

The Seven Constants of Church Planting

From North American Vineyard Churches

If I had to boil it all down and talk in terms of essentials I would suggest that there are seven constants to church planting and these are constants which come out of years of experience! I think they are crucially important, not only for new church plants, but for old church leaders, as well.

1. Constantly Tell Your Story

Constantly. Guys come to me and say, I'm going a particular town to plant a church. Do you have any advice for me?" I say, Tell everyone why you are there. And once you've told them ten times -- tell them five hundred more: "Here's my story. This is why I'm here. This is the vision God has given me for planting this church, and this is how he's brought me to this point. We're the Vineyard and this is what we're about. This is the Bible, this is Jesus. God loves you; I want to tell you about him. That's why I'm here. You constantly tell your story, and you do it over the long haul, as well.

As a pastor I still do it. I tell parts of my story in sermons all the time with my people. Some of you have heard me do that and didn't know why. You've got to understand that I'm not trying to exalt myself -- I'm trying to bring new people on board! Here's who we are, here's where we've been, here's where we are now, and here's where we are going." I constantly tell the story about what we're about and what we're doing. It's like an atomized can; I just spray it on everybody because you don't know who is going be sitting there listening to you and thinking, ``This what *just* what I've been looking for!"

The problem is many pastors get *bored* of telling their own story-- so they quit telling it. And then they wonder why their church quits growing. Telling your story is a major part of vision-casting and leadership. Not telling your story can be a contributing factor to lack of church growth, because people lose focus when you're not consistently telling who you are and where you're going. And they lose their reason for existence. For many people, their sense of mission and reason for existence rightly comes in part out of being a part of this thing -- advancing the Kingdom through the local church. And so people need to be constantly reminded of where we've been and where we're going with the vision that God's given *this* church. And you do that by constantly telling your story.

2. Constantly Tell His Story

I'm putting them in that sequence because that's kind of the way it works. Of course, that's not the true priority. The true priority is *his* story. Constantly tell his story. Every occasion ought to have his story in it. Jesus is the Son of God. It's always in there, always wrapped up in the midst of any exchange with people.

3. Constantly Explain the Mysteries of Life

What's important in life? Well, escaping the big one! Heaven or hell. That's a big one isn't it? I elect, I'm going to heaven. It's a better deal than hell. Now, the next big priority

is, Do you want to get there first class or tourist? First class. That means commitment: commitment to Christ, commitment to his church, and commitment to his cause.

All over the world there are people who have committed themselves to Christ in the sense that they have prayed the prayer, bowed the head, or raised the hand. They want an insurance policy for the life hereafter -- but they are not committed to the church! They disdain the church. Watch out for those. You don't want those people around you. Call them to commitment to the church. Our movement is full of people who are uncommitted to the church. They see it as something to merely accommodate them, to meet their needs. They do not see the church as the vehicle for the mission of Jesus. The first and foremost question isn't, "What's in it for me and my family?" but rather, "What's in it for Jesus? What is he going to get out of this?" It's *his* church.

And it also means commitment to his cause. There are a lot of people who are committed to Jesus, and even to his church -- but they are not committed to his cause. How do you know that? By looking at the measurements of how they spend their time, energy and money. They don't give any time to evangelism, to ministering, to caring for the poor, to looking after widows. Look at their calendar. Look at their check book. Who are they serving? It looks to me we are often serving everything *but* Jesus, when we look at where our money goes. Where are you really focused? Most people are not focused on Christ and his cause. So you need to tell them that, over and over again: "Alert! SOS! Wake up! You're not where you want to be! You're not where you are supposed to be! You're not committed!" *Measure* it!

We have to have ways of measuring where we're at in ministry. Most people play church like guys playing basketball without a ball and without a hoop. They play without the very things which provide a measurement, or standard, for who's winning the game. So long as you're playing basketball without an actual ball, anyone can appear to be graceful. Or if you don't play with actual hoops, everyone looks like they're a high scorer. But it's not real. You're playing a game without the very elements that tell you if you're winning or not! So when it comes to church leadership, I keep putting in the ball and the hoops. I keep bringing out things that are concrete ways of measuring how you're doing: Is the church growing numerically? Is there tangible fruit? Are people getting saved and assimilated into the church? How many of the poor are you caring for? How many new leaders have you developed? Is the quality of ministry and body life and love amongst people growing? Those kinds of questions make some people mad. That don't want you introducing those kind of elements, because if you start actually measuring, things don't look so good. Some would rather *appear* to play than actually play.

