



Church Planting in a Metro Area

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“You want me to go where?” Who says that?” a rebellious teenager? a timid employee? How about a young man from Amarillo, Texas, who God is calling to plant a church in San Diego, California? Yes, those were my words in December of 2001, as I was overwhelmed that God would allow my family and me the privilege of starting a church in San Diego. But it wasn't all about the joy of the opportunity.” I also knew my weaknesses, and that knowledge frightened me. San Diego is the eighth largest city in the nation, with 1.4 million people. In 2001, there were two independent Baptist churches and few non-Baptist, gospel-preaching churches in the entire city. And, although more conservative than Los Angeles or San Francisco, San Diego isn't exactly a bastion of Christendom. By God's grace, we followed His call. Fast-forward more than twenty years: I'm overwhelmed to say God has built and sustained Canyon Ridge Baptist Church. He's done more than I ever thought He would and grown us in ways I never thought possible. We're blessed with a fantastic team of servants dedicated to sharing the gospel in our city. God has blessed us with a permanent location in the heart of San Diego. Through my office window, I can see a low-income, transient, and primarily immigrant housing. Our neighborhood is a thriving international community with over seventeen mother tongues spoken. It's a community where you can rent a 350-square-foot studio for \$1,950.00 a month and find yourself serenaded every night by a chorus of homeless folks singing. I wouldn't trade it for the world. I want to share five simple thoughts that have helped me over the past two decades of church planting in a metropolitan/urban area. If you are a church planter or praying about planting a church in one of the needy cities of our nation, I pray these will help you as well.

People Come First
Personal evangelism is a must when building a church in an urban environment. Guests won't run through your doors because you put up a sign and design a snazzy website. In the early days of Canyon Ridge, I spent a minimum of twenty-five hours a week knocking doors, meeting people, and participating in outreach and community events. Why? People only came to church after I engaged, encouraged, and shared the gospel. Over twenty years later, we still have an aggressive outreach plan. This year, we will hand-deliver through door-knocking and canvassing over 250,000 invitations to church—all to meet more people and introduce them to Jesus. Commit to Learning a New Culture
As I've mentioned, I came to San Diego from Texas. Texans drive differently, dress differently, eat differently, enjoy different hobbies, and think differently from San Diegans. Are there similarities? Sure! But my family and I still had to make a huge adjustment when we moved here. The more you're with the folks of your community, the more you will understand the culture. Learn and embrace the culture; it's a worthy pursuit that will help you build gospel influence.

Understand You Will Say “Goodbye” Regularly
Of the many things metropolitan areas are known for, longevity is not one of them. You'll say “goodbye” to folks who change jobs, college students who graduate and move away, people who leave for a more comfortable community, and interns who get full-time jobs elsewhere. If you live in a military city like ours, you'll have the added burden and blessing of service members joining and moving. Church planter, I pray that God will bring people who will live as “missionaries” in your area—folks who will serve in your church not because it is home or comfortable but because God has called them. They'll give up the American dream of a house and being close to family for an eternal reward. They, like you, will live in a smaller house or apartment and pay exorbitant prices for the privilege of ministering in your community. And they will encourage you more than words can say. In reality, you'll say goodbye a lot, but you'll also be constantly surprised by all the hellos and by how the Lord encourages and sustains you and His church.

Accept That Your Church May Never Own a Building
For the first five years of Canyon Ridge, we met in a 1,200-square-foot community center. We spent the next two years in a school auditorium on Sundays and the next year and a half in the multi-purpose room at our current location. We've met in hotels, Navy chapels, literally under a tree, and in our house. In 2009, the Lord miraculously provided a building. It was in disrepair, a blight in our community, and looked like a cross between a bundt cake pan and a spaceship, but it was ours! Even after extensive remodeling, it doesn't look like a “normal church.” But to me, it's cooler! I'm thankful for God's provision. My point is this: People might visit your church because of a cool or permanent building; but it won't be enough to keep them there. People came to both a recreation center and a school cafeteria and planted their lives in this local church because they were loved, discipled, and encouraged to walk with Jesus.

A building is a means to an end, not the sign of success or failure. Your church may never own a building—that's okay! You may never have a permanent location—that's okay! You're not called into the commercial real estate business; you're called to reach people with the gospel. Don't make excuses. Simply do your best with what you have, and trust Christ to build His church.

You Can Trust Him
Pastoring in a metropolitan/urban area is fantastic. It's electric when people from different parts of the country and world gather in the church they were saved in for one purpose: to glorify God and be edified for the work to which God has called them. I think back to when I asked God, “You want me to go where?” I'm so glad God called me, and I'm glad I went. Could it be that God wants you to go there? If God is calling, go. For Christ has promised, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). You can trust in Him!

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