

Replanting in a City: Restoring Churches, Neighborhoods, and People

Mike Dodson

Dr. Mike Dodson serves as a Sending Church Coach and Church Planting Pipeline Specialist for the North American Mission Board. Previously, he served as a church planter, pastor, and regional strategist in the Northeast for over 15 years, as well as a church planting professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary for almost 10 years. He has been married to his wife, Kelly, over 25 years, and they are the parents of three sons.

Introduction

What are the limits of God's desire to restore the people to Himself? Through the leadership of James in Acts, God's Word reveals His desire to rebuild His tabernacle so that all the peoples of the earth might seek Him and be restored as well—“After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who makes these things known from long ago” (Acts 15:16-18, NASB).

While God's desire to rebuild and restore is nothing new, it is finding fresh expression in the work of church replanting. Since the publication of *Comeback Churches* over 10 years ago, replanting has appeared on the horizon as a significant model of ministry.¹ In essence, replanting is a hybrid of revitalization and church planting. Many leaders who engage in replanting have qualities and characteristics of both revitalizers and church planters. The new churches emerging from being replanted are a blend of new direction and vision with people and/or resources from established churches. Replanting can be a wonderful way to steward God's people and resources to accomplish His purposes.

In order to explore the reality of replanting in a city, let's answer some important questions. Specifically, what is replanting? What are some unique challenges to replanting in a city? What can replanting accomplish in regard to repurposing buildings, restoring neighborhoods, and renewing people?

What is Replanting?

People who enjoy gardening have probably replanted something—moved a shrub or some other kind of plant from one location to another. Sometimes replanting is done because one plant dies or isn't flourishing and needs to be replaced. The reasons can be myriad: the soil loses nutrients, the climate can experience a dramatic shift, or the plant becomes diseased. It becomes obvious that the best way forward is to replace what has been there with something new. A similar situation can happen with churches.

Replanting is like putting a new plant in the soil where the previous plant struggled or died. The new version of the church brings new life and a fresh expression where the previous church no longer could. In essence, replanting “reveals a possible strategy for older churches and new churches to work together for greater gospel impact.”²

In addition, replanting often grafts in some of the people and elements of the previous church. Like any other model, God needs to breathe life into this new expression. At the same time, the people must discover how to flourish in the same soil and context in which the previous church could not. As Mark Clifton proclaims in a reference to the dry bones coming to life in Ezekiel 37, “Whether it's Israel in the sixth century BC or twenty-first century North America, spiritually dead institutions of faith die for one reason and one reason only: they stop loving what they once loved and stop doing what they once did.”³

In the Foreword of *Replant: How a Dying Church Can Grow Again*, Ed Stetzer asserted,

The Western world is in need of new churches. In some cases churches must multiply and plant new churches from scratch, while in other cases existing churches must and should be revitalized—in essence, they must be “replanted”...

But replanting requires pastoral vision that can see beyond all that to recognize that history and tradition can be allies in forging a path toward revitalization. Many times these churches have a valuable gospel DNA; a theological tradition, lost, that needs to be recovered; and a history of God's faithfulness that needs to be retold.

The very buildings they occupy, while often outdated and in need of repair, speak to decades of faithful stewardship on the part of past congregations. Focusing on that heritage can turn history into an asset and tradition into an argument for change.⁴

Some people have suggested that one of the most helpful tools in *Comeback Churches* is a chart that outlines what a church needs depending on where it is on a revitalization scale.⁵ Over the last several years, I have tweaked the chart to include replanting. This chart might provide a snapshot of where replanting fits in relationship to church revitalization and church planting.

Less — Change — More	A Church Needs...	If it is...
	Refocusing	Stagnant in size (needs a clear focus on outreach)
	Reenergizing	Declining in size (deal w/ internal issues; begin reaching area again)
	Restructuring	Experienced serious decline (large internal changes; new strategy)
	Replanting	Near death (restart with new leadership and become a new church)
	Regenerating	Death is imminent (cease existing; legacy churches)

For the purpose of this article, the models of revitalization, replanting, and planting are distinct and require different kinds of leadership. This concept does not mean that aspects of each model do not overlap with the others. In real life, most situations that can be defined as church revitalization contain hints or elements of the other two models. The same can be said of the other two models. In other words, as with ordinary practical ministry, the lines and distinctions between these three models can be fuzzy at times.

