

Understanding the Realities of Church Planting

by Phil Henry¹

Church Planting is what's known as a "high risk" activity. As a result, traditional or ordinary expectations related to 'church' don't always—or even rarely—apply.

At the same time, some of the problems that long-established churches struggle with result from people's expectations deviating from the biblical norms of "loving God" and "loving one another."

The purpose of this essay, "Understandings of Church Planting," is to help the members of Mercy Hill's launch team to recognize expectations in themselves about church and, in faith, set them aside when they get in the way of these two greatest commandments.

As you review these ten "Understandings," discuss them with your family and prayerfully ask God to reveal to you how your expectations may need to change in order to be an effective team member in this new church community.

As you do, be prepared to experience certain levels of fear and uncertainty—that's normal. But also be prepared to experience new levels of faith and grace. If God is calling you to join Mercy Hill's launch team, He is doing something more than simply calling you to do something difficult. He's also providing what you need to follow and obey Him in this new chapter of your Christian life.

1. Highs and Lows.

I'm often told, when I describe what I do to others, "That must be exciting!" I smile and say, "Yes, that's the problem!" The excitement of church planting, you see, is also the challenge of church planting.

There is so much uncertainty and things can be so fluid at times that it's normal to go through very high "highs" and very low "lows." It has been helpful to me in such times not only to reach out to others and ask for help—"remind me why I'm doing this again, please!"—but also to remember God's promise: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning..."

I'm told that only about ten percent of pastors are "wired" for the highs and lows that pioneering church planting presents. That's probably true of "congregation members" as well.

Do you feel called to such a venture? If so, realize that as well as enjoying times of celebration, rejoicing, fulfillment, and deep community, there will also be hardships. You will go through pain, frustration, financial challenge, loneliness, disappointment and fears.

2. Don't Expect Perfection

"Progress not perfection" is a good motto for church planting. The other corollary I adhere to along these lines is by Chesterton, "Any job worth doing is worth doing badly." Church planting is not for perfectionists—or at least, not for perfectionists who can't smile at their perfectionism.

We have an incredible opportunity to do something from scratch, to dream about what the church could be, what it should be. As such, we should dream big. We should dream large.

At the same time, while we have the opportunity to build a church, from the ground up, that is passionate about Jesus and his mission, we will still have unmet expectations with our new church as well. It will not be the perfect church and will not satisfy us in every area.

¹ This document is an expanded version, of a shorter form written by another church planter, Reid Monaghan. Reid is the lead pastor at Jacob's Well in North Brunswick, NJ.

The saying is true: the only perfect church is the church in heaven. As soon as I joined the church, it no longer was perfect.

3. Sacrifice Will Be the Norm

In some established churches, sacrifice is seen to belong to the 20 percent of the people who do 80 percent of the work. In a church plant, the rule of thumb is 80 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work.

By signing up for the launch team, you're agreeing that you understand that this adventure will require "all hands on deck". As leaders, we understand the pain that sacrifice can cause. There may be a season of the church plant where you discover that your service is causing your life to be imbalanced. We want to care for one another in this.

At the same time, sacrifice is embedded into the very nature of following Jesus: "If any man comes after me, let him take up his cross and follow me." Cross-bearing is a discipline that some long-time believers have forgotten.

Church planting very well may be the context in which you discover how to return to obedience to your Lord and carry your cross once again.

4. Building Trust in Leadership

Church planting initially requires entrepreneurial leadership that typically comes from a single individual—the church planter. This is as it should be: rarely do new things ever get accomplished "by committee."

However, ultimately the goal of any mature church is a shared team of godly men, who, as equals, deliberate and make judgments for the community as a whole. This collegial context is one that will develop in Mercy Hill's family over the next couple of years.²

In fact, one prayer we want to remember is this: may God bring men to faith in Jesus today that He can place into leadership in the future.

Until we have established such leadership, there will be times that we think the church should go in one direction but the church plant's current leadership—the church planter—will take it in a different direction.

