

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a strategic plan for starting a Seventh Day Baptist church in Owensboro, Kentucky. This paper will be used in several different ways. First, it will fulfil an academic requirement at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for course #33860--Strategic Planing for Church Starts. Second, copies will be sent to denominational co-workers to keep them informed about my plans and progress in this endeavor. Copies will be sent to Rodney Henry, the Executive Secretary of the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference; Ronald Elston, the National Field Missionary; Kirk Looper, the Director of the Seventh Day Baptist Missionary Society; and other interested persons. Third, it will provide a stimulus for me to think through the various issues involved in starting a church, as well as provide a standard by which I can measure my progress.

The ideas presented in this paper are tentative; they are subject to change as the need arises. Biblical principles must never be compromised, but there are no “sacred cows” as far as ideas are concerned. Elmer Towns wrote, “The techniques in starting the church are not as important as the compelling desire by the church planter to win souls.”¹ I agree.

It has been one year since I first felt called to start a Seventh Day Baptist church in Owensboro. My dreams, vision, and goals for the new church have changed dramatically over the course of that year. However, I believe that kind of change represents a healthy precedent. As we prepare to inter the 21st century, society is changing at an ever-increasing pace. The Church, if it is to remain relevant into the new millenium, must be in a continual state of transformation. We can never afford to sit back and believe that we have finally “got it right.” Many of the strategies used to reach the lost in the 19th century are woefully ineffective in the postmodern world. This concept is discussed in greater detail later.

Several people have asked me why I wanted to start a new church. The answer is fairly simple, even if the task itself is not. First, I am called of God to church planting. The call to church planting is as certain as the call to any other specific ministry. The call is both inward through the Holy Spirit and outward through the Church. I have no compulsion to pastor an already existing congregation. I do not envy those who are called to pastor an existing congregation; in many ways, their task is more daunting than mine.

Second, church planting follows the biblical pattern of fulfilling the Great Commission. Daniel Sanchez observes, “The New Testament indicates that church planting was the primary method the apostles utilized to fulfill the Great Commission.”² Towns agrees:

The dynamic church-planting efforts of the Apostle Paul, Barnabas and Silas, Timothy, and others who were all early disciples, verifies the concept of local church expansion to which Jesus Christ is committed. Surely they would have done no less than he commanded and no more than He empowered.... Since the purpose of the Great Commission is finalized in the planting of New Testament churches, those church planters who establish churches are not doing something that is spectacular or overwhelmingly unique. They are simply carrying out the command of Jesus Christ that is given to all.³

Third, planting new churches is the most effective means of evangelizing the lost. “God’s primary method of evangelizing an area is by planting a New Testament church to reach the area with the gospel.”⁴ Therefore, if any church or denomination is serious about converting the lost to Jesus Christ, they should have church planting at the top of their agenda. Towns states,

Since we want to effectively reach the United States and the world, we should use the most effective evangelistic tool we can find. All forms of evangelism have their place, but the most effective method is to plant a New Testament church in every section of every city of the United States.⁵

An emphasis on church planting also represents good financial stewardship. Since we have limited financial resources available for evangelism, we should use those resources

where they will have the greatest impact. When it comes to evangelizing the lost and expanding the kingdom of God, church planting yields the biggest “bang for our buck.”

Church planting also ensures the health and longevity of churches and denominations. New churches are needed to pick up the torch from those congregations that are dying or have lost their effectiveness for evangelism. Jim Slack aptly states,

If a church or denomination is starting new churches, it is extending its life into the future. The opposite is also true. When a church or denomination stops planting new churches, it has begun to die. People, organizations, and churches achieve and maintain significant growth only as new units are being started.⁶

I close this section with an anonymous quote recorded by Gerald Colbert:

To grow something that lasts a season,
plant flowers;
To grow something that lasts a lifetime,
plant trees;
To grow something that lasts through eternity,
plant churches.⁷

Ecclesiology

Elmer Towns warns church planters of the importance of ecclesiology: “Know your Ecclesiology. No doctrine is more crucial to church planting than the doctrine of the church.”⁸

Therefore, this section examines ecclesiology, denominational affiliation, and church name. We begin with the doctrine of the church:

We believe that the church of God is all believers gathered by the Holy Spirit and joined into one body, of which Christ is the Head. We believe that the local church is a community of believers organized in covenant relationship for worship, fellowship and service, practicing and proclaiming common convictions, while growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We believe in the priesthood of all believers and practice the autonomy of the local congregation, as we seek to work in association with others for more effective witness.⁹

The above quote was taken from the statement of beliefs revised by the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference in 1987. Don Sanford notes that three “fundamental premises are recognized in this statement: (a) a covenant relationship; (b) the autonomy of the local church; and (c) an associational relationship with others.”¹⁰

The church covenant forms the foundation upon which each local Baptist church is built. Rodney Henry writes, “The local church becomes a reality when a group of baptized believers unite in common beliefs and purposes, and in a common commitment to God and each other.”¹¹ The covenant is an agreement which articulates the responsibilities of each member of the covenant community to God and to the local church. It is the agent which unites individual, autonomous Christians into a community of faith. Henry emphasizes this point:

The church is not just an assembly of individuals, but a community. The Bible does not teach the people of God to be a loosely organized collection of autonomous individual believers with no sense of community. It teaches that individual believers are not complete unless they are in right relationship with God, and with the community or congregation. A key element in the local church covenant is the recognition of this fact.¹²

