

🌿 INTRODUCTION 🌿

I love the local church. Counter-cultural communities born of, shaped by, and built around, the gospel of Christ. Points of light, hope, and love in a dark, divided, and increasingly cynical world. We need churches. We need more churches.

For the last twenty-five years, church plants have largely shaped my experience of church: first as part of a core team launching with the mess of seventeen people squashed into a front room, fold-out chairs, green carpet, printed orders of service; then seven years later as a planter in the same city, as the front room became a school dining hall, which then became a sports hall. When no one else could be squashed into that space we planted again, thirty-six adults and five kids meeting in a different part of town. Years later, as the senior pastor of another church, we've seen the need of neighbourhoods where there's little gospel witness and responded by sending our own people. Our church has planted two other churches directly, and has also been involved in a number of other collaborative projects. Church planting has shaped my experience of church and, in many ways, it has shaped me too.

We need churches. We need more churches. In this book, I am trying to pick apart how and why it is that

plants go wrong (or, at least, don't go as right as we'd hoped). Let me state two things at the outset: (1) I'm certainly not writing as an expert, but rather one who's had the privilege of speaking to lots of planters and (2) please don't read it as a book that 'points fingers'. It's not meant to be read with your inner voice of disappointment and frustration, but rather as a friend from within the planting world, wanting to help strengthen our efforts, wanting to raise some questions that might help avoid some of the pain along the way.

Chilli plants

Our house is tall, narrow, and on the outskirts of Oxford, with three floors but built onto a slight hill and so it ends up as six levels. The top level (where our youngest sleeps) is an early-afternoon suntrap, and for this reason it often doubles as a make-shift greenhouse with windowsills bustling with plants. At the moment we're propagating a selection of chilli seedlings but even though they all came from the same seed packets—and were planted at the same time—it's obvious which are thriving, growing, and flourishing. I'm not sure why. Perhaps the seeds themselves were from different parent plants? Perhaps greenfly and other pests have had a part to play? Perhaps the micro-climate on the windowsills or even the competition for sunlight between some of the plants has been a factor, but it's clear that some are not going to produce chillis and will end up on the compost heap at the end of the garden.

This book is an effort to work out some of the reasons why church plants—that may on paper look hopeful—don't thrive. It's based upon an attempt to gather stories from struggling planters from around the world (both those whose plants have closed but also those who are 'limping along') and then to analyse common threads of why that has happened.

Numbers and research

The number of struggling church plants (and planters) out there may surprise you. One often-quoted piece of research by the North American Mission Board found that after one year 99 per cent of plants were still active, by two years 92 per cent, by the third year 81 per cent, but by the fourth year only 68 per cent. Almost a third failed to make it¹. To be honest, those numbers sound high from our context in Western Europe. Many plants will struggle and limp along. But that kind of huge drop-off rate isn't something I've seen here or found in the research project that sits behind this study.

The problem with evangelism?

A critique that is often levelled at the church more generally is that it is only really interested in making new converts. The easy task (in one sense) is to prayerfully, expectantly, share the message of Christ and see fruit by way of new converts. The trouble is, however, that the risen, ascended, and authoritative Lord Jesus didn't call us to only make converts, but rather to ...

... make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:19-20).

To simply get people 'into the kingdom' and not help them to mature and grow and flourish, is to start the task of discipleship and then walk off, leaving these 'baby' Christians to fend for themselves unattended. It was never meant to be this way. As any parent will tell you, the job of raising and maturing a child is a huge privilege, an awesome responsibility, and a lot of hard work.

1. Quoted in Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches* (Jossey-Bass, 2014) p. 104

I wonder if our inability to properly disciple people has a parallel in church planting? We expend vast amounts of energy in launching and getting the thing going: dreaming, vision-setting, recruiting, fundraising, making websites, printing and marketing, and then don't give the support and care needed to help the church – the disciples – actually thrive. Remember the study? Nearly one third don't last four years.

Many have commented on the difficulties of church leadership in the West, and the ease with which we can be shaped in our ministries and expectations by the way everyone else around us does things. Like the battle with the supermarket shopping trolley that keeps veering to one side, it's a constant challenge to minister in a way that reflects the life and values of Jesus when the values around us are pulling us in the opposite direction. Too easily we can value what the world values. Zack Eswine's *Imperfect Pastor* has been particularly helpful for me in battling the drift in ministry mindset.