When this happens, it is important you understand that even when everyone doesn't agree, we will stand together, believing the best about one another, assuming, in particular, our leaders are prayerfully doing what God is guiding them to do.

This can be particularly challenging for some people who have come from a background where there has been hurt or pain related to decisions made by church leadership. If this is the case with you, being part of a launch team means that you aggressively pursue healing and forgiveness in these areas of your Christian life.

5. No Entitlement & "for the Good of the Team"

We are asking God to do a special work in New Jersey and the metro Philly area through our labors. We see the bigger picture: God is expanding His kingdom through the ministry of Gospel-centered churches, and we have an opportunity to join Him in this work.

² As a point of fact, Mercy Hill does have an interim board of elders that has been appointed by our denomination who help oversee this ministry.

This has a profound impact on how we see ourselves in the church. We're not in it for us, primarily. We're in it for God. Think about this: salvation, even, isn't about us. It is about God. The reason God saves people from their sins is to bring glory to Himself.

Likewise, your reason for being part of this new community should not be based in any way on what you hope happens in the future for *you* personally. Rather, you should be part of this work for *His glory and the good of others*.

In a similar vein, there will be an almost constant restructuring of the organization of our church as God grows our ministry. In fact, one strategic priority that the leadership of this church holds is the need to "replant" the church every year for the next five years.

What this means is that as new people are gathered into our family, and as our ministry expands, we will be rearticulating, as if for the first time, the same principles and priorities we've articulated all along. But this replanting, and recasting the mission of the church, takes place in a rapidly changing context of a growing church community.

For example, you may experience being in charge of an area one year that, the next year, will fall under someone else's leadership.

Practically speaking, then, we need to think in terms of the "good of the team." Hold your responsibilities with open hands at all times. Avoid the temptation to latch onto "pet projects" that you feel you must lead.

One fairly common scenario in this regard is volunteering. You might find yourself in charge of an area that, due to ministry growth, will require a staff person's leadership. That's a good problem: your ministry area outgrows your capacity to lead it!

Likewise, when our family is small, you might be the best person to lead an area of ministry or service; as we grow, there might be another person who is better suited to that work. You might find yourself serving in an area that is not a "best fit" for you for a season; you might find yourself not being used in an area of intense gifting for a season. Sometimes God chooses *not* to use our gifts, sometimes He chooses to work through us in areas we are not gifted.

Whatever the situation and circumstances, church plant people, and members of a launch team seek to be excited about working in a variety of contexts. Try not to take things too personally.

6. Forms will Change & "Lots of Good Ideas"

The purpose of the church is to demonstrate the presence and character of God. The church, remember, is not an event or a building, but a people called by God to show His kingdom to the world. This function, this identity, will never change.

However, the forms through which this kingdom is expressed, both in our lives, and as we gather corporately for worship, will change.

The mission remains the same: the expression of that mission is dependent upon a number of factors, including cultural and demographic.

Pray for the leadership of Mercy Hill that they will seek God as to how to best express this mission during each season of the life of the church. Pray for your own heart that God will give you contentment as what might be cherished forms for you take on new expressions during different seasons of the life of the church.

One practical way this comes into play is that some ministries of the church will last longer than others; some will have a permanent-kind of existence, others will come and go. Different ministries will have different shelf lives.

Likewise, ideas and decisions will be prayed through and thought through. There are many outside the box thinkers and many resourceful, creative people in our team. This is as it should be. New ventures can't come into being without significant energy spent on thinking creatively about how to bring something about.

However, not everyone is wired with the same amount of creativity. That means you must make an effort to understand that creative input will be highly valued. Don't discount the possibility that someone's seemingly strange ideas may be just the thing that carries the church to its future.

Also make an effort to be someone who brings ideas to the table. Constantly read and learn and think about church planting. Ask others what they're doing. Learn from them. Ask non-Christians and unchurched people what they think about the church.

As the church plant pastor, I tend to give more weight to ideas and suggestions from people who actively are showing they are not only digesting the mission, but putting it into practice.