Without a covenant, an orderly Baptist church does not exist. The covenant is a manifestation of the Baptist principle of a regenerate, baptized church membership. No one should be allowed to sign the covenant without first giving a credible profession of faith and being baptized by immersion. No one should be allowed to join a Baptist church without signing its covenant. Towns agrees with this concept of a regenerate, baptized membership as necessary for a legitimate church:

The first criterion for a New Testament church is an assembly of those who have been scripturally baptized according to the purpose and plan of the New Testament.... Since we were identified with Christ’s body at salvation, the symbolism should be carried out when one enters the church, the body of Christ. He is placed into a pool of water as a symbol of being placed in the grave, identified with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. All people in a New Testament church should profess to be Christians and have been identified with Christ in His work on Calvary.¹³

In the Baptist faith, each local congregation united by covenant relationship is an autonomous body. Local autonomy means that each church has responsibility over its own affairs. It has the authority to write its own constitution and by-laws, adopt its own statement of faith, and determine its own budget. It may call its own pastor and determine its own form of worship. The local Baptist church does not recognize the authority of any secular or ecclesiastical hierarchy in matters of religious faith and practice. Baptists recognize Jesus Christ as the one and only head of the church.¹⁴ “However, the autonomy of the local church is held in tension with a similarly scriptural and Baptist tradition of local churches working in association with other churches to better accomplish the work of the kingdom.”¹⁵

For hundreds of years, Baptists have prized local church autonomy, believing that the local church is the highest ecclesiastical authority under God, while seeking to work together in associational relationships to meet common goals. Sanford writes,

Associational relationships are based upon the premise that local churches are not regarded as isolated units, but are integral parts of the body of Christ. However, whenever one joins in association with others, whether it be as individuals, as churches or as denominations, he gives up some of his autonomy for the benefit of the whole. His own rights are tempered by the rights of others; his decisions are influenced by the decisions of others. Sometimes this creates a tension between the local church and the associational principle.¹⁶

Wayne Rood describes this associational principle as it exists for Seventh Day Baptist churches:

The local Seventh Day Baptist church is dependent: its autonomy is conditioned by the associational principle. Just as individuals gather in churches to be strengthened by mutual faith, mutual concern, and mutual support, so churches gather into larger bodies for mutual benefit and strength. Just as individuals gather into churches and submit their insights to the insights of all the members, so local churches gather into larger groups and benefit from mutual discussion and correction. Just as individuals throw their efforts into congregational efforts to meet social injustice, immorality and inequality so that jointly an impact can be made, so local

churches unite their efforts in those of larger groups so that impact can be made on regional, national, and world-wide problems.

Seventh Day Baptist churches are involved constantly in the search for a balance between local autonomy and the associational principle.... Seventh Day Baptists are largely agreed that in a balance between the two principles is to be found the best relationship, congregation to congregation.¹⁷

Since the authority of Baptist associations is advisory,¹⁸ it does not technically infringe upon local church autonomy. However, just as local churches may exercise discipline over their members, associations of churches are free to rebuke or exclude member churches based upon their organizational agreements. Although autonomous churches may determine their own faith and practice, if they wish to join in association with other churches, they must adhere to certain standards as set forth by the association. This balance between liberty and accountability allows both churches and associations to maintain doctrinal and moral purity, although it is often at the expense of total unity.

David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman report that there is a tendency among new churches to be independent, but they strongly caution against that tendency:

We believe that it is wise for a newly planted church to avoid the modern tendency of being independent. The biblical partnership model happens when congregations affiliate with a denomination. It happens whenever a church partners with an international cluster of congregations who flow with a common vision. Young churches should make their denominational affiliation clear right from the beginning. They should not wear themselves out by attempting to express dynamic partnership relationships with all of the different denominational clusters around the world. This would become exhausting and confusing.

We believe it is the wisest course for a new congregation to develop an explicit commitment to a particular denomination or family of churches. This denomination should be in harmony with the theological commitment and tradition of the church planter. In this way, the congregation can soon begin to focus energy in its local, national, and international commitment to partnership with other congregations in the cause of the gospel. Focused partnership is more effective than scattered and diffused partnership commitment. Denominational affiliation helps such focused partnership to happen.¹⁹

The Seventh Day Baptist Missionary Society and the Southwestern Association of Seventh Day Baptist Churches are supporting this new church plant in Owensboro. We will be considered a branch congregation of the Faith Baptist Church in Doniphan, Missouri, until we are large enough and stable enough to apply for membership in the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference. We will actively partner with other Seventh Day Baptist churches to propagate the gospel on national and international levels. I intend for the Owensboro church to be a springboard for multiplying other new Seventh Day Baptist churches that will, in turn, multiply others. I have a five year goal of helping establish a Seventh Day Baptist church planting center which will call, train, and support church planters in a strategic effort to multiply new, successful Seventh Day Baptist churches.

One last issue to consider in this section is the new church's name. Choosing a name for the new church is not as easy as it may seem. There is a growing tendency among church planters to avoid denominational designations in the new church names. It has been noted that lost people are much more likely to attend a new church that does not have an overt denominational label. Therefore, the new churches tend to use the "community" designation, such as "New Life Community Church," "Lakeshore Community Church," etc. However, not all church planters agree with this tendency. Towns has some strong feelings on this issue:

Shall the New Church Be Called Baptist? There are some young men who think it is easier to plant a new church if it does not have the name "Baptists." They want to call it "community," "Bible," or "Congregational." If these men think that people will attend if the name "Baptist" is not there, they are mistaken. The title "Community" or "Bible" or other seemingly non-offensive names have no meaning to the community. The church planter is saying his new church will not take a stand on the vital issues.

