

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: When Church Planters “Fail”

Church planting involves taking risks. Our first church plant in Japan is illustrative. After two years of language study followed by two years of church planting, the time had come for our one year home assignment. And yet after two years of investing our energies into essential church planting activities such as teaching, preaching, and evangelizing, not a single person had become a new believer. The prospect of failure, which in our initial excitement and preliminary strategy had seemed so remote, was now fully visible within the range of our vision.

I entertained various possibilities as to the cause of our difficulties. But no matter what scenario I sketched, the theological context for our church planting always provided hope. You see, I am convinced that church planting is rooted in a theological framework and therefore is not ultimately reducible to missional methodology or strategy, even though those discussions are helpful. Church planting is essentially a theological activity.

In 1952 at the Willingen meeting of the International Missionary Council of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the concept that mission derives from the nature of God himself received much attention. The mission of God, or *missio Dei*, was formulated so as to extend the idea that God the Father sends the Son, and God the Father and the Son together send the Spirit. The new extension comprised the addition of a third “movement”: Father, Son, and Spirit together send the Church into the world to fulfill the purposes of God. According to this new paradigm, the Church’s significance derived from understanding mission as belonging essentially to God, and only secondarily to the Church.

But since the time of this formulation of the *missio Dei*, in WCC circles the concept has thoroughly marginalized the Church such that God is seen as fulfilling his mission in and to the world outside of the instrumentality of the Church. On this understanding, the *missio Dei* is perceived to be as effectively implemented through socio-political and cultural macro structures as through the Church. This marginalization of the Church in mission occurred against the wishes of theologians like Karl Barth who originally coined the term *missio Dei*.

In evangelical circles such as ours, however, the *missio Dei* can be understood as emphasizing that because mission derives directly from God himself, the Church’s work in mission is in reality God’s work. That is, missionaries, including cross cultural church planters in Japan, participate in God’s mission as they go forth in mission.

We now have fifteen years of hindsight from which to view the church planting experience mentioned above. The church now has its own national pastor and is growing. Although it felt to us as if we were risking failure at the two year mark, the one who is building his Church knows all things, including all free choices of humans, and is therefore not the God who risks. He is not the God of only the possible. He is still sovereign. We were simply participants in God’s mission at one place on planet earth. If we had “failed,” we still would have been participants in that grand and unshakable divine mission. Our success is measured by faithfulness to our missionary God.

Confessing that our missional task is only a part of God’s mission, that our mission belongs ultimately to God, provides us with spiritual resources to face the potential risks of church planting in Japan. We can remain calm and confident in the midst of difficult church planting assignments. The confession also makes us humble and modest when we see God use us to bring into existence churches where there are none or very few. To sum up, if we understand that the outcome of our ministry is entirely dependent upon our church planting’s sure location within the global mission of our unfailing and sovereign God, we are given the freedom to “fail.”

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