malvern area being a focal point for our missional work. It was through prophetic words that God gave to dear saints in our local church that this vision was affirmed and our faith was stirred all the more.

It was through interdenominational support in the church planting cohort that I received consistent care for the years leading up to and surrounding our launch. It was through the cohort that I was held accountable to our values and virtues, and was given practical, in-the-moment help for the challenges of planting.

It was through the strong support of our sending church, that we were able to plant with a solid core team. It was through the wisdom and experience of our sending church and the pastors in our region, that we were able to walk through a merger with an aging Baptist church that led to us finding our home in the borough of Malvern, Pennsylvania. It was through the shared vision and financial support that we could get this church off the ground.

It is through the prayers and encouragements of brothers and sisters throughout our region and denomination, that we have seen the Lord bring many to faith and grow our young church and bless its efforts. It is through the resources that the denomination provides that we have been able to train and raise up leaders in our church.

Asking the question, “Why is cooperative denominational planting a priority?” to me is like asking, “Why would I use a power saw to cut wood?” Sure, I could use a hand saw, or who knows I might even be able to snap that wood in half with a good solid kick. But why would I do either of those things when I have the power tool on hand? (To my true “craftsmen” out there who love the old way, I ask you to set aside your love of tradition and please acknowledge that the chop saw is just easier.)

By using the power saw, I can cut the wood with greater precision; I can navigate my job with greater ease; I will be able to increase my fruitfulness and output; I will cut back on painful splinters and unnecessary blisters; and my finished product will be of much higher quality. Yes, the power saw comes with its own dangers. Yes, increasing input to a plant can create its own challenges. But are we willing to believe the Scriptures when they say that an abundance of counselors is a good thing?

To the Go-Getters, denominational support may feel like a hindrance to you. You have a vision and you want to get it done. Maybe the Lord has truly given you a strong vision for this plant, but do not forget the Lord has also said, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice” (Prov. 12:15). You and your future church plant will be better from the wisdom and discernment of others. It may mean the vision changes some. It may mean the vision is put on hold. But that does not mean that the mission has failed.

To the Wait-and-See folks, it is through denominational support that you are going to be challenged. If you are a Wait-and-See church, you will be stretched by the churches around you to consider planting. If you are a Wait-and-See planter, you will be stretched to take steps of faith. When all the wise counselors around me were saying, “I think the Lord is calling you to this” and I was thinking, “ehh, I don’t know,” I had to ask myself a question. “Am I the one seeing this clearly? Or is the Spirit giving insight to all of these faithful brothers and sisters around me?” I quickly realized it was the latter, and through their care the Lord helped me put my fear to death and walk in faith for the plant he had before us.

Sovereign Grace, we need each other. We need each other in our churches, and our churches need each other. We are the body of Christ, and through joint partnership we will sharpen each other, bring light to blind spots, and hold each other accountable to all that the Lord is calling us to. Far from partnership being a hindrance in planting, it truly is one of the greatest tools and blessings.

MONEY BEHIND THE MISSION

Walt Alexander

Lead Pastor, Trinity Grace Church (Athens, TN)

Church Planting Priority #11

We prioritize denominational and church plant team support over individual fundraising.

It was a Monday and I was discouraged. It was December 2018. We were eight weeks into planting Trinity Grace Church (Athens, Tennessee). We had gathered to worship for eight straight Sundays. The meetings were going well and the team was serving joyfully, but the burden felt especially great. In addition, my wife Kim and I were having difficulty communicating and were having conflicts.

So, that Monday, I did what I had done for years when having marital conflict while serving as a pastor of Cornerstone Church (Knoxville, Tennessee). I called my friend Bill Kittrell. After a few minutes of talking on the phone he said, “Can you and Kim go to dinner with Cheri and me tomorrow night?”

The very next night, Bill and his wife Cheri drove an hour to Athens to take Kim and me out to dinner. It was a nice meal, for which Bill insisted on paying! But, more significantly, it was a slow meal, during which Bill and Cheri lovingly asked us questions and offered us counsel.

I could catalog numerous moments where we have been encouraged by Bill and Cheri and our friends at Cornerstone Church. But, as I reflect on seven years of receiving encouragement, strength, and practical help from Cornerstone to Trinity Grace, I am more deeply convinced that *churches plant churches*.