Try to distinguish between form and function (see above) and help create an environment on the launch team that is conducive to new thinking.

As valuable as creative input is, remember: not all ideas can be accepted. That's okay. If the time comes when your idea isn't the one that is accepted, ask God for the grace to accept that situation. There will be other times when ideas and input are not solicited. Be slow to take things personally.

7. Relational Expectations & Conflict Resolution

In a church plant, the potential for rich community is tremendous. God has brought a number of passionate, like-minded people together on our team.

However, this doesn't mean that all of us will be best friends.

It is only natural in a family for some people to be closer to one another than to others. Think about this: some of us who have a previous history together might find ourselves making friendships with new people. That's as it should be.

We don't want relationships to stay static, but rather for God to continually bring us out of what can become comfortable "bubble." Biblical community always includes outsiders; that's been part of God's plan from the beginning.

As newcomers and outsiders are included in our family, pray that God will help you encourage one another through these changes and give us all a deeper love for Jesus and a life that sees all relationships as means for us to bring glory to God.

Of course, relationships also imply conflict—as imperfect people, we will make mistakes and offend one another. We will not live up to one another's relational expectations.

This, too, is okay. This is normal. Part of learning to be a family, a community of faith, is placing our ultimate expectations in Jesus, not in one another.

At the same time, when your feelings are hurt, when you feel slighted, or feel someone has caused you emotional or relational harm, there are steps that must be taken—and "doing nothing" is not an option that a Christian has available.

Whether you are the *offended* or the *offender*, make your commitment now to take every step to resolve issues that bring temporary division to the Body of Christ.

This is often where leadership comes in. One of the main functions of church leadership is to help navigate such relational conflicts in the family. This means that talking to someone in leadership is preferred to talking to others—slander and gossip will kill a church plant. Avoid this at all costs. When someone is being discussed, make a habit of asking, "Did you mention this to _____?" If not, then say, "I think we should wait to discuss it until he/she is present."

8. Cheering for the Big “C” Church

Mercy Hill has benefitted from many other churches. We are also committed to building up other local churches in New Jersey. It is important to remember: we are not in competition with them. Many local churches share our exact mission, though we will live out our mission in a unique way according to the way God has called and shaped us.

Does every church have to look the same for God to be pleased? Are there any perfect churches? Will we make ourselves big at the expense of someone else?

Let’s remember, also, that there is a temptation to “compete” for church people. That’s not our goal here at Mercy Hill. Instead, we will direct our efforts toward the mass of humanity currently living apart from Christ.

Just as we cheer for other churches, as they follow Jesus, you should make every effort, as Paul writes, to pursue “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” among the Body of Christ in New Jersey and the greater Metropolitan Philadelphia area.

This relates not only to churches we will work with in our communities, it relates to your own church background.

If you are not resolved with a conflict at a previous church, Mercy Hill and its leadership cannot, in good conscience, welcome you into this fellowship. Jesus’ words apply very well here: “first be reconciled to your brother; then, come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5)

Likewise, you may be called out of this church community to serve somewhere else. If that’s the case, remember: your presence on this team is not to be taken lightly. The leadership of Mercy Hill depends on your commitment so that a new church can be formed. That requires you to be an integral part of this family.

If you are called to serve somewhere else, in some other missions field or in another local body of Christ, please commit to making this decision “in community,” in dialogue with the others in our family as well as with the leadership.

Your goal should always be to preserve the unity of the faith and of the church.

9. Knowing God’s Will

The only way to join a new church community, and be a part of a launch team like this, is through earnest prayer from the heart. As yourself the following questions:

- Have you sought the Lord about this decision through prayer and/or fasting?
- Do you truly feel like it is His will that you and your family be committed to this team in Jersey?
- Are the members of your family unified in this decision?
- Being on the launch team isn’t a commitment for the rest of your life, but are you certain for this season that you’re in the right place doing the right thing?
- Are you going in with unhealthy expectations? Have you identified them?
- As best as you can tell, do you believe that you are going into this ministry with a desire to see God’s name glorified and the lost brought to Jesus?