Some young men say that the name "Baptist" has "bad" connotations in the community. Dr. Falwell says, "Then determine to make the word 'Baptist' a good name."

Other young men think they will start with a neutral name and change it later. Again, Dr. Falwell notes, “They won’t change, it is easier to start right, than to try and make a church right at a later time....”

Also, since a name should separate and eliminate confusion, then the name “Baptist” will separate a church and its soul winning function from other churches in the community that have compromised their stand on the gospel.

Since the name “Baptist” has been used for biblical reasons, the church planter should use it. In the last analysis, the people will support the church if the power of God is there and if the church is biblical. They will not care what others have done under the Baptist label. The people will support a church because of what it is doing, not because of its name.²⁰

If the term “Baptist” has negative connotations, then the term “Seventh Day Baptist” may be even more problematic. The main problem with the name Seventh Day Baptist is that it is frequently confused with Seventh-day Adventist. Often, when we say “Seventh Day Baptist” the other person hears “Seventh-day Adventist.” Others assume that there is some close connection between the Baptists and Adventists, which there is not. That false assumption is just like assuming that Southern Baptists are the same as Unitarians simply because they both worship on Sunday. In fact, the Seventh Day Baptist denomination is two hundred years older than the Seventh-day Adventists. Also, the early Adventists arose out of Sunday-keeping Protestants, not the Seventh Day Baptists. William Miller was a Sunday-keeping Baptist and Ellen G. White was a Methodist. There would be no confusion if the “Seventh-day” Adventists had been more original in choosing a designation.

However, in spite of the potential problems, I tend to agree with Towns on the issue of church name. If the name “Seventh Day Baptist” produces false connotations with the Adventists, then I will determine to change that perception. In the near future, when people in the Owensboro area hear the term “Seventh Day,” they will automatically think of the Baptists rather than the Adventists.

Towns states that “a name ought to point out the most outstanding characteristic” and “should separate and eliminate confusion.”²¹ If that statement is accurate, then there is no more ideal name for our church than “Seventh Day Baptist.” The term “Baptist” identifies us as evangelical Christians who believe in salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It also says that we believe in regenerate membership; therefore, we practice believer’s baptism by immersion and congregational polity. The term “Seventh Day” identifies us as Christians who are committed to the principle of *sola scriptura* and will keep the commandments of God rather than the traditions of men (Matt 15:3-9). Therefore, “Seventh Day Baptists” are evangelical Christians who keep the commandments of God and have the faith and testimony of Jesus (Rev 12:17, 14:12).

In the final analysis, I do not believe the name “Seventh Day Baptist” will be problematic after all. My experience has been that those who confuse Seventh Day Baptists with Seventh-day Adventists are those who come from a church background. It is highly likely that the life-long unchurched have never heard of Seventh-day Adventists; therefore, they have no basis for confusion. Our target audience for the new church is these unsaved and unchurched individuals. It does not greatly concern me that the name “Seventh Day Baptist” may be confusing to life-long church Christians; I am not trying to impress them anyway.

Also, it seems that the new churches that use a generic label are most successful with the baby boomers. Church names that attract baby boomers may not necessarily appeal to other generations. I have a different target group in mind.

Ministry Focus Group

As I discuss my ministry focus group, I will move from general to specific. In general terms, I am targeting the area in and around Owensboro, Kentucky. I have considered

other locations, but my mind and heart keep returning to Owensboro. There are a couple of practical reasons for choosing Owensboro. One, I am a seminary student in Louisville.

Owensboro is just under two hours from Louisville; therefore, I can continue my education at Louisville while planting the church in Owensboro. Two, I grew up in the Owensboro area and know it well. Towns lists some advantages to returning home to plant a church:

There are several advantages in returning home to begin a church. It is an area where the church planter, (1) knows his way around, (2) has many friends, (3) already has a natural love and burden, (4) understands the community background and culture, and (5) would naturally remain a long time, giving opportunity to build a stable work without being called to another location.²²

It is vitally important for the church planter to know his community and ministry focus group very well. Again, Towns remarks,

Every community has different needs, and every group of people reflects a different composite personality. Each pastor must minister according to his spiritual gifts, hence there is a different application of Biblical principles in every new church.²³

To be more specific, I am targeting the unsaved and unchurched in the Owensboro area. Too many churches are content with transfer growth from other churches. Unfortunately, these churches are not increasing the kingdom of God; they are merely rearranging the deck of cards. I am determined that the main source of growth in this new church will be newly baptized believers. Jim Slack comments,

A church should demonstrate that impacting the lost with the gospel is its priority. Just as the church planter's focus on lostness was used of God to bring the church into existence, a newly organized and maturing church should zealously maintain its focus on lostness. If a church turns inward, as most churches ultimately do, growth will cease and so will any hopes of maturity.²⁴

Brian McLaren quotes William Easum on the importance of churches beginning with and maintaining an outward focus:

...life in Christ comes to us on its way to someone else, congregations should focus outward instead of inward, congregations exist for those who are not part of them, life

is meant to be given away not kept, God does not honor congregations that seek merely to raise money and survive.²⁵

It should be fairly obvious that churches should focus on the lost, but it may not be as obvious that churches should focus on a particular group of lost people. Many churches have the lofty goal of reaching all the lost people in their area. However, church growth experts have determined that churches are most successful when they target the group that they are most equipped to reach:

