

The laity and church planting

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In February this year we were blessed by the ministry of Rev Chris Conrad across four centres in Australia. Chris serves as Director of Church Planter Development in the North American Wesleyan Church. He presented seminars in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth; encouraging us to recommit to the work of church planting.

I was especially encouraged by Chris' presentation as he quickly adapted to the Australian situation. In our unchurched and sparsely populated country, new churches are more likely to form around a nucleus of ten or twelve people, rather than the hundreds often quoted from North American experience. Chris reminded us that the optimal size for a congregation to plant a daughter congregation is while they have only fifty members themselves. Now that is an Australia sized challenge! By that criterion, who of us could not consider launching a daughter church in the neighbouring town or suburb?

My own thoughts about church planting have grown out of my experiences in the Australian church, as well as from time spent on the mission field. Rev Conrad's statements resonate well with me. I was converted through the ministry of the Wesleyan Methodist Church and was called into ministry at a time when the church was growing rapidly. In the 1970's and 1980's we grew from a handful of churches to over seventy churches. Those who lived and served through that time will remember it as an exciting and visionary time, but also an exhausting time. It was a time when pastoral supply was always stretched, and pastors were relocated regularly as the leadership sought to care for new congregations. Lay people gave well beyond the tithe and often carried out a large share of the preaching and pastoral duties.

That period of intense growth was followed by a season of consolidation, and today we are reaping the benefits of that earlier period of sacrificial church planting. Many of our churches (which started as a handful of believers) are now averaging one or two hundred people in Sunday worship. It is inspiring to visit rural and city churches alike and sense the growing ministry. A good number of our churches have reached a place of increased capacity so they are not only able to pay their pastoral staff adequately, but they offer richer public worship and a broader discipleship program. With this growth has come an increased awareness of community needs with a number of clothing, feeding and educational programs started.

It is a good time to be a Wesleyan Methodist! Furthermore, as the cycle of church planting and church growth comes full circle, we are struck by a renewed emphasis on church planting. There are many exciting new ventures at present:

- The network of churches planted in the suburbs of Perth and across Western Australia continues to grow with new work in Jandakot and Carnarvon.
- The Mawson Lakes church in Adelaide is now exploring possibilities of establishing a daughter church.
- In Victoria and New South Wales several church plants are underway, while at the same time, the Southern and New South Wales Districts are cooperating to start a new fellowship in Canberra.
- Several preaching points are being considered in South and North Queensland from Deception Bay to Rockhampton.

It seems that God is stirring us to renewed vigour and outreach through church planting. How then, can we enter into all of the beneficial aspects of church planting without that exhaustion of our earlier years? One part of the answer lies in the use of lay workers and ministry teams.

- **Lay workers.** One of the immediate difficulties of church planting is securing pastoral supply for new congregations. At another time it would have been normal to place small Wesleyan churches in a circuit, with regular visits from clergy based out of a larger centre. Lay workers would have provided much of the week-to-week ministry. Circuits often consisted of three or four (even eight or ten) small churches. This model lifted some of the financial stress off pastors and it promoted the truth of the priesthood of all believers. Recently our national leadership began to address this need by re-examining the role of lay workers. The National Board was asked to approve the licensing of Lay Ministers through the district conferences instead of local church conferences. This small step suggests a renewed commitment to our heritage of lay ministry, and it could quickly result in a ready list of qualified and willing workers to help in church planting.
- **Church planting teams.** Experience has shown that new churches that are isolated and financially stretched often become focused on survival and cease to grow. This results in discouragement in the congregation and loss of credibility in the community. However, some have found that better results are achieved when multiple workers are assigned to new church efforts. When two or more work together they are inclined to be more effective because they complement each other's gifts and they stay energised by sharing the ministry load. This usually requires at least some of the team being bi-vocational and fits well with the concept of lay ministry.
- **Church clusters.** An expansion of the concept of ministry teams is the establishment of church clusters, with pastors and lay ministers working in close proximity to each other. When there is a spirit of trust and cooperation, many of the advantages of the team concept are replicated. In our times of greatest growth we aspired to establish churches in every major centre across Australia, which resulted in some very isolated churches. Of course, that network of churches serves us well today, but it was demanding for church workers. With prayerful planning, we can use church clusters and pastoral teams to reduce the stress of isolation.
- **Getting uncomfortable.** Finally, we should be aware that this call to greater lay involvement in church planting brings the challenge home to every Wesleyan Methodist. Undoubtedly, there is a special richness in attending a growing church with a sharp worship band and a multi-tiered children's ministry, but God requires that we leave our places of comfort to carry the message of full salvation to every community across our country. Are you willing to answer the call and join a team in planting a new church?

We have often heard it said that church planting is the most effective form of evangelism. There is energy and desperation in a church planting situation and there are new circles of influence introduced through new contacts. Perhaps there is simply more prayer in a church plant. Whatever the reason, church planting brings new people to Christ, and that is pleasing to God. If a congregation of fifty is the optimum size for launching a daughter church plant, then now is the right time to launch a new church plant!