That night, and many nights since, our marriage was supported by our sending church. In fact, Cornerstone has supported Trinity Grace Church in many ways: pastorally, spiritually, and financially, just to name a few.

One element of churches planting churches is sending out equipped leaders and envisioned members. Another is by sending financial resources, by partnering with church plants to alleviate some of the financial burden so that church planters can devote their energy to pastoring and leading the church plant. For this reason, one of our church planting priorities is: *We prioritize denominational and church plant team support over individual fundraising.*

Churches planting churches by sending financial resources is not just a wise way to fundraise, it is the pattern of the New Testament. The foremost example is the church of Philippi. After being forbidden by the Spirit to preach in Asia, a man in a vision called Paul to Macedonia and to Philippi to preach the gospel (Acts 16:9–10). During Paul's few months there, God began a good work. God saved Lydia, by opening her heart to what Paul said. God saved the Philippian jailor when the prison doors were opened after midnight. Miraculously released from prison, the authorities asked Paul and Silas to leave, which they did.

But even though the church of Philippi had just begun, they were eager to support Paul and Silas as they departed to plant more churches. At the end of his letter to the Philippians, Paul lists four times this young church supported him. First, they supported him “when [he] left Macedonia” (Phil. 4:15), presumably collecting an offering for him before he departed. Next, during his three-week stay in Thessalonica, they supported him by sending an offering to him there (Phil. 4:16). Later, they supported him by sending an offering to him in Corinth. As he reminds the Corinthians, “And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need” (2 Cor. 11:9). Finally, they supported him by sending an offering to him in Rome. In fact, the whole book of Philippians was written by Paul from Rome because he wanted to thank the Philippians for “reviving [their] concern for [him]” and to assure them that he had “received full payment and more” and was “well supplied” (Phil. 4:10, 18).

What a remarkable church! They had freely received so they freely gave so that others could freely receive as well. But also what a remarkable example of how churches are meant to plant churches by partnering with church plants and sending financial resources.

We as a denomination have a shared mission. Each local church has a mission in its specific locale but we also have a mission to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20). We believe that “no local church is omniscient or self-sufficient to carry out the mission which Christ has entrusted to the entire church.”¹ We will not plant many, healthy churches in different parts of the world without sharing this mission. One important way we share this mission is partnering with church plants and sending financial resources. The benefits are many. Below are a few.

Broadening the Vision

When local churches support church plants beyond their locale, they imitate the church of Philippi. Standing behind their words with meaningful, tangible resources strengthens the partnership and the bond across the miles. This can be done through regular budgeted giving or special one time giving.

The Local Church Stays Active

There is a vital role for local churches in planting churches. Unlike much church planting literature that maximizes the vision and burden of church planters and often minimizes the role of local churches, we believe church plants are strongest and healthiest when planted by churches. Prioritizing denominational and church plant support helps ensure that local churches are planting churches, through local elderships helping to select the location, mentor the planter, equip the team, and send out the church plant.

Maximized the Planter

By providing financially, local churches release the church planter(s) to more fully devote their energy to pastoring and leading the church plant. Few

1. Sovereign Grace *Book of Church Order*, 2025, 1.6.

realities are more daunting and distressing for most church planters than the need for finances. If it seems like God is calling us to plant a church in a certain location with a certain church planter, supporting that church financially is among the greatest things we can do for the success of that church planter and church plant.

Building Churches that Help Churches

When churches are planted with sufficient financial support, they most often grow into stable and thriving churches that now have increased vision for contributing financially to future church plants, from their own local church and beyond.

A church in Athens, Tennessee can help plant churches in Nairobi, Kenya. A church in Conroe, Texas can help plant churches in Galloway, New Jersey. A church in Manila, Philippines can help plant churches in North Manchester, Indiana.

It is hard to exaggerate the effect of Cornerstone Church on our young church, Trinity Grace. Their encouragement, strengthening, and practical help have truly been invaluable. But their financial support at the outset was significant as well. In addition to contributing to the national church planting grant and the regional church planting grant (each \$25,000), through a special offering and individual gifts, Cornerstone gave us well over an additional \$25,000.

As long as Trinity Grace exists, people in Athens, Tennessee will hear the story of Cornerstone Church's generosity, encouragement, and help. Just like Christians throughout the world will forever read of the generosity of the church of Philippi. May God multiply the example of Philippi and Cornerstone. May he "make all grace abound" to us so that we may "abound in every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8).