In summary, Mark Clifton summarizes the focus of replanting:

Instead the pathway to new life comes when we remember the legacy of missions and ministry that birthed the new church in the first place and become broken to return to that place once again. This kind of remembering can only happen on the other side of repentance.

That is the heartbeat of what it means to replant a church. It is the process of ensuring a continued legacy for the thousands of near-death churches throughout North America by leading them to reengage with the missions and ministry that laid the foundation of the church.⁶

What Are Some Unique Challenges to Replanting in a City?

We might find it helpful to mention briefly some of the challenges to engaging in replanting in the context of cities. As North America continues becoming more urban and less rural,⁷ changing dynamics can be created in communities and neighborhoods. In turn, churches can struggle to recognize the shifts taking place around them or to make necessary adjustments in ministry strategy. As Darrin Patrick explains, “All contexts—suburban, rural, and urban—need new churches. But there is a special need for new churches in cities. By planting and replanting churches in urban centers, we have a strategic opportunity to influence the entire world, because the entire world is coming to live in, work in, and visit cities.”⁸

That quote alludes to some of the unique challenges of replanting in cities. One is diversity which can manifest itself in many ways—economically, socially, racially, generationally, and culturally as ethnicities, languages, and worldviews intersect. In addition, the changing dynamics in communities and neighborhoods are brought about by transience, gentrification, and the movement of people groups. As John Ulrich points out, this issue can often be one of the changes that needs to take place within churches that need to be replanted. Ulrich notes, “Older people don’t naturally think in terms of racial diversity like the younger generation does, but when they (the older generation) experience it, they can learn to value it.”⁹

Jimmy Steele, who is leading a replant called The Hill Church in La Mesa, California, elaborates on the challenges of replanting in the city:

Competing cultures is the greatest challenge in my replanting context in San Diego. The city itself is a conglomeration of cultures—ethnic, socioeconomic, church/nonchurch, and generational. From the moment we replanted, competing cultures were brought together. Everyone brought their own expectations and assumptions as to what our ministry should look like. The older generation is prone to looking backwards—“This is how we used to do it.” Our church planting team had been trying to form a culture since we moved into our context, which itself is informed by previous church cultures. San Diego’s “churched” culture plays into this as well. There is a culture here of Sunday morning “attractional” church with membership mostly thought of as unimportant and borderline unbiblical. And most importantly, as our church interacts with lost people, a new level of cultural sensitivity is added. The challenge has been trying to create a distinct missional culture through the slow process of replanting, with so many cultures and assumptions regarding ministry.¹⁰

In regard to these challenges Patrick concludes, “Urban soil is the most difficult place for any church to grow. Yet the majority of churches that need replanting are in the urban core. This is a tough paradox to work with.”¹¹ Replanting is challenging

on its own merit because it involves developing a fresh expression of the local church in the midst of a struggling expression. Add to that the changing dynamics of a city context, and the level of complexity rises significantly.

What Can Replanting Accomplish?

Understanding some of the unique challenges that replanting presents in cities is essential. At the same time, doing so is constructive considering all that can be accomplished when new life is infused in a context where a church has lost its vitality. Much can still be accomplished for the Kingdom. Let us look at several positive results when the model of replanting is adopted.

1. Replanting Repurposes Existing Church Buildings or Other Facilities to Renew or Restore the Work of God's Kingdom in a Particular Community.

Many replants spring to life in part by adopting established churches that have been struggling to see transformation (internally and externally) take place for a significant period of time. This situation can be the result when an existing church confuses taking care of a building with taking care of members and the needs within its community. Mark Clifton asserts, "To be frank, it is easier to spend time and money fixing a building than doing the hard work to become an indispensable part of the fabric of the community."¹²

In most cases, the replanting process clearly involves repurposing a building and location for greater Kingdom purposes. Dharti Lewis, Vice President of the North American Mission Board's Send Network, explains,

What Bruce Moore is doing with Christ Fellowship in Tampa is an example of seeing the building go from a Sunday use only, to a 24-7 usage. And I think churches who are able to repurpose their space to become a value add to the community have a better chance of long-term survival than simply those who are sticking to the traditional Sunday and Wednesday only usage.