[Donald A.] McGavran declared that studies of growing and healthy churches worldwide revealed that a focus on a people group, a population segment or a homogeneous unit, had been far more productive than trying to minister to everybody who lives within geographical proximity of the church.²⁶

These experts have pointed out that it is impossible for any one church to appeal to all the wondrous variety of people God has created. It is unrealistic for us to expect to reach all people in an area with one particular church. Daniel Sanchez comments,

It is impossible for any one church to reach and retain all the people groups in its city. Often different groups hold different preferences with regard to the music, worship, and leadership styles... Obviously, there exists a need for different churches to meet the different tastes and styles of the people. This is not to say that a church should reject people who do not have the same tastes, but it does mean that people have the tendency to attend the type of worship service in which they feel comfortable.²⁷

Rick Warren has much to say about focusing on a particular kind of people group. He gives both practical and biblical reasons for identifying a ministry focus group:

Too many congregations are naïve in their thinking about evangelism. If you ask the members, “Who is your church trying to reach for Christ?” the response will likely be, “Everybody! We’re trying to reach the entire world for Jesus Christ.” Of course this is the goal of the Great Commission, and it should be the prayer of every church, but in practice there is not a local church anywhere that can reach everybody.

Because human beings are so different, no single church can possibly reach everyone. That’s why we need all kinds of churches. Together we can accomplish what no single congregation, strategy, or style can accomplish by itself.²⁸

Imagine what would happen to a commercial radio station if it tried to appeal to everyone’s taste in music. A station that alternated its format between classical,

heavy metal, country, rap, reggae, and southern gospel would end up alienating everyone. No one would listen to that station!²⁹

What is the likelihood of a church full of retirees reaching teenagers? Not likely. How about the likelihood of a church made up of military personnel reaching peace activists? Highly unlikely! Or what's the likelihood of a church composed primarily of blue-collar factory workers reaching white-collar executives? It's possible, but don't bet on it.³⁰

Gerald Colbert teaches his church planting classes that one of the most important factors in reaching a ministry focus group is to understand both their real and felt needs.³¹ Once these needs are understood, the new church can design a strategy to meet them. Warren illustrates,

Just because your church is closest to someone doesn't mean you can automatically reach them. Your church may not *fit* them. On the other hand there are people who will drive past fifteen other churches to attend yours if it meets their needs....

Young adults, for example, have different hopes and fears than retirees. A Gospel presentation that emphasizes the assurance of heaven as the benefit of salvation will probably be ineffective in ministering to a young adult who thinks he has his entire life in front of him. He's not interested in the afterlife. He's consumed with finding out if there is any meaning or purpose to *this* life....

A more effective way to witness to a young adult would be to show how we were made to have fellowship with God *now* through Christ....

Married couples have different interests than single adults. The poor face different problems than the middle class. The wealthy have their own set of worries. College graduates tend to see the world differently than high school graduates. It is important to know the perspective of those you are seeking to win to Christ.³²

Warren also reminds us that targeting is biblical.³³ The book of Acts records numerous occasions when the disciples reached different groups according to their needs. When witnessing to Jews or gentile proselytes, they preached Christ from the Hebrew scriptures (Acts 2; 3:18-26; 8:26-35; 13:14-44; 17:1-4, 10-11). However, when witnessing to pagans, they took a different approach. They began with biblical creationism and then proceeded to preach the gospel to them (Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-30).

Warren points out that defining a ministry focus group is especially important for smaller churches:

The practice of evangelistic targeting is especially important to small churches. In a small church with limited resources, it is vital that you make the most of what you've got. Focus your resources on reaching people your church can best communicate with.

Small churches must also make choices on tough issues. For example, since it's impossible to appeal to everyone's taste in music style in a single service, and small churches can't offer multiple services, they must choose a target. Changing styles on alternate weeks will produce the same effect as a radio station with a mixed format. No one will be happy.... Small churches become more effective when they specialize in what they do best.³⁴

Given the fact that targeting is both biblical and practical, I believe God is calling me to plant a church designed to reach teenagers and young adults. There are several reasons why I am particularly gifted to reach this age group. First, I am a twenty-seven year old, single young adult, so I understand many of the needs of young adults, and I am not that far removed from teenagers.

Second, I am now the Spiritual Director for the Owensboro Chrysalis organization. The Chrysalis is an ecumenical organization that encourages teens fifteen to nineteen years old to become better witnesses for Christ in their homes, schools, and churches. The Chrysalis is probably the biggest, most effective Christian outreach to teens in the Owensboro area. As Spiritual Director, I am in frequent contact with local teens from a wide variety of backgrounds. This close working relationship has helped me to understand the culture and needs of teenagers and how to minister effectively to them. I will be Spiritual Director for at least the next three years, and I intend for the new church plant to be a strong supporter of The Chrysalis. Being a Chrysalis Spiritual Director and a church planter for teens is an excellent combination for ministry.

Third, I love teenagers, and they love me. This vital aspect is the most important for ministry to teens and is discussed later.

Owensboro is Kentucky's third largest city and seems to be a prime candidate for a new church plant targeting teenagers and young adults. The population within the city's two largest zip codes is approximately 77,000, but that number tells only part of the story.

Owensboro is the focal point for shopping, entertainment, business, and healthcare for Daviess, Hancock, Ohio, McLean, and Webster counties in Kentucky, as well as Spencer County, Indiana. Owensboro is currently experiencing explosive growth in new housing construction. There are several new subdivisions being built on the eastern and western ends of the city. New business construction is also booming along Frederica Street toward the southern end of the city.

