

MentorNet #55

Keeping New Believers Faithful

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Those who engage in evangelism and church planting find that many folk eagerly respond to the Good News and start coming to a church. However, in new ministries, the drop-out rate can prove high. Many folks who started well lose interest, become discouraged or abandon their new faith. Jesus warned that this would be the case, because of temptation, persecution and worldly allurements (Matthew 13:20-23). Even so, wise church planters can preserve most of the fruit of their labour by following several New Testament instructions. We recommend the following, as starters.

1. Baptise new believers straight away.

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). Show God’s love and your love to those who repent, and baptize them. Many will not believe that God has forgiven and accepted them, until you accept them in the way that Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:19).

Baptise without undue delay. The apostles often baptized the same day that folks expressed their repentance. They taught the meaning and implications of baptism afterwards. Remember, the command to baptize was given to you, not to the new believer. Waiting a long time before baptism will discourage most new believers. Some will fall away, but, then, even some long-time believers fall away, too. DO NOT delay baptism unless there is a good reason for doing so, such as winning other family members so they can be baptised together.

Baptise amongst friends. If you baptise new believers with no witnesses, then they will often feel isolated and lonely. Only baptise in secret if the new believers’ life would be in danger otherwise. New believers will often bond with the place where you baptise them. Thus, if you take them into a chapel or another church and baptise them there, then the newly baptised will often consider that church to be their spiritual family, and may soon lose interest in your simple church or cell group.

2. Bring them into a culturally suitable church.

New simple church plants can prove just as foreign and unnatural as big, traditional mission-planted congregations. The very foreignness of churches can discourage new believers who respect their own culture. Some adult new believers will find your simple church frivolous or accommodating only to women or youth.

Speak their heart language. Most folks will more deeply sense God’s love for them, more clearly understand God’s Word and more readily obey Jesus’ commandments, if they learn in their own language and culture. With new believers, coming into a culturally-comfortable church proves more important than making a social statement by attending a culturally-mixed congregation. Thus, most new, simple churches should be planted with a single ethnic, linguistic and economic community.

Employ imitable methods of worship and evangelism. If new believers cannot participate in worship and evangelism from the start of their new faith, then they may never consider those practices their responsibility. Methods should be chosen that prove culturally acceptable, immediately available, and affordable to the poorest. To do so, avoid bringing new believers into churches that are dominated by outsiders and employ foreign worship practices. From the start, let new believers explain the Good News to their friends and family in ways that they find natural, and plant new churches in the homes of adult men whenever possible.

3. Serve the Lord’s Supper often.

Just as baptism is for bad people who have repented, so the Table is for bad Christians who need frequent forgiveness. Allow new believers to obey the Lord Jesus’ command frequently to celebrate His supper, and empower all new churches to do so from their start. Whether or not there is a capable speaker or

competent teacher, let new churches celebrate the Table every time they meet. Communion is often the only way, besides prayer, that new congregations can sense that they have entered into the awesome presence of God.

Teach and practice its biblical meanings. The Lord's Supper provides a mystical participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16), is done as a proclamation of the Lord's death, and allows believers to discern the Lord's body and to examine themselves. Be very careful to avoid two extremes: explaining the bread and cup in ways that go beyond the Bible, and explaining them away as mere symbols or reminders. Let new believers commune with the Lord and with each other through the bread and cup. This will prove hugely encouraging.

Provide frequent forgiveness of sins. Even though they have repented from sin and turned to the Lord, most new believers will still be involved in many sinful practices and relationships that they have not yet overcome or abandoned. As they become aware of personal and social practices that dishonour the Lord, they will hurry back to the Table to be assured of the Lord's forgiveness. If you do not provide the Table often, then they will carry their sense of guilt or shame and become discouraged. Many will not feel good enough to stay in your church or cell.

4. Ensure joyful fellowship in the church.

Most newly repentant believers still have many friendships and social groups where they feel welcome. If the church does not provide healthy relationships, then many new believers will return to godless groups where they can enjoy friends who accept them. When possible, win entire families to Christ and bring them into the church together; new believers seldom fall away when they are accompanied by their closest friends and family members,

All meet each other's needs. New and old simple churches must remain highly participative, allowing all participants to speak and to prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:3, 24-26). In both the formal time and the informal times, older believers show love and concern for the new believers, including them in all the activities they feel comfortable with. Allow the new believers to express their joy, their faith, and their needs. Let others respond to them. When they have material needs, find ways in which the church can help.

