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THE CHURCH PLANTING NEWSLETTER OF THE EC CHURCH

Perspectives on Planting

Key leaders reflect on the history of church planting and its significance in the Kingdom.

by Kolleen Long

Gary Brown

CONFERENCE MINISTER,
GREAT LAKES REGION

The more windows we open up for the lost to come into the kingdom, the better," Brown says. "Church planting is one of the best ways to do that. It's a new and fresh fellowship." New believers, he continues, are often more willing to try new things in church. They may not have as many preconceived notions about how things should be run.

During the past nine years, Brown's work as conference minister led him to work with several church plants. One was Maranatha EC Church, a Hispanic congregation in Highland, IL., which has since chartered and remains an active EC congregation. Another is New Direction in Tallmadge, Ohio, a current restart ministry.

Brown, who served for 29 years as a pastor before becoming conference minister, believes we should look at ways to demonstrate support to church planters and their families. For example, he says, an established congregation can show they care by offering to do a Spend-A-Day project for a planter in their area.

"I often thought that one of the best ways of support for a church planter,

something they definitely need even more

than money, is fellowship," Brown explains.

"Spend-A-Day would be [that] kind of thing, a way of connecting and supporting their work on a regular basis, a relational basis. It's a way many churches can help if they just reach out and touch base with them."



Bruce Wagner

CONFERENCE MINISTER,
DELAWARE REGION

Before becoming conference minister three years ago, Wagner served for 26 years as a pastor in seven different assignments. He had no personal experience with church planting, however, until he became conference minister.

Thinking back, Wagner says he did not have a specific impression about church planters before that time. What he had was the general idea that a church planter needed to be "somewhat entrepreneurial," he explains.

Today, Wagner works with a number of church planters in his region. In addition, the restart ministry of Living Hope Lighthouse in Palmerton, Pa., chartered under the leadership of Pastor Nathan Fry since Wagner became conference minister. These contacts have enhanced his view of church planters.

"I still believe they need to be entrepreneurial," Wagner says. "I also think they need an extra measure of faith. [Church planting] is a unique calling."

It's also a necessary calling if the denomination is to continue growing and effectively reaching those without Christ. "We need to do church planting to reach people we are not reaching through our established churches," Wagner confirms.

In order for church plants to succeed, other congregations should find ways

they can help the planter. "Certainly they need support from our established churches and their pastors," Wagner says. "I think that's the biggest thing."



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Dave Dennis

PASTOR, LAKESIDE EC CHURCH,
TRANSFER, PA.

During his time on the Church Planting Commission from 2003-2008, Dennis brought a unique perspective to the table: he led a church planting project in Lafayette, IN., from 1989 to 1993, an effort that did not ultimately result in an active congregation.

"Even though we didn't end up with an established church in Lafayette," Dennis explains, "there were probably dozens of people at that time that came to faith in Jesus Christ. As the project closed down, we were able to find solid existing churches in that area for the people, some of whom we are in touch with to this day. They are thriving in their faith."

"Even in a project that we would label a failure," Dennis concludes, "the kingdom is advanced." In other words, he says, church planting is a risk worth taking.

Today, Dennis and his current congregation provide financial support for the EC restart in Tallmadge, Ohio. In addition, he says, "My wife and I participate in the church planting partners on a personal end of things and have for years."

He notes we must go beyond the financial to provide a church plant and its pastor much needed support: "One of the things I remember that was so critical was knowing that there were people who were consistently and sincerely praying for us," Dennis recalls. "Church planting can be exceedingly lonely, especially if you're striving to have a church in a place where there aren't other EC churches nearby. That prayer support is a lifeline."

"If we take seriously our responsibility to pursue making disciples of Jesus Christ, and we recognize that planting new churches is one of the most effective means of doing that, then we really don't seem to have a choice about whether we plant churches or not," Dennis says. "It becomes a 'no-brainer.' It's that simple."



Kevin Leibensperger

CURRENT BISHOP

Church planting is high on the list of Leibensperger's goals for the Evangelical Congregational Church.

It's his personal conviction that church planting is essential for kingdom growth. "It's important to share our faith individually and personally," he says, "but one of our visions and goals as a movement is to reproduce churches as well."

The task of the Church Planting Commission, he says, is to keep the focus on the need to plant churches. This evangelism strategy has strong biblical roots. When studying Acts and the Epistles, for instance, one realizes that church planting was the way the gospel spread around the world.

"Take the Apostle Paul as an example," Leibensperger says. "He wasn't just making individual converts on his missionary journeys. He was also organizing congregations. You can call it a church planting journey, if you think about it."