Age distribution statistics for Owensboro are also interesting. I have recently examined demographic reports provided by the Research Unit of the North American Mission Board. These reports are based on 1997 data from Owensboro's two largest zip codes. In one zip code, teens fifteen to nineteen years old are the second largest population group. In the other zip code, they are a very close third. Kids ten to fourteen years old are only a fraction smaller. These teenagers represent a significant, untapped mission field for the gospel.

I recently met Dan Garland, the director of evangelism for the Kentucky Baptist Convention. We spoke briefly about the potential for reaching teenagers for Christ. He is not aware of any churches that are specifically designed for this age group. I know of a few churches in Owensboro that have strong youth groups, but their outreach to youth is one program among many. I do not know of any churches that are targeting teenagers as a first priority in evangelism and discipleship. It is possible that I am attempting something that has never been tried before. There may have been churches designed for teens from time to time, but I doubt

that there has ever been a Seventh Day Baptist church designed from the beginning for teenagers and young adults. To borrow a phrase from my favorite TV show, we are “boldly going where no one [or church] has gone before.”

Researchers have noted that different generations have different identifiable characteristics. It has been popular to name these generations according to birth date, then define them according to their major distinguishing features. “The Builders” are those born in 1910-1946; the “Baby Boomers” were born in 1946-1964 and are the largest generation in American history; “Generation X,” also known as the “Busters,” were born in 1965-1976.³⁵

My primary ministry focus group is the “Bridgers.” Thom Rainer, Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has written the first definitive Christian book describing this generation. In *The Bridger Generation*, so-named because they will bridge the new millenium, Rainer describes their characteristics and challenges, and presents a passionate plea to reach the bridgers for Christ. The bridgers were born between 1977 and 1994 and are the second largest population group in American history.³⁶ It would be a catastrophic mistake for the Church to fail to reach this generation with the gospel.

Rainer notes, “In the twenty-first century the bridgers will shape the attitudes, values, economics, and lifestyles of America. They will be the dominant adult population group for at least the first half of the next century.”³⁷ That fact becomes ominous when we realize that the Church is not reaching this important generation. “Unlike the majority of previous generations, this seventy-two-million strong population group is not growing up in homes that even claim to be Christian. Parental influence to point these young people to the Savior is negligible at best.”³⁸ We are only now beginning to realize the consequences. Rainer observes,

Teenage bridgers are redefining the family. As a consequence, they are accepting as normative those behaviors their predecessors have largely discouraged. Divorce, births to single parents, and extramarital affairs could one day be accepted as traditional marriages and values.³⁹

I once heard someone say, “What one generation tolerates, the next generation accepts, and the next generation embraces.” Sadly, the bridgers may be proof-positive that this phrase is true.

Remarkably, the bridgers are now at the age when they are most receptive to the gospel. Rainer has noted this trend:

out of the thousands [of adult Christians] surveyed, four out of five said they became a Christian during childhood or adolescence. The research led me to realize that the church cannot afford to wait for kids to reach adulthood before we evangelize them. As other Christian researchers have noted, the statistical probability of someone accepting Christ after age nineteen decreases dramatically.⁴⁰

the most receptive time of a person’s life to be reached for the gospel is when he or she is a teenager. Nearly 90 percent of all persons who accept Christ become Christians before they turn twenty years old.⁴¹

Rainer quotes George Barna on these findings: “by the time students enter high school, the odds of accepting Christ as Savior are radically reduced; by the time they graduate from high school, the odds are stacked against such a choice to a staggering degree.”⁴²

Although I disagree with much of what Brian McLaren has written in *Reinventing Your Church*, I agree with him that the church’s allocation of evangelistic resources should be focused on bridgers. McLaren writes,

Since studies show that most practicing Christian adults made serious faith commitments between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, perhaps we need to put, say, 80 percent of our missionary emphasis on kids under the age of eighteen.... perhaps we need to try to create exciting youth churches... And since most adults love kids, maybe the best way to get through to adults is by doing fantastic things for their kids-like showing them the love of God and exposing them to life’s greatest experiences, including good, clean fun.... If you take the Christian mission seriously, think young and welcome the children to come to Christ.⁴³

It is obvious that the Church needs to reach young people for Christ. The question then becomes, how do we reach them? The most important answer is love. Warren comments, “The most overlooked key to growing a church: We must love unbelievers the way Jesus did... Love draws people in like a magnet. A lack of love drives people away.”⁴⁴ He states that there “is no method, program, or technology that can make up for a lack of love for unbelievers.”⁴⁵ It is the atmosphere of love that attracts many newcomers to his church:

Our members’ love is focused toward newcomers, not just toward each other. I know of many churches where the members love *each other*, and they have great fellowship, but the churches are still dying because all the love is focused inwardly. The fellowship in these churches has become so tight that newcomers are unable to break into it. They don’t attract unbelievers because they don’t love unbelievers.⁴⁶

I suspect that the main reason most churches do not love unbelievers is because they are afraid of them. Most people like things stable, cozy, and comfortable. They are afraid of change. They are afraid of the degree of change that a flood of unbelievers and new converts would bring to their church. However, real love is the perfect remedy for that fear. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18, NASB throughout).

Love is the greatest need and greatest ministry opportunity for the bridgers. Rainer notes, “Perhaps the greatest perceived need of the bridgers is a place to be accepted and loved.”⁴⁷ This need is especially true due to the home situation of many bridgers:

Theirs is the generation of broken families, fatherless homes, and abusive environments. Millions of bridgers are starved for love.