All serve with spiritual gifts. Even the newest believers have received the Holy Spirit and have spiritual gifts. Thus all have something to say or something to do to serve one another. Help believers to recognize and employ their gifts from the start. Guide believers to serve one another according to their strengths and gifts. Avoid assigning tasks to new believers for which they are neither gifted nor motivated. Being left alone, ignored or assigned unwanted drudgery work can discourage new and old believers alike.

5. Teach loving obedience to Jesus.

All new believers' heart has been flooded by the Holy Spirit with the Father's love for them, and they easily express their new love for Jesus. Obeying Jesus expresses one's faith and must never be confused with 'legalism' which is a futile attempt to please God by following the Law.

Follow Jesus' Commandments. In a simple church plant, base all that you do on the commandments of Jesus, especially those illustrated in Acts 2:37-47. Always be willing to abandon any practice that is not commanded by Jesus or is not in the New Testament. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey Jesus, filling even new believers with joy and strength (John 14:15-17; Acts 5:30-32). If your church practices are dictated mainly by church traditions and unbiblical rules, then its legalism will prove lifeless, loveless and discouraging.

Continually make disciples. As simple churches and cell groups mature and multiply, there will always be room to grow and develop as disciples. Within the church, slowly introduce the New Testament "one-another" practices according to current needs and opportunities. Empower new believers to make new disciples from the start. New believers will often prove the most zealous and winsome in drawing others to Christ. New believers who are growing rapidly in obedience will often prove the best simple church planters

and shepherds. Mentor, coach and train them as soon as they are willing to follow instructions by leading others to Christ and to lead new simple churches. Otherwise, many will come to feel useless and unwanted.

6. Model response to persecution.

Jesus warned that the world would hate his followers as much as it hates him. Part of evangelism is asking folks to count the cost; part of disciple-making is to provide new believers with ways in which to cope with intolerance, bigotry and persecution. Otherwise, many will fall away to avoid public shame.

Teach Jesus' warnings. A basic need of every new believer remains a way to respond to insults, opposition and persecution from unbelievers and from tradition-bound believers. Remind them that Jesus himself was misunderstood, maligned, falsely accused, even murdered. It has been given to believers both to believe in Jesus and to suffer for him. However, just as Jesus humbled himself, and refused to insult his persecutors, so we believers are to humble ourselves (1 Peter 3:13-16; 5:6-11).

Promise help from the Holy Spirit. Those who work to advance the Kingdom of Jesus must be ready to tell the truth when asked and to depend on the Holy Spirit to give an answer when brought before authorities (Matthew 10:16-32). Learning to hear from the Holy Spirit is a privilege of every believer, especially of those who must suffer opposition, as Jesus did. Those who have suffered and stood their ground grow very bold in the Lord. This works as well for new believers as it does for others.

7. Provide pastoral care.

New believers have many bad habits, attitudes, and vices that they will soon want to overcome. God gives to every church apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers to help all the saints grow more like Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Deal with personal and family problems. Pastoral leaders of simple churches must visit new believers and provide biblical guidelines for overcoming sins, ignorance and evil cultural practices (1 Thessalonians 2:7; 5:12). Without pastoral care, new believers, made sensitive to their own sin by the Spirit of Jesus in them, can quickly grow discouraged and feel that they are not good enough to keep coming to church. Teach generally in the church about every believer's need to grow and change, and deal with individual problems in private, a man helping men and a woman helping women. Otherwise many will feel that God is not able or willing to help them.

Protect from false teachers. Jesus warned against false prophets who would lead many astray (Matthew 4:11), and Paul warned the elders at Ephesus about false teachers and about church leaders who would seek to draw the disciples after themselves, requiring that elders take special care of the church (Acts 20:28-30). Warn the new believers about false teachers and give them instructions in how to respond to such. If you do not, then some will be led away from your church even a few weeks or months after they have repented.

Resources for Church Planting and for Training Christian Leaders

Reproducible Pastoral Training, to multiply churches, O'Connor:

<<http://missionbooks.org/wcl/customer/product.php?productid=533&cat=1&page=1>>.

Free CP training software "*Come, Let Us Disciple the Nations*": <<http://www.Paul-Timothy.net>>.

Free mentoring tools and resources: <<http://www.MentorAndMultiply.com>>.

Free training materials for new leaders & missionaries: <<http://www.Paul-Timothy.net>>.

Free materials that combine pastoral training with church planting: <<http://www.Paul-Timothy.net>>.

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