Churches plant churches, to the glory of God!

PRIORITIZING EQUIPPING AND CARE

Philip Estrada

Lead Pastor, Mission City Fellowship (San Antonio, TX)

Church Planting Priority #12

We prioritize denominational equipping and ongoing care over an expedited assessment and temporary support.

Our Shared Ambition: To Light Candles, Not Firecrackers

Firecrackers are really quite impressive, beginning with a loud bang and then a sudden and brilliant burst of light. Sadly, their brilliance only lasts for a moment and then vanishes just as quickly. In an eagerness to advance the gospel, it can be tempting to take on a “firecracker” approach to church planting, looking towards a loud launch, impressive strategies, and getting from point A to point B as quickly as possible. I love firecrackers and there’s a time and place for them, but firecrackers aren’t built for the long haul. But we want churches that last, so, when it comes to church planting, our ambition is less like lighting a firecracker and more like lighting candles.

Candles shine brightly and beautifully, giving off a pleasant aroma as they burn. Their steady light pushes back the darkness for hours on end. Likewise, our ambition isn’t merely to plant churches as rapidly as possible, but to plant healthy, long lasting churches. We want to ignite candles whose light will last for generations. We believe the way to plant healthy, long-lasting churches is by investing time, patience, and partnership in equipping well-formed and well-supported planters. This commitment is at the very heart of our twelfth church planting priority. We are ambitious to surround a planter with a community dedicated to his growth in godliness, his training in essential skills for planting and pastoring, and the shepherding of his own soul. All of these serve to prepare and, by God’s grace, preserve the planter as well as the church he is called to shepherd.

Our Equipping Ambition: The Planter's Preparation

To create a candle that burns bright and long, its wax and wick must be formed patiently. The same is true for the church planter. A man with a gift for preaching and a passion for the lost is an absolute gift to a church. However, his passion doesn't mean that he is prepared to plant and pastor a church. Before we send a planter out, we are committed to a process of knowing him in close relationship, shaping his heart through rich theological and pastoral formation, and equipping him with the practical training needed. This season of preparation is a worthwhile endeavor that utilizes the benefits of our partnership as churches every step of the way, in hopes to see a planter equipped not only to launch well but also to endure.

Knowing the Planter: The Relational Mentorship of the Regional Church Planting Committee

Our preparation process is intentionally relational and guided by a simple conviction: we want to know the man before we send the man. The goal of our Regional Church Planting Committee (RCPC) is to get to know the planting candidate and his family through a personal relationship. We go about this by assigning a mentor to the planting candidate, providing a one to two-year commitment of counsel, guidance, feedback, care, and assessment. We want to establish a strong relationship with the planter and his family, endeavoring to give them an experience of care within our partnership.¹ This involves regular prayer and conversation, listening to their trials and triumphs, and asking thoughtful questions about their life.

Shaping the Planter's Heart: The Theological and Pastoral Formation of the Sovereign Grace Pastors College

For many planting candidates, the training that began in their local church extends to the rich theological preparation offered by our Sovereign Grace Pastors College. Our Pastors College is a key part of the development process, and the Regional Church Planting Committee may recommend a planter attend if he hasn't already. This is far more than a season of academic exercise. It's

1. Phase 4, In-Depth Assessment and Development Plan, SGC Church Planting Guidelines and Best Practices

a season of deep theological, personal, and pastoral formation, for both the planter and his family to continue to grow in keeping watch over their life and doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16).

The ambition of the Pastors College is to graduate men who:

- Savor the beauty of Christ above all else
- Pursue the exaltation of God's glory in all things
- Marvel that their sins are forgiven
- Trust fully in the power of God's Word to change lives
- Rely wholly on the power of the Holy Spirit
- Delight in loving and leading their families
- Count caring for God's people a staggering privilege
- Love and pursue the lost
- Value the strength, joy, and humility that team ministry brings
- Find steadfast resolve in Christ's promise to build his church.

Over ten months, planters engage in 36 modular-style courses covering biblical, theological, and pastoral studies. Just as importantly, they and their families are immersed in the rich fellowship and discipleship of a local Sovereign Grace Church.² Throughout this season, the planter's mentor stays connected to the planter and his family, receiving regular updates on the relational, personal, missional, and spiritual life of the candidate. By doing this, it ensures we are continuing to take a patient, unified, partnership-approach to the preparation of the whole person of the planter, and not merely the sharpening of his public gifts.