As you enter ministry, you will be tempted to orient your desires toward doing large things in famous ways as fast and as efficiently as you can. But take note. A crossroads waits for you. Jesus is that crossroads. Because almost anything in life that truly matters will require you to do small, mostly overlooked things, over a long period of time with Him. The pastoral vocation, because it focuses on helping people cultivate what truly matters, is therefore no exception.²

The problem is that church planting, in the words of Eswine, is very often about 'large, famous and fast.' When the clock is ticking, and funding is only for a limited season, the pressure for 'success' can be debilitating. It is often felt

2. Zack Eswine, *The Imperfect Pastor: Discovering Joy in Our Limitations through a Daily Apprenticeship with Jesus* (Crossway, 2015) p. 26.

that the pastor needs to grow the church, to raise the funds needed to be self-sufficient.

Market Research

When I was a part of the core team of the church that started in a front room with green carpet, I worked for a nearby market research company that helped global clients understand how they were perceived, and why, by the general public. In our introductory training we were warned in the first couple of weeks that we would never be able to watch TV adverts in the same way again. They were right. My family will tell you how annoying it is. My company showed us how adverts work—the combination of story, emotional engagement and branding—and so now whenever I see, hear, or read any kind of advertising, I’m analysing it. It’s annoying for me too.

But it also means I like asking questions and trying to dig into the reasons why people do what they do or think what they think, or how they feel about something. Trying to see the big picture and make a narrative out of the numbers. Which is where this project came from. It was an itch starting in the spring of 2018 that never went away: was there a way that I could talk to a broad selection of planters about how they have struggled and find out why?

That started a series of conversations, which led to an online survey, some follow-up conversations, and resulted in eighty stories from planters and pastors all over the world (the questions I asked are in Appendix 1). With eighty stories, it sits somewhere in between a quantitative (numbers-based) and qualitative (descriptive-based) study – not really enough data for me to make confident statistical analyses, but more in-depth accounts than we would usually get for a qualitative study. I have sought to bolster and supplement the stories I collected with other material that is available – from a handful of books covering similar

topics (published and unpublished), some reports that have been commissioned, as well as a few Ph.D. studies with a level of overlap.

A tangled ball of wool

In exploring and analysing the stories, it's clear that each church plant is a unique combination of factors: the local context, the personalities, gifting and character of the people involved, as well as their prior ministry experiences and expectations. While there are common themes and threads that seem to unite many of these stories and interviews, there is still complexity. The analogy I've found most helpful is that each struggling plant is like a tangled ball of wool made up of multiple colours. As you seek to carefully unpick the ball in question, you'll find that each one is unique, comprised of different colours and threads. On average each plant listed 4.3 factors that were causing them to struggle (though one listed nine!). This project is an attempt to carefully pull apart and examine twelve of the main factors of why plants don't thrive: twelve common pitfalls.

Each chapter examines each strand within five sections:

1. A hypothetical story element helps us see how easy it might be to fall into this pitfall. These aren't 'real' but rather draw from a variety of accounts and examples.
2. An exploration of the study itself. What did this issue actually look like in the words of the planters? I'll be deliberately quoting verbatim from the study within this section, seeking to give a voice to many whose stories haven't been heard.
3. What Scriptures can help us as we think about each issue? What truths do we need to engage with and consider from the Bible?
4. An opportunity for self-examination. Are there helpful questions we need to personally engage with

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around this strand? Whether you're a planter, or part of a core team, or a pastor sending out a plant, what questions should you be asking? The questions could be both focussed for the individual but also usefully asked of the whole group.

5. How have others dealt well with this issue? What strategies might we consider as we seek both to make ourselves aware of potential issues and to handle them faithfully? Here we will hear from pastors around the globe who have wrestled with this issue and hear how they dealt with it.

There's also a final section that will help us think about where we might go from here, as well as how we can care for people when it all goes wrong. A few individuals I spoke to had been caught up in the mess of a church plant that had to close, and it was clearly still very painful. Indeed 44 per cent of people said they felt they hadn't received enough support during the difficult months of the plant, or after it had closed.

Let me reiterate: please read this book as coming from a friend from within the planting world, wanting to help strengthen our efforts, and avoid some of the needless pain of planting churches. Also, please read with hope. Not hope because 'if we just'— if we just adjust this aspect of planting, or train better in that, or recruit the perfect core team, then it will all be good—but hope because of the gospel. Hope because our God has promised to build His church, and because He has prepared in advance for us good works to walk in (Eph. 2:10). A hope, not because of us, but because our God is faithful.