I am convinced that the single key factor in these churches’ success at reaching this generation is an intentional decision to love these kids unconditionally.... this unconditional love attracts the bridgers like a magnet.⁴⁸

Many bridgers are growing up in single parent homes. Not only are they missing the attention of one parent, but frequently the other parent has to spend most of the time on the job. Even in two parent homes, both parents usually have to work outside the home leaving the

bridgers without adult attention and guidance. This tendency may explain why bridgers respond very well to one-on-one attention. Giving these kids individual attention is one of the best ways for us to love and minister to them. Rainer writes,

bridgers need significant one-on-one time. This generation has missed out on appreciable contact time with adults. Churches that reach this generation will need to have a large number of adults dedicated to spending significant amounts of time with... these starved-for-love-and-attention young people.... “Big brother” relationships, often modeled with success in the secular world, could very well be a dynamic ministry for churches that reach the bridgers. The impact of one godly man upon a bridger will have both lifelong and eternal consequences.⁴⁹

It is important to note that love and acceptance applies to the person, not necessarily the lifestyle:

In order to love unbelievers unconditionally, people must understand the difference between acceptance and approval. As Christians, we are all called to accept and love unbelievers without approving of sinful lifestyles. Jesus did this when he showed acceptance and love to the Samaritan woman at the well without approving of her licentious lifestyle. He also ate with Zacchaeus without approving of his dishonesty. And he publicly defended the dignity of the woman caught in adultery without minimizing her sin.⁵⁰

Sometimes Christians expect visitors to their churches to arrive with Christian values already in place, but that expectation is both unrealistic and devastating to the church’s outreach. Warren reminds us that “We cannot expect unbelievers to act like believers until they are believers.”⁵¹ Paul also reminds us of this principle (1 Cor 5:9-12). In our new church, we will love and accept them for who they are and challenge them to grow into the persons God created them to be.

I must also emphasize that our love for these young people must be genuine. They can spot a phony and are turned-off by insincere people. However, they can identify and will respond to real, unconditional love. That love provides a firm foundation for witnessing to them. A teenager is much more likely to accept correction and guidance when it is given out of love. Rainer gets the last word in this section: “The bridger generation is desperate for clear

boundaries. Many of them are not receiving this discipline at home, but they respond well to churches that offer guidelines from a foundation of love.”⁵²

Vision, Mission, and Values

Vision is indispensable for the person who would start a church. All church plants must begin with a vision of the possibilities. Shenk and Stutzman explain the importance of the church planter’s vision: “Church planting is born from a vision, given by the Holy Spirit, of God’s love for lost people. That vision leads us on to new frontiers of ministry and evangelism.”⁵³ In order for that vision to become reality, it must be contagious:

Growing churches who are reaching out in faithful mission and ministry are characterized by leaders who have a vision from God.... Many times the vision is contagious and soon attracts others who believe the vision is from God. In most cases, the scope of the vision is too large for the leader to accomplish alone. In fact, God gives vision to demonstrate that he alone can bring the vision to pass.⁵⁴

Elmer Towns states, “The man who would start a church must, by faith, see the church completed in his heart before a soul is won or a brick is laid on the foundation.”⁵⁵ This vision motivates the planter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to keep going when the inevitable trials and difficulties arise. He knows that nothing is impossible with God (Matt 19:26):

The man who desires to build a church is usually motivated by the “impossible dream,” and he must accomplish the “unperformable task.” A church is never a human invention, nor is it a man’s accomplishment. An ecclesia is a people “called out” from sin, beckoned to gather themselves in God’s assembly. They are “called out” from normal pursuits to carry out God’s commission. The church is established by God, is empowered by God, and, ultimately, has God as its objective. Those who would start a true church must be motivated by God, Who is its founder.⁵⁶

My vision is to plant a Seventh Day Baptist church that will impact the Owensboro area for Christ by effectively evangelizing and discipling teenagers and young adults. Their enthusiasm will draw in their friends, parents, and other adults who will want to participate in our mission. We will have a contemporary worship service focused on God with solid biblical

preaching and teaching. Our discipleship classes will challenge them to grow in grace and knowledge, and our evangelism programs will give them opportunities to share the love of Jesus with a lost and dying world. We will call, train, and support future leaders drawn from our own converts who will fulfill leadership positions in our congregation and in the churches we are planting.

I have developed a mission statement to guide this vision. It contains a double acronym. The second part of the acronym includes all five purposes of the church:

Our mission is to **I**mpact **T**he **W**orld **F**or **C**hrist: **I**nvoke, **T**each, **W**orship, **F**ellowship, and **C**are.

I have chosen five core values to characterize our church:

- Love
- Learn
- Challenge
- Grow
- Do

I have also developed a slogan for our church. I would like to have some shirts printed with the slogan underneath the Seventh Day Baptist logo. The slogan is designed to accentuate our differences with the world and other churches. Granted, this will be a different kind of church. Genuine Christianity is a different lifestyle from the world around us. This church will be designed for teenagers and young adults, which is different from most churches. Sabbath observance is also different from other evangelical churches in the area. I believe these differences can be turned into strengths. After all, teenagers love to be different. Our slogan is: “We’re not afraid to Go Against the Flow!”