10. Need to Revisit

Finally, it’s only human to have expectations. Not one of us has found perfect control over his expectations, and many of us often find they swing from one extreme to another under trial or stress. That’s okay.

One solution is to ask God's help. Another is to reach out to another person in our community who can remind you of these church-planting realities.

Rereading this document from time to time will also be useful as a reminder of the great work you've undertaken to help start a new church from scratch here in South Jersey.

God is faithful; He will bring the work to completion having begun in your heart and in the lives of everyone He has brought together at Mercy Hill. We need to urge one another along by revisiting these principles regularly.

Conclusion

As you can see, there is more to church planting than perhaps at first meets the eye.

The ten "realities" here each are important to understand. None of them can be taken lightly.

Going into this effort requires all involved to call on their beset efforts to bring a Christ-centered, counter-cultural, kingdom-focused new church community into being.

As we do, we will experience hardship and heartache. But the Master who called us didn't call us to a luxury cruise. He called us into battle, and ultimately, to die for His Name's sake.

This is the reality of church planting—and the reality of the Christian life. As you count the cost, I will pray that God gives you courage to step out in faith to serve Him here.

Postscript

The final page of this essay packet summarizes these commitments and provides a place for you to check each commitment and place your signature. After prayerfully reviewing these ten "realities," sign and return this final page.

My Commitment to the Realities of Church Planting

Having read these realities, check each circle and sign below as an indication of your commitment.

- Highs and Lows.** There is so much uncertainty and things can be so fluid at times that its normal to go through very high “highs” and very low “lows.”
- Don't Expect Perfection.** “Progress not perfection” is a good motto for church planting. The only perfect church is the church in heaven. As soon as I joined the church, it no longer was perfect.
- Sacrifice Will Be the Norm.** By signing up for the launch team, you're agreeing that you understand that this adventure will require “all hands on deck”. As leaders, we understand the pain that sacrifice can cause. At the same time, Jesus said: “If any man comes after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.”
- Building Trust in Leadership.** Church planting initially requires entrepreneurial leadership that typically comes from a single individual—the church planter. This is as it should be: rarely do new things ever get accomplished “by committee.”
- No Entitlement & “for the Good of the Team.”** We're not in it for us, primarily. We're in it for God. Think about this: salvation, even, isn't about us. It is about God. The reason God saves people from their sins is to bring glory to Himself. You should be part of this work for *His glory and the good of others*. Try not to take things too personally.
- Forms will Change & “Lots of Good Ideas.”** The church is not an event or a building, but a people called by God to show His kingdom to the world. This function, this identity, will never change. However, the forms through which this kingdom is expressed will change. Constantly read and learn and think about church planting. Ask others what they're doing. Learn from them. Ask non-Christians and unchurched people what they think about the church.
- Relational Expectations & Conflict Resolution.** It is only natural in a family for some people to be closer to one another than to others. We also want our community always to include outsiders; that's been part of God's plan from the beginning. When conflict arises, whether you are the *offended* or the *offender*, make your commitment now to take every step to resolve issues that bring temporary division to the Body of Christ.
- Cheering for the Big “C” Church.** Mercy Hill has benefitted from many other churches. We are also committed to building up other local churches in New Jersey. If you are not resolved with a conflict at a previous church, “first be reconciled to your brother; then, come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5)
- Knowing God's Will.** The only way to join a new church community, and be a part of a launch team like this, is through earnest prayer from the heart. As yourself: are you certain for this season that you're in the right place doing the right thing?”
- Need to Revisit.** It's only human to have expectations. Rereading this document from time to time will also be useful as a reminder of the great work you've undertaken to help start a new church from scratch here in South Jersey.

Aware of these realities, I commit myself to becoming an eager participant in the Mercy Hill Launch Team.

Signature: _____ Date: _____