2. See sgcpastorscollege.com

Equipping the Planter's Hands: The Practical Training and Assessment of the National Church Planting Group

Our denominational partnership provides specific training and resources for the planter through our National Church Planting Group (NCPG). The NCPG hosts a Church Planter National Assessment each year which is designed to serve those exploring a call to planting. The assessment covers everything from preaching, evangelism, marriage, family, and leadership. Further along in the process, planters join a one-year national church planter cohort provided by the NCPG. In the cohort, Sovereign Grace pastors provide unique training and equipping in the specifics of church planting. From a planter's initial assessment to his launch day, our family of churches is committed to thoroughly preparing every planter for the grace-empowered work ahead.

Our Long-Haul Ambition: The Planter's Preservation

Our ambition is not just to launch a planter, but to sustain a planter as he pastors the church. Because of this, our commitment to come alongside a planter doesn't end on launch day; it's ongoing through a network of intentional, relational, and hands-on care.

Help for the First Miles: The Church Planting Coach

As a planter gets closer to the church launching, he is assigned a certified church planting coach who is a vital partner to the planter. The coach is committed to walking alongside the planter through the final year of preparations before planting and, most importantly, throughout the entire first years as a new church. This is a dedicated, two-year relationship that acts as a lifeline to help the planter navigate the immense responsibilities, decisions, and pressures of planting and pastoral ministry. It ensures the planter always has accessible support and never feels alone. Through his planting coach, there is always a hand ready to help, a voice of wisdom to weigh decisions, and a friend ready to encourage and point him back to Christ. A planter isn't merely given a roadmap and then sent out—he is provided with a trusted guide who will walk the first miles with him.

A Network of Care for the Long-Haul: The Regional Family

The care of a planter extends far beyond a single coach and a two-year commitment. Every church plant resides in a region of other Sovereign Grace Churches, and the planter himself is surrounded by the care of its regional elders who actively seek to connect with him and care for him, in ongoing friendship. These relationships between elders become sweet expressions of the Lord's loving support and encouragement. Much support is provided through tangible means like short-term mission teams, preaching relief to give the planter a needed break, and ongoing personal care through close and meaningful relationships. This entire network of support, from a dedicated coach to a caring region, is a tangible means of grace God uses to protect and preserve the flame of a planter's life and ministry.

In Sovereign Grace, we see a new church as our shared mission, and the preservation of the well-being of its pastor is our shared, long-term ambition. Because we are ambitious to see planters and churches well-equipped and able to endure, we embrace a patient-partnership approach to planting—a process that requires more time and deeper relationships, but one that seeks to honor God and serve his people best.

A WORD TO THE SENDING CHURCH

Ben Kreps

Lead Pastor, Living Hope Church (Middletown, PA)

Dear Sending Church, Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! I thank God for our partnership in the gospel and that God has knitted us together in Sovereign Grace. What a joy it is to play a part together in planting and strengthening churches.

I am writing to share with you that after many years of discussion, dreaming, and prayer, God generously provided the privilege for Living Hope Church (the local church that I pastor) to plant a church in 2023. It was a remarkable experience and I pray that your church will also someday experience the joy of stepping into the glorious work of planting. While it is a joy, I also realize that the prospect of sending away faithful members and leaders and givers to establish a new congregation can be a daunting proposition. So I want to encourage you to press into God's plan to advance the gospel through planting local churches.

In short, let me urge you to *bank everything on the faithfulness of God*. As you look over your budget, your resources, and your membership, you will quickly realize that in order to plant, your church will need to make significant sacrifices. To walk through those challenges, you will need to have your best theology close at hand to strengthen your faith to persevere in the work. Let me remind you that our God is faithful, generous, and kind and he has assured us of his commitment to love and bless us through the substitutionary sacrifice of his willing Son on our behalf.

In order to bank everything on the faithfulness of God, you will do well to rest upon and trust his very great and precious promises. As you sacrificially sow into the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ, you should expect to reap, and

the more generous your sowing, the greater the expectation of a bountiful harvest (2 Cor. 9:6). You need not fear that God will fail to provide for you as you experience loss in the process for if he didn't spare his own Son, how will he not also graciously provide all that you need to glorify him in your efforts (Rom. 8:32)? Hasn't God said that he will build his church and that the gates of hell will not stand against it (Matt. 16:18)? In every moment of this process, and with each step of faith that you take, place your plans and your cares into the hands of our faithful God who has promised to care for you in each and every season (1 Pet. 5:7).