Now, listen: The Vineyard is no exception in this regard. Sometimes when I'm one-on-one with pastors, they get scalded because I start asking them those kinds of questions and it just infuriates them. "He doesn't like me." I like him fine. I'm just trying to get him to wake up and smell the coffee. Because he has the illusion that he's successfully serving God, but he has no measurement. I can tell you the specific measurements of how we're doing in our church here in Anaheim: I know that we had over five thousand street decisions last year. People that prayed the prayer. I know that by actual Bibles distributed and actual cards turned in. I also know how many of those people were actually disciplined and assimilated into the church. I know how many people we baptized last year. I know how many new home groups were started. I have a system that reports that. Sometimes the system defaults, and I'm not always on top of it, but I know

generally. And I know who to call if I don't have the numbers. You've got to have ways of measuring where you're at.

4. Constantly Disciple

How many of your people are actually in the army? That is a crucial question. Now, some of the people in the army are actually in the hospital at the same time. (Remember: the church is supposed to be an army, a hospital, and a family.) Sometimes more people are hospitalized than not. People get shot up. Or some people are back in school getting retrained because something happened that blocked off their ministry. They are out of the army -- but that's okay. They aren't absent without leave. They're being retooled to go back in. You need to know that. And they need to know that it's okay to be in the hospital or to just be in the family. But it's *not* okay to live there permanently! Eventually we have to get you fielded because the measurement is not, "I'm hanging out here indefinitely," but rather, "Here are the sheaves, here are the results, here are the works done in your name and in your service." I've read the Book pretty carefully and that's what I think it's all about. We work with people to get them in the army. Constantly disciple.

5. Constantly Expand the Infrastructure

Discipling produces the people to fill the infrastructure -- but you have to constantly expand the infrastructure for the people you're bringing in. Different things need to be developed. Now, if you are a specialty shop (which is what a church plant is), then for the first six months you don't have much infrastructure to put people in because you don't need it. You may be a few years into the church before you need a lot of infrastructure. (Of course, it's possible that you *should* need more infrastructure, but don't, because you're not multiplying or disciplining people. Sometimes that's because you yourself are not a disciple. The first person we often have to disciple is ourselves. You'll reproduce in kind. Some of you are in the process of planting a church and are wondering why it isn't happening. It could be one of a thousand variables, but one may be that you are not actually yourself doing the very things you want reproduced in others.) But if you're doing that if you're disciplining and bring people in you need to constantly expand the structures of your leadership teams, your small groups, and your ministries to accommodate and assimilate and train up those who are coming in. Expanding the infrastructure is a constant task needing our attention if the church is to grow.

6. Constantly Live in Brokenness

The New Testament description of a Christian and the church suggests a very high level of godliness, and character, and constraint, and ministry, and compassion, and blessing, and spirituality. Then you look at the church we live in and it's way below.

The church is represented in my life. I'm not all that Jesus wants me to be. I'm not all that he's provided for me. I'm not walking in all that I know. I'm trying, but I'm not doing all that well some days. Are you? That leaves me in a broken state -- an awareness of, "O God, O God, except for your mercy and except for your grace." I think it's designed to be that way. I think we are supposed to live in the constant reality that we are not measuring up. Even in his righteousness, even under his mercy, even as a recipient of

his grace, I can't walk like Jesus does. I touch on it every now and then. I visit it. That gives me hope and encouragement for more. But the reality is that we have to constantly live in brokenness. The way we do that is by not developing some sort of external religious thing that hides us and puts us in a denial process by which we pretend to be more than we are. Rather, we just learn to live constantly with the awareness that we just don't measure up. But that's good news, folks. If you don't measure up -- if you *can't* measure up then you're constantly asking for Jesus to make up the difference. That's good news! It's pretty hard to act overly religious when you know you don't measure up, and that he's paying the difference. I'm not sure that we ever get incredibly better or stronger or mightier, becoming these great men and women of God. I think we always live with the awareness that we are serving the great God of men and women. Jesus came down to earth. I didn't go up to him. He came to the world. The world didn't come to him. I got saved by a merciful savior. Didn't you? And he's still merciful toward me. Everyday of my life I live in a constant awareness of that.

7. Constantly Reevaluate and Be Flexible in What You Are Doing

No program, however lovely, isn't ready to be measured and inspected from time to time. Continually look things over. Don't fix things that aren't broken. That's not valid. But be aware that something you did two years ago that did so well may not work *this* year. You had better look at it. What can we do to adjust it to make it work? Sometimes it's minor. Sometimes it's major. Sometimes some of the same leaders who were pulling your cart five years ago maybe can't pull your cart now. So you need some new leaders.

But whatever you do, don't hold onto things for their own sake. Programs are means to an end. Evaluate their effectiveness. Keep what works; get rid of what doesn't. Do whatever is necessary to help the church of Jesus Christ to advance.