



Why I Had to be 34 Before I Planted a Church

Church planting is sexy. It's the hot thing to do in ministry these days. If you're a young guy looking to go into ministry, you're probably real tempted to head down the church planting road with nothing more than a pocket full of dreams, cockiness, some Sunday School or Young Life ministry experience, maybe a Bible college degree, and if you've really been procrastinating, a Seminary degree. But the more I see guys in their early- to mid-twenties with cool sideburns, a beer in one hand, and "The Reformation for Dummies" in the other talking about going and planting a church, I tend to get a little nervous...like how I feel when I'm driving down the road and a car with the big "student driver" Domino's Pizza sign on top pulls up next to me. I usually let them pass and stay in front of me so I can keep a good eye on them.

There have been many young church planters who have had tremendous success in our lifetime: Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Mark Driscoll, and even a guy like Andy Stanley (OK, the he didn't really 'plant' a church, but he was still relatively young). This is very inspiring. Young guys in ministry see these examples and want the influence and success they see in Seattle, LA, Chicago, and Atlanta. But here's the problem: not everyone is as gifted as they are, nor as driven; and while I believe God does indeed call people to church plant and even to be church planting movement leaders, only a few are hand-picked by God to be leaders of church planting movement leaders.

What I'd like to do now is just tell you my story; my journey to church planting. It's full of ups & downs, stupid decisions, a few states in the Midwest, four kids, and a whole lot of God's grace.

I've dreamt about planting a church as far back as 1995 when I was in college. Back then, it was nothing but energy, testosterone, and a few too many late nights with little sleep as my 22 year old self (with already 5 years of significant ministry experience) and my buddies talked about what church should be. But the immediate call on my life at that point was in the realm of student ministry, so that's where I disciplined myself to focus on.

After 5 years as a youth pastor/church staff bottom feeder and being sick of dealing with materialistic, selfish, horny adolescents whose home lives were so jacked up that 4 hours a week with me wasn't going to make a difference anyway, I uprooted my very young family (kids were 3 & 4) to pursue the church planting dream. I was going to finally go to seminary, spend a lot of time and money on an MDiv with a church planting emphasis, and basically ignore my wife's hesitancy with the whole thing. It was a wreck. 9/11 happened and our house didn't sell for months. There was no money, or time, for school with our little kids and I was working nights and being daddy day care in the day while my wife worked. Our lives were upside down and unhealthy.

About a year after life like that, church planting was still an internal call I had, and I found a new church plant in our city to check them out. What I found spoke to my soul and confirmed my call to plant. Our family got plugged in, got some good counsel and community, we were on the fast track to getting healthy, I began serving in some leadership roles at the church, and it looked like we were actually going to be able to hive off of the church in the future and my planting dream will have truly been prophetic. So, I was 29 going on 30, still young with a young family, but things were moving forward. I began to attempt to raise some money to come on staff at the church plant to really "be a missionary". But no money came in...and worse yet, churches began calling me to be their youth pastor.

It appeared that God was not opening the door to planting at this time, but was opening doors for other ministry opportunities. I did in fact end up going to a church for 3 years as the Student & Young Adult pastor. I didn't want to do youth ministry anymore, but it really wasn't about what I wanted, it was what God wanted me to do (think Jonah...Michigan ended up being the belly of a big fish for me, but instead of being slimy and stinky, it was cold and snowy). God worked in my life and my family's life in a big ways in Michigan. He used the church context we were in to help us clarify what we thought church should and shouldn't be. He used the time to also call my wife to church planting. He used the city context we were in to prepare us for the city we would eventually end up planting in. He used the ministry environment I was around to hone and sharpen my leadership and communication skills. We also had another child in Michigan, and before we left to go plant, my wife was pregnant with our fourth child.