And you've seen it with those who have used their spaces for schools, daycares, and other ministries like them. But those who are able to take those value adds to the community and turn them into an evangelistic, disciple-making opportunity, not only allow those things to become economic engines but also a tool for outreach into the community.¹³

We all know conceptually that the local church is primarily about the people in the church, rather than being about the building. The church building is intended to be a place where God's people can gather and meet with God. Then, God renews His people to send them back out on mission together. Church buildings are meant to be a resource that God's people steward to accomplish His Kingdom purposes. God's

people are not meant to find their identity in buildings. Replanting is one method that God is using to repurpose and steward existing facilities in a more effective way.

While replanting often involves repurposing existing church buildings, it can also involve repurposing other facilities like schools. The Church at Perry Creek is a replant that began in an elementary school. In that process, the new church has made a significant effort to serve the school (principals, teachers, students and their families). They are adding value to the school and the community. This replant is helping the school use their facilities in more purposeful ways by serving school leaders, students, and their families at school-sponsored events. John Ulrich describes the mindset that he and The Church at Perry Creek have toward the school: “It becomes ground we are reclaiming for the Kingdom.” He amplifies the impact the congregation is having by sharing one teacher’s comment, “The school feels different since the church is here.”¹⁴

2. Replanting Combines a New Core Group of People with an Established Core Group of People.

Joining the new with the old can bring a renewed life, focus, and vision to the established group and challenges the status quo. Doing so is needed but often difficult. Even if they are making efforts to minister to that community, the established group of people may be stuck in a routine of doing church activities that are no longer connecting with the community. This observation does not mean that the existing group of believers never had an impact on their community. Most likely, the church had a history of reaching people in their area, but their effectiveness may have been diminishing for a while.

The replanting team needs to value the church’s history and the people who invested in the previous work while pressing toward the new, future expression. Dharti Lewis elaborates: “In the areas where the new core team went in as learners, they were better able to honor the history of the church moving forward. Instead of coming in with all the answers, they went in seeking to understand before trying to be understood. With regard to replants and mergers, I have seen those things happen well when the dignity of those who were part of the original church is restored.”¹⁵

At the same time, the established group may struggle with experiencing and telling new stories. It is more natural or comfortable to rehearse the stories of their past church experiences. Thus, the new core group must balance finding time to value the stories of the past while knowing that new stories have to be experienced and told. The new stories need to be the primary focus in public settings.¹⁶ Somehow God brings both emphases together.

In addition, the established core group may experience some loss of identity. In general, they need to grieve what they have lost in the previous expression of the church while they are learning new people and new rhythms of ministry in the replant. All of their memories are tied to the past. Now, everything changes with new

relationships, new rituals, new ministries, and new ways of doing things. Replanting teams will do well to respect that identity struggle whenever and however they can while moving forward with the new vision.

As God helps everyone work through this synthesizing process, much good can emerge. The new group can learn to value and appreciate the way God has worked in the past. The established group can experience a renewed vision of seeing lives transformed. New relationships can be formed as the work of God's Kingdom moves forward in a fresh way. The Body of Christ becomes richer as a result.

When God begins to bring about renewal through replanting, the work of His Kingdom can begin to move forward in a fresh way. One of the ways God is doing that at The Hill Church involves changing demographics within the church. Jimmy Steele recalls, "Our church was mostly seniors with very few children before we replanted. Our children's ministry has tripled over the past seven months. And with this growing segment of young families and children, we have seen a growing desire by the seniors to get their unbelieving and unchurched children and grandchildren back in church."¹⁷

3. Replanting Brings About Community Restoration by Engaging Neighborhood Needs.

In the replanting process, one of the goals should be not only seeing changes in the church but also in the surrounding community. As Mark Clifton affirms, "It is important that we understand how to define success as we replant churches. Success—bearing fruit in the life of the church—means having a pattern of making disciples who make disciples that results in the community being noticeably better."¹⁸ It should also result in other communities becoming noticeably better once the replant multiplies by sending people to other communities to establish new expressions of the church.

Often, struggling churches pay little attention to community needs, and the community therefore pays little attention to the church. When neighborhood residents do not see a church having any significant impact in a community, it is much easier for them not to care about a church's existence. Replanting can help address that issue. Mark Clifton explains,

As we have looked to meet the needs of the neighborhoods and serve people with the love of Jesus, people have taken notice. You don't redefine your church for your community by changing your name, updating your sanctuary, or changing your music. You redefine the church for your community by how you serve it. You don't serve your community to get people into your church either. You serve the community to get your church, the people of your church, into the lives of the people in the community on a consistent basis.¹⁹

Recently, Dhati Lewis has been leading a new initiative at the North American Mission Board that focuses on Community Restoration. One strategy for achieving that is to establish economic engines (using the church facilities to establish a daycare for children, members starting new businesses in the community, partnering with local businesses, or providing seminars to help people develop job skills or manage their finances better) for the church as well as the community.