Core Group Development

The subject of core group development is inseparable from the ministry focus group. The core group, also called the launch team, is that group of people gathered by the church

planter to help start the new church. Shenk and Stutzman observe that the team approach is the biblical model for church planting: “it is also true that when the believers reached out through church planting, the Acts record suggests that the ministry was always carried forward by a team. They apparently never commissioned a missionary to go alone into a new region to plant churches.”⁵⁷ Gerald Colbert describes the core group: “A core group is the new church in seed form.... The primary factor for gathering the core group is the vision for the new church. A second factor is the make-up of the ministry focus group for the new church.”⁵⁸

It is vitally important that the core group reflects the ministry focus group of the new church. Colbert notes, “A prominent church growth writer has said, ‘Your first twenty members will determine who your next hundred members will be.’”⁵⁹ Rick Warren also observes this tendency:

The people your church is most likely to reach are those who match the existing culture of your church.... Whatever type of people you already have in your congregation is the same type you are likely to attract more of. It is unlikely that your church will attract and *keep* many people who are very different from those who already attend.... You will attract who you *are*, not who you want.⁶⁰

Therefore, if my ministry focus group is teenagers and young adults, then my core group should be made up primarily of teenagers and young adults. I am actively forming a core group to match that profile.

It is also important that the leaders in the core group are converted Christians. Rightly or wrongly, anyone who stands in front of the congregation will be considered a role model for the new church. Elmer Towns warns, “Have Biblical standards for workers. One temptation in starting a church is to use anyone until someone better comes along. But this is building your foundation on the sand rather than a rock.”⁶¹ Therefore, Colbert says, “It is wise to

enlist these people using the vision and core values for the new church as key screening agents rather than giving an open invitation for people to become part of the church-planting group.”⁶²

Since the “new congregation will be formed in the image of the church planter or church planting team,”⁶³ the role of the team is to model the kind of church it wishes to build. Shenk and Stutzman comment, “the team in ministry is already a church, even though it is a small one. The team working together in repentance and harmony reveals to people the nature of the church which it desires to create.”⁶⁴

Church Systems Design

The church systems design is a basic diagram of the various ministries and programs of the church. Gerald Colbert says, “It is a snapshot of the church at a given point in time when all elements of the vision are in place. It illustrates relationships of systems and ministries. It shows the flow of people into and through the church. It informs about the results of involvement in various systems and ministries.”⁶⁵

The church systems design should incorporate all five of the purposes of the church—evangelism, discipleship, worship, fellowship, and ministry. My systems design has elements that are very similar to a number of other churches. Some elements are my own design. The combination of these elements into an organized system is unique to each church planting project. Elmer Towns writes, “Men use a different formula in building each church. Yet, many patterns are similar because certain timeless principles transcend space and culture. These grow out of the nature of the church and the principles in the New Testament.”⁶⁶

While biblical principles and purposes do not change, the strategies we use in implementing those principles are highly fluid; they may change according to time, culture, and ministry focus group. In other words, techniques that bring biblical principles to rural farm

communities may not work as well in an urban environment, and vice-versa. Therefore, our church systems design should not be set in stone. The systems design may necessarily change as the church grows larger. Many churches assume that, because a particular methodology worked for them in the past, it will continue to work in the future. In fact, the cause of yesterday's successes may be the cause of tomorrow's failures. Brian McLaren comments:

We have argued over methods, as if old methods are the problem and the sparkling new method will solve the problem. Unfortunately, if a method solves the problem, it will itself become the problem sooner or later when an even newer method will be needed to replace it. This is nothing more than the parable of wineskins being replayed again and again.⁶⁷

That fact is at least one reason why we should be cautious about trying to imitate what other churches have done. “Wait until a model is popular enough to imitate and you’re almost sure to be too late.”⁶⁸

The first element I will consider here is worship. Genuine worship is our heartfelt response to God for who he is and what he has done. There are three main parts of a regular worship service: prayer, praise, and preaching. Worship should be contemporary and in the modern language of the people we are trying to reach. Worship can be fun, exciting, contemplative, and moving, but it must always be focused on God. Our worship services should reflect the fact that it is good to be a Christian. “Churches that claim to have a faith that saves and a God who is truly good ought to be happy places.”⁶⁹ Some of the best Christian music ever written is the praise songs and choruses written in the last fifteen years. Unchurched kids are responding very well to this type of worship service:

Healthy church growth and relevant, inspiring worship travel hand in hand. This generation, probably more than any other, places a premium on worship styles.... Gospel content and communication must be primary, but the good news must be presented to the lost and the saved in formats that they will appreciate, listen to, and understand.⁷⁰

We must be cautious not to do a worship service for superficial entertainment value. Again, teenagers can spot a phony. Thom Rainer quotes George Barna:

But let's get some perspective. Attracting kids to church does require relevance in style, but it is not the performance itself that will cause them to embrace Christ and His Church. If kids want a show, better venues and more professional performers are available. If they want hot music, MTV and FM radio serve it up 24 hours a day. Having a separate stylized Sunday morning experience is very thoughtful and probably the most appropriate way of appealing to kids, but no matter how great a church service may be, sleeping in would be preferable. *Kids respond to people who care about them.*⁷¹

I have no musical ability, so my main focus is preaching. My sermons tend to be loaded with scriptures and teaching oriented. I believe this preaching style will be an asset to reaching bridgers. Rainer makes some interesting comments concerning bridgers:

While we must be aware of their culture and make some adjustments accordingly, we must also challenge them with the claims of Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ.... In a fascinating book about the decline of mainline churches, three authors conclude that the failure to challenge young people biblically was a major factor behind the denominations' woes.... They are hungry to learn, to be challenged, to be shown that biblical Christianity is different from anything else they may be seeking.⁷²