Brothers and sisters, the Savior is worthy of our deepest devotion and greatest efforts. We have been given this one life to live and we have the opportunity and privilege to invest our lives into the glorious cause of seeing the whole earth filled with the glory of God in and through the proclamation of the gospel. Make no mistake, planting includes real loss and tears as we temporarily say goodbye to friends we know and love. However, in the end, we will not regret going all out for Jesus.

Let us be counted as faithful stewards, living for the joy of the great Day when we will see our King and hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21). Until that day, may our churches be found laboring in the harvest, rejoicing in the saving grace of God for sinners like you and me, and extending that grace to a world that desperately needs Jesus.

With great admiration and appreciation,

Your friend,

Ben

A WORD TO THE PLANTER'S WIFE

Ashley Shorey

Redeemer Fellowship (Newark, DE)

Dear Church Planter's Wife, I wish so much that we could sit down with a cup of coffee (matcha for me, please) and talk it all out. The fears, the faith, the questions, the big and small ways God has already led and provided for you personally. All of it. The way your story is weaving into the bigger redemptive story of our God is beautiful and I have no doubt there are so many things I could learn from you.

Instead, this morning I read Paul's words from Thessalonians and thought of you,

We give thanks to God always for all of you . . . remembering before our God and Father your *work of faith* and *labor of love* and *steadfastness of hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, [sisters] loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thess. 1:2–4, emphasis mine).

It takes faith in God (not just your husband) to plant a church. It takes eyes that are "looking to the reward" (Heb. 11:26) to walk in this calling of a church planter's wife, releasing your husband and opening your home and heart in new and demanding ways. Your faith, stepping out of that boat and following Jesus onto the waves, leads me to praise.

I know it can be scary. Watching your kids leave those kindred-spirit friends behind, seeing no one their age on the plant team. Leaving a beloved church/home and wondering where you will meet or live. Taking a pay cut that will require even more ingenuity and faith as you seek to care for your household.

Choosing to leave family and friends that you love in order to serve those you have yet to meet with the gospel. Engaging in very real spiritual warfare in a heightened way. Being deeply aware that you are simply not enough for this task. It's all a little scary! It all requires faith that I believe God has given you.

But I also know how easy it is to step out in the sureness of God-given faith only to start to lose sight of the object of our faith in the midst of the waves. So I pray, dear sister, for you and for me, that God would grant us clear eyes to see our beautiful Savior who is worthy of every single offering we bring. I pray that you would continue to consider him faithful who has promised (Heb. 11:11). That you would keep on "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). That even when you are so very aware of your own vulnerabilities, you would be able to say, "I have set the Lord always before me, because He is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken" (Ps. 16:8).

This role also comes with labor. I know. I know the unseen details and burdens that you carry. The careful budgeting and making of meals and late night calls. The prepping of the house and bathrooms after a long day in order to make space for the meeting that will encourage God's people. The strong encouragement and deep partnership you provide for your husband when the flood of burdens and decisions feels overwhelming. The "first to arrive and last to leave, whatever is needed" nature of your service to this new body of believers. I know the love that spurs on that labor for Christ and neighbor. But I also know that without daily abiding in Christ, there is deep weariness in this work. I've experienced this weariness at times. So, I pray that the work would never push out the wonder.

I pray that you would be a disciple of Jesus Christ first and always before you identify with any other role. I pray that together, even when we are so very aware of our weaknesses, we would be able to say with the psalmist, "I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge" (Ps. 18:1-2). Your labors might seem less spiritual than your husband's at times. But, if done unto the Lord, every person welcomed, child cared for, meal prepped, box packed, or toilet scrubbed for hospitality, "will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:24).

Church planting is the best of times and the worst of times. There is so much to find joy in! I could spend hours talking about the missional, miraculous goodness I have witnessed, and I'm sure you could too! Still, hope can be fleeting if it is placed in anything that might be produced by man.

Hope in God, though, is never misplaced. I pray that his Spirit would grant you steadfastness of hope; that your heart would never stop "pondering anew what the Almighty can do." Your hope in our loving, omniscient, sovereign, missional, redeeming God is more of a service to your husband and your church than you will ever know.