Lewis elaborates on how replanting can help bring about community restoration: "It can bring about restoration from an economic and social vantage point as churches try to figure out how to thrive in the city. When they see the need to engage the city holistically, they look at the emotional, economic, social, and spiritual well-being of the city. By having the added value of space in a replant, you have the ability to leverage that as an asset to create economic engines."²⁰

4. Replanting Addresses Generational Issues to Renew Hope in People's Lives.

As Darrin Patrick asserts, the replanting process can be costly: "The emotional cost of a replant is enormous. The leaders must be ready to take friendly fire masquerading as concern for the church."²¹ While such conflict is likely to happen in replanting, it is worth enduring that cost in order to see God renew the generations and bring them together in a fresh manifestation of the church. It is worth the cost in order to see God establish a renewed sense of hope in both the older and younger generations.

Many churches caught in the grip of plateau or decline develop a generational challenge. In part, this struggle can be rooted in misplaced identity. Jimmy Steele explains it this way:

Living in an everchanging culture, church should be a place of stability—stability in Christ. Many of the seniors in our congregation looked to the church for stability but a misplaced stability in tradition and comfort rather than in Christ. Where their identity has been wrongfully placed, it has been more difficult for them as things change. I see how this can be challenging for them, especially for those who are widows and/or have no family locally. I have learned the importance of preaching on identity in Christ as we make changes. Reiterating that our identity is in Christ, not tradition or "the way things used to be," has been very beneficial.²²

Another result of plateau and decline involves the younger generation fading out of involvement, so the church struggles with developing the next generation of leaders, especially young men. Therefore, one of the key factors that replanting often accomplishes is bringing older and younger generations together in a fresh way. God intends for churches to be multigenerational. The generations need each other. Mark

Clifton asserts, “In merging an old and a new church, the multiple generations can become a source of blessing and strength to one another.”²³

Another way replanting can renew people’s lives involves providing opportunities for leaders to emerge from the older and younger generations. Sometimes the older generation has not been asked to provide leadership for a long time. In the replanting process, John Ulrich has found that “men have stepped up and led well.” He further elaborates the importance of both generations: “Young people help put a face on things that people like to see. Older people know how to get things done.”²⁴ Replanting can help bring both groups together.

Moreover, we know God desires the generations to value one another. “Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to *him* as a father, *to* the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, *and* the younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Timothy 5:1-2, NASB). Titus chapter 2 has something to say about this as well. Replanting provides plenty of opportunity to apply these verses.

Dhati Lewis encapsulates the importance of this issue: “Whether someone is young or old, they still want to belong and they still want to matter. While the application may look different for someone older or younger, the better the leader is able to infuse dignity to all parties then the better the replanting process will be as it takes place in the city.”²⁵

Conclusion

My family and I recently had the experience of participating in a replanting effort for a year in a SWAT (Serving With Another Temporarily) team experience. It was rewarding to see and hear the struggle to value a previous identity and build a new one. It was exciting to see people find a renewed, missional purpose in serving the kids, families, teachers, and administration of the elementary school where the new church was meeting. It was encouraging to see the effort to be multigenerational and more diverse. May God’s Kingdom purposes be fulfilled through the replanting of many churches in the days ahead. It is a model and methodology that God can use to repurpose existing facilities, restore neighborhoods through gospel ministry and proclamation, and transform people’s lives to better reflect God’s Kingdom purposes.

NOTES

1. For example, this model of ministry has become a major focus of the North American Mission Board over the last three years (www.namb.net/church-replanting/).
2. Mark Devine and Darrin Patrick, *Replant: How a Dying Church Can Grow Again* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014), 20.
3. Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: New Life for Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016), 13-14.
4. Ed Stetzer in Devine and Patrick, *Replant*, 14-16.

5. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H Books ,2007), 18.
6. Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 14-15.
7. For more information on this topic, see three posts from 2017 on overviewing Mission Field North America: <http://www.thecgcs.org/2017/02/8653/>, <http://www.thecgcs.org/2017/03/mission-field-the-north-american-urban-context/>,<http://www.thecgcs.org/2017/03/mission-field-north-america-urban-context-part-ii/>.
8. Devine and Patrick, *