Let me back up for a minute and clarify how my bride, Dawn, got on board the church planting ship and how we moved forward with it. About a year and a half into our new ministry, my wife and I attended a student ministry conference. All we heard the whole week as God talking to us about church planting through the main session speakers and breakout speakers. It was weird. We kept looking at each other asking, "Are you hearing what I'm hearing?" We decided at that point that God was indeed talking to us both and it was time to pursue church planting one more time. We went to a church planting conference, got assessed, and basically got the green light from God and from other planters that we could and should do this. It was at this conference that I met a guy who ended up being from the city in which we would plant. God made pieces fall into place very quickly.

So, here we are in Springfield, Illinois planting Delta Church. I turned 34 in January and we had our first service January 21, 2007. God is working me, my family, my church, and my city. We are in the right place at the right time. As difficult as church planting is, being sure of the call and seeing spiritual fruit begin to grow is the encouragement to keep going. Here are some bullet points of what I learned through my journey and why I needed to be 34 and not 24 to plant a church:

- I was too young and inexperienced in both life and ministry. Passion and drive only get you so far. People will follow someone who is clear and confident in who he is and what he's doing.
- My wife needed to be called as well. She was not on board early on, but God worked in her life in a great way to call her to be the wife of a church planter. Our marriage has endured both very rough and joyous times, which has allowed us to better counsel people. We will be married 11 years this upcoming June.
- I needed to be a dad. Having kids changes your perspective on life greatly, and gives you a clue into how God sees his children. Humanly, it also gains respect from people as they see you manage your household.
- I needed experience in leading. Other than my current church, I've lead in churches that have ranged from 120 to 20,000. I've seen lots of leadership models. I've been able to try different approaches to ministry. I've been able to test myself in many contexts to find out if I can gather, train, and release people for ministry. I've also been able to speak and preach a lot in different situations to hone in on my style.
- I needed experience in pastoring. I've been able to counsel, baptize, perform a funeral, marry couples, do pre-marital

- counseling, do marriage intervention to help prevent divorce, sit with a family at the hospital while the dad died from cancer in the next room, and see people grow in their walk with Jesus.
- I needed time to solidify my theology. Instead of me fumbling through theology while being a lead pastor, I was able to do that while on staff at churches and only look like a little idiot instead of a big idiot.
 - I needed to plant out of the right spirit. When I was young, I was simply too rebellious. Pure rebellion is not the right spirit to plant a church with. God needed to burden me with preaching the gospel to a new context, not just thumb my nose to the megachurch down the street.
 - I simply needed to be older to attract older people. It's pretty easy to lead under and sideways. What I mean is that attracting younger people and peers isn't all that hard. But when it comes to attracting and leading those older than you, it takes maturity and a good track record. Without some established older saints in your church, you'll be immature and poor (but have a lot of energy!)

So this is my journey that I'm on. I also want to say that just because I have somewhere around 15 years of ministry experience does not mean I completely know what I'm doing. As a matter of fact, the older I get, the more ministry I do, the more people I lead, the more I simply don't know and need Jesus to pastor me and my church. One can never lose the teachable spirit. Here are some questions to some young guys:

- If you've never been in ministry vocationally and feel called to plant a church, take some time to at least intern at a church plant to get a feel for it.
- If you are called to church plant, does that call have to come into fruition right away? Should you take some time for ministry experience, church planting internship, secular market vocation, education, etc? Maybe God's plan is for you to plant in the future.
- Are you married and do you have any kids? I can't say that being married with children is a must (Paul wasn't either of those), but it sure does help practically.
- What percentage of you wants to plant out of rebellion to the "modern church"? I think there always has to be some dissatisfaction with the established church (if there wasn't, don't start a new one, just go get on staff at a good church), but it can't be the majority of your drive.

God's church is His bride. Just like I desire sharp, prepared, and Jesus-dependant men to someday marry my daughters, I believe God wants that same thing for the men who will pastor the local expressions of his church. We need to honor His bride and not treat her flippantly.

Our journeys are all different. There is no cookie-cutter, A+B+C process for who a church planter is and what a church plant is. I simply encourage you to walk in faith and wisdom. God bless.

Ryan Mobley
Pastor, Delta Church
Springfield, Illinois