In my home I have a letter board that, as much as I had planned to regularly change it, has stayed the same for most of the last seven years since we planted our own dear church. It greets me each morning with these words from Romans 15:13. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." Many a bleary-eyed morning I have read and reread these words, praying them over my own heart.

And now I pray them over you. I pray that our great God of hope would, morning by morning, meet you by the power of the Spirit, filling you with all joy and peace through faith that you might not just scrape by, but instead abound by the mighty grace of God, in deep, eternity-fueled, hope. Why? Because "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (I Thess. 5:24).

Because Christ is worthy and the harvest is plentiful,

Ashley

A WORD TO THE PLANTER'S CHILDREN

Dave Odom

Lead Pastor, Redeeming Grace Church (Franklin, TN)

Dear Church Planter's Children, when God called your parents to participate in this church plant, you were not an afterthought in his mind. God has made a promise to you that he intends to keep in your life: that things will go well for you as you humbly follow your parent's leadership into this exciting new church planting adventure. You can trust your parents. But more importantly, you can trust the Lord.

God is inviting you and your entire family to participate in this powerful and exciting mission called church planting. There are blessings that await you, but there are also challenges. As you know by now, church planting requires sacrifice, not just for your parents, but also for you.

Our family's church planting adventure was about to officially begin. The moving truck was packed with all of our stuff, and our living room was packed with all of our friends saying goodbye. It was an evening filled with laughter and tears.

At least that is what they told me.

I missed the entire party because I was upstairs holding my 7-year-old daughter, Anna Grace, who was weeping in her empty bedroom. This was the saddest moment of her young life as the realities of what church planting would cost her settled in: leaving the only home, friends, school, and church she'd ever known.

By God's grace, the tears did not last for long. For even in her sadness, Anna Grace trusted us (her parents) and embraced where God was leading our family.

In Ephesians 6, God addresses children directly as the Apostle Paul writes these words, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land’” (Eph 6:1–3).

God’s command, which was written in stone in Moses’s day, still stood in Paul’s day. And it still stands in our day. Children are to humbly trust and obey their parents. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus had not negated this command, but instead brought renewed hope to its promise.

For the children of Israel who humbly followed their parents as God was uprooting them from the only home they ever knew in Egypt, God promised that he would prosper them in their new home in Canaan for many years. Now, through the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul is telling the children in Ephesus and you, just as God blessed the children of Israel, so the Lord will bless you who humbly follow the leadership of your parents, who are seeking to follow the leadership of Jesus for your family.

In the early years of our church plant, Anna Grace would ride to church with me 3 hours before the meeting every week; helping to unload the truck, set up sound equipment, arrange children’s ministry, organize song sheets for musicians, set out all the guest cards and pens, and serve in every way possible in preparation for the meeting. Those 7-year-old tears had long since dried up, and she had joyfully embraced the meaningful role that God had for her in this church planting adventure.

God blessed Anna Grace with a new home, new church, new school, and new friends. She heard the gospel in our church plant, she was born again in our church plant, she was baptized in our church plant, and she now serves the Lord on the worship team in our church as a 21-year-old college student at Belmont University. And now, 14 years later, she wants to share this encouragement with you.

There was nothing I was more afraid of than the changes that came with leaving to plant a church, but that is exactly where God revealed himself to me. To any church planter’s kids preparing for the unknown,

be encouraged that the Lord always does far more abundantly than we could ever ask or imagine.

This can be your story, too. Or at least some version of it. I can't tell you the precise blessings God has for you on this church plant, but I can tell you this—he sees you, he cares about what you're feeling, he knows this is costly, and he has good for you in it. Your job now? Joyfully embrace this church planting adventure. Trust God's goodness, God's nearness, and most of all God's promises.

Because of God's good grace,

Dave

The Sovereign Grace Journal

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We plant and strengthen
CHURCHES
for the glory of God.

Sovereign Grace Churches is a confessional community of congregations, united in theology, fellowship, and mission. We treasure the sovereign grace of God in Christ, and we are committed to gospel-centered doctrine, preaching, and living.

Our fellowship extends beyond mere denominational affiliation, to relationships that foster mutual encouragement, care, and a glad pursuit of Christlikeness.

We are continuationist in our pursuit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts, complementarian in convictions on gender, and elder-governed in our polity, with some carefully delineated areas of shared governance. Our passion is to see churches planted and nurtured throughout the world.

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