Since becoming bishop in 2008, Leibensperger laid out a challenge to our congregations: start seven church plants within the next five years. "That's a very ambitious goal," he admits, "and I don't know if we'll reach that complete target."

It is crucial to have a good supply of potential church planters to reach that goal by 2013. He notes that multiple possibilities exist to start plants now, including communities that need a church as well as churches that are ready to reproduce. But without a

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- Kevin Leibensperger

planter to match to the opportunity, the work can stall.

"Our primary goal at this point is to cast the vision for church planting, to expose pastors of all ages and experiences—particularly our younger men coming into the system—to the opportunity of church planting," he says. "What I've really discovered is that without the planter, very little can happen. Someone who is called and gifted and then trained in the area of church planting is really critical to the process."

Leibensperger is encouraged that several people are now considering entering the process, especially after a period with few planters available to start a new work.

"Basically, the ingredients for a successful church plant are the planter, the place and a plan," he says. "And I guess you could add a fourth - passion. The passion in my mind would include a definite sense of vision for a particular church plant as well as for the community in which it needs to be planted. All those things need to be cultivated."

He believes that the shift in church planting philosophy, from denomination-driven to church-multiplication, is key. "It's very difficult from a central headquarters to identify a community that's really ripe for planting. That's much more effectively done on the ground," explains Leibensperger. "We encourage our local churches to begin thinking of the possibility of daughtering a church on their own. That's a necessary transition we need to make and embrace."

Leibensperger hopes each EC layperson will find ways to support church plants through prayer as well as giving to the biannual church-planting offering. Also important, he says, is that individuals see how a new church plant can enhance, not threaten, our ministry opportunities.

"We need to get past the perception that we already have too many or enough churches," he says. "We don't lose out by planting new churches, we're not taking anything away from existing churches. Having those additional churches as part of our fellowship of faith strengthens our ability to minister."



Praying for Church Planting

Day of Prayer for Church Planting, the first Sunday of each month



PRAYING FOR STRENGTH TO ENDURE

THE WORK OF PLANTING A CHURCH is not humanly possible. It is a God-sized task, a task to which God calls men and women. As such, our planters, their families and leadership teams are often bearers of great burdens. We can help as we pray for endurance:

- Pray for wisdom to make good life choices.
- Pray for protection from the enemy who delights in taking people out of the game.
- Pray for physical, emotional and spiritual health to face the challenges of ministry.
- Pray for God's provision of essential needs for daily life and ministry.
- Pray for sufficient fellowship with other mature believers as our planters are often surrounded by people who "need" them.
- Pray for people support and encouragement in times of challenge and discouragement.
- Pray for opportunities to take necessary breaks from ministry: days off, vacations and ministry training.

YOU CAN PERSONALIZE YOUR PRAYERS as you pray for each planter. Use the following list as you pray for endurance for our EC planters.

- Allentown, PA - *Horizon* - Bud Daneker
- Highland Park, IL - *Maranatha* - Salvador Cardoso
- Lancaster, PA - *Vida Nueva* - Ramon Mendez
- Philadelphia, PA - *Comunidad Biblica Cristiana* - Rolando Diaz
- Reading, PA - *Vida Nueva* - Ramon Mendez
- West Hazleton, PA - *Buenas Nuevas* - Edwin Mieses
- York, PA - *Iglesia Cristiana* - Carlos Kelly
- Slatington, PA - *Trinity, Restart* - Brian Kern
- Tallmadge, OH - *New Direction, Restart* - Tim Ream
- Gratz, PA - *The Dwelling Place, Restart* - Robert Stoner
- Sunbury, PA - *Bethany, Revitalization* - Keith Blan

Mike Sigman

*BISHOP EMERITUS;
PRESIDENT, EVANGELICAL
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY*

Sigman unknowingly became a church planter in 1986. "We didn't know it at the time, but I was doing a restart ministry," he remembers. "I was sent to Baltimore to close down and reopen a dwindling independent church; it had only 18 people left. Essentially, Jenny and I went to that Baltimore suburb and we knew that we needed to give this very, very small congregation a new beginning. And the only way we knew to do that was through aggressive evangelism."

The Sigmans started with Vacation Bible School, which put them in contact with a handful of local families. "From those families," he says, "we began to grow the church and through preaching and teaching of God's Word and through personal evangelism, one by one people began coming to Christ. They started sharing with their family and friends; more people came to Christ and the church grew."

The congregation, Rosedale Community, continues today, under the leadership of Pastor Chris Mann. Sigman's experiences there, as well as four years as chair of the Church Planting Committee, had an impact during his years as bishop, 1999 to 2008. "I



continued to have a passion for church planting," he confirms.

As bishop, Sigman worked closely with individuals such as Keith Miller, Les Cool and John Ragsdale to advance the role of church planting in the EC denomination. He notes

three major changes that occurred:

First was the official introduction of restart ministry to the denomination. "By the mid 90s," Sigman says, "the church planting training centers were preparing leaders to restart churches. Restart ministry had become a major form of church planting, and the EC church adopted that concept. Bishop Kevin has continued that and done an outstanding job in giving [restart ministries] more clarity."

Second was the incorporation of ethnic church planting into the larger denominational program. Sigman credits John Ragsdale as a pioneer in this area. "During a time when the regular Church Planting Commission was struggling financially," Sigman explains, "the division of missions took the initiative to begin planting Spanish-speaking congregations. At the request of Spanish-speaking pastors, we merged [their] church planting initiative into the Church Planting Commission and thereby

broadened our vision for church planting from English-speaking to multicultural church planting."

Third was a highly-focused emphasis on the multiplication of churches: churches planting churches that plant churches. In the late 1990s, Sigman says, the concept was introduced to church leadership, a significant shift from the previous, denomination-driven approach. To further the new concept, the denomination provided teaching and coaching, especially among churches with the potential to start a sister congregation. "But we saw very little multiplication taking place," Sigman says. "That's where Bishop Kevin is moving the church now."

In 2002, the denomination made another significant move. As a result of Vision 2020, church planting moved from being one of various denominational committees to one of a select few commissions. This elevated status gave church planting more authority, Sigman notes. A few years later, the denomination began publishing this newsletter, *Partners*, to help spread the idea of church planting among EC congregations. Sigman hopes this increased exposure, as well as funding received through regular church planting offerings and individual church planting partners, will help provide today's EC church plants with the support they need to succeed.

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Fred Moury

CONFERENCE MINISTER,
SUSQUEHANNA REGION

Churches, says Moury, need to see they are called by God to plant churches.

"We need an intentional passion to see churches birth other churches," he says. "We recognize that that's the only way to multiply and grow the kingdom. It has to be part of the DNA of our churches and our congregations. When multiplication becomes a passion of our churches and church leadership teams, we're going to see it happen."

Moury has seen many facets of ministry over the past 39 years of service. His exposure to church planting has varied from participating in a church planting class at the Evangelical Theological Seminary to doing preparatory work for a church plant in southeast York alongside Gordy Lewis.

He also pastored St. David's EC Church, a Weigelstown, Pa., congregation with many ties to church planting. "It wasn't a direct game plan on the part of the church, but it did happen," Moury notes. "There was excitement about church planting and there were families who left the church to become a part of [different] church plants."

In his 13 years as regional elder/conference minister, Moury has worked with a



number of planters. "Conference ministers do sit on the Church Planting Commission," Moury says. "We also work closely with church planters. We have a relationship with them, just as we do with the pastors of our chartered churches."

He notes the EC denomination has incorporated many changes over the years regarding church planting. Potential planters attend an initial assessment and, if they are a good match for the work, a boot camp. There, participants are encouraged to formulate mission values and statements. "They need to know what's necessary, what resources are out there and how to establish networks," says Moury. "If they run into difficulties, they learn who to go to and who can help them out."

Today's church planters learn what is available, from grants and funding to informational resources. They are also encouraged to set up coaching relationships. "And we now have a church planting associate, Les Cool, who is really giving some hands-on mentoring to some of our

church planters," Moury notes. "That is extremely useful."

Relationships like these are key, Moury notes, in order to combat a common enemy of many church planters: loneliness. "Whether they are in a church restart or a brand new church plant or even a church revitalization," he explains,



New Bethany Church in Allentown (above) was chartered as an independent EC church in 2006. The congregation was the first restart to reach this stage since the ministry became a major form of church planting in the Evangelical Congregational Church.

"these guys face the sense of being out there and being alone. Loneliness is a real issue. They need a sense of real connectedness with other pastors."

Adding to the sense of isolation is the fact that many church planters are working a second job and are unable to attend daytime pastoral meetings with others in their community. By offering relational support, Moury says, we can help diminish this problem. "The more touches we can have, the more hands-on types of things, the more they are going to feel connected."

Look for more **"Perspectives on Planting"** in the upcoming Winter 09 newsletter

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