Today's young people do not appreciate superficial preaching or watered down Christianity. They are sick of the superficiality that surrounds them daily; they are looking for something with substance. One bridger told Rainer,

Dr. Rainer, when you write this book, will you ask pastors and church members why they water down that message that I needed to hear? Will you tell them that I almost gave up on the church until I came to one that preached and taught with love and truth? Please tell them that my generation is dying to hear the message of Christ without compromise. And tell those in the church too.⁷³

One of the key elements in this new church will be a healthy teaching ministry with challenging discipleship programs. Most high school level curricula used in churches are woefully inept at teaching biblical doctrine. Many churches seem to think that teenagers cannot accept biblical challenges, but that has not been my experience. Teenagers tend to live up, or

live down, to the expectations placed upon them. Teenagers appreciate a challenge. Rainer notes,

Bridgers are aware of the easy believism and no-sacrifice-demanded discipleship implied in many churches. Ironically, these low-commitment youth respond better to a high-commitment church.⁷⁴

Now is *not* the time to dumb down our teachings and expectations. More than ever, our Sunday Schools need to increase expectations and challenge the bridgers with the cost of discipleship clearly taught in Scripture.⁷⁵

Bridgers typically respond to challenges. Churches that can be culturally relevant and biblically demanding will be the churches that reach this generation.⁷⁶

Effective discipleship is inseparable from evangelism: “It is a sobering thought to consider that one of the clearest marks of a disciple is the ability to make disciples.”⁷⁷ This new church will be characterized by an on-going priority on evangelism. Roland Allen observes that it is a wasted effort to plant a church that is not evangelistic: “There is no particular virtue in attacking a centre or establishing a church in an important place unless the church established in the important place is a church possessed of sufficient life to be a source of light to the whole country round.”⁷⁸

One of our chief evangelistic efforts will be the formation of S.W.A.T. Teams (Strategic Workers And Temporary Teams). This acronym was borrowed from Bob Logan, but I am using it somewhat differently from him. First, I think teens will love the concept of being a part of a S.W.A.T. Team. Second, I believe these teams will be highly effective. S.W.A.T. Teams will be organized, trained, and carry out evangelistic programs. A new S.W.A.T. Team will be organized for each event, so everyone should have a chance to exercise their gifts in a particular area. S.W.A.T. Team events may include youth rallies, Christian concerts, True Love Waits rallies, creation seminars, door-to-door faith sharing, and numerous other projects.

Teenagers and young adults will be integral to every aspect of the church's ministry. The Christian mission is the main cause that is important enough to energize them for ministry. Rainer reminds us, "We must not assume that the skeptical attitude of the bridgers is a terminal scenario. To the contrary, an anti-commitment attitude may be a thin veil covering a strong desire to find that person or institution worthy of their commitment."⁷⁹ The expansion of the kingdom of God is well-worth their highest level of commitment. Rainer has observed this trend among many bridgers:

Bridgers indeed respond better when asked to *do* ministry.⁸⁰

They are hungry for a place that demonstrates unconditional love along with clear expectations. They are responding well to churches that demonstrate a belief that these kids are capable of meeting vigorous demands. They are just waiting for someone to tell them that they are smart enough to achieve something great. They will thrive in a church that teaches them that they can do anything in Christ's power. But they will avoid or leave quickly those churches that have no expectations for them.⁸¹

Finally, a notable characteristic of bridger-reaching churches will be the involvement of their youth in ministry. These churches will not be satisfied to fill pews with bridgers; they will make every effort to involve each young person in ministry.... Bridgers are not waiting to make a difference one day in the future. They are ready to accept the challenge today.⁸²

Mile Posts

Gerald Colbert describes mile posts as follows:

Mile posts are the results of actions. They identify completed components of your church-planting projects.... Mile posts measure progress in your church-planting project. When mile posts are arranged in logical sequence, and relationships between the mile posts are established, a strategic plan has been outlined.... Critical mile posts must be achieved or the objective will not be attained and the church most likely will not be planted.⁸³

I have listed a number of mile posts on the following page. The list is by no means complete, but it is a good starting point. Some of these mile posts have already been accomplished.

- Prayer team formed
- 1st prayer update letter mailed
- Core group formed
- Music/worship team formed
- Treasurer identified
- Secretary identified
- Name finalized
- Logo created
- P.O. box obtained
- E.I.N. # obtained
- Facility arranged
- Launch date set
- Insurance obtained
- Vision statement written
- Core values identified
- Mission statement written
- Confession of faith written
- Covenant written
- Information brochure printed
- Business cards printed
- Equipment obtained
- Set up/take down crew identified
- Children's worker identified
- Advertisement completed
- 1st service launched
- 1st teacher recruited
- 1st ministry apprentice called
- 1st discipleship class completed
- 1st baptism
- 1st new converts on Chrysalis team
- Faith sharing class completed
- 1st S.W.A.T. Team event completed
- 25 member mark reached
- Church constituted
- Church incorporated
- Application made to General Conference

Conclusion

The thought of planting a church both excites and terrifies me at the same time. It is a risky venture, but usually life's greatest rewards come after we have taken the biggest risks. I am well aware of my inability to plant this or any other church. My weaknesses are a constant reminder of that fact. I would not even begin to move forward in this effort if I was not firmly convinced that this vision is from God. One of my favorite verses is 2 Cor 12:9: "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." I hope this church plant becomes a catalyst for planting many more evangelistic Seventh Day Baptist churches. Seventh Day Baptists have been around for three hundred and fifty years, and our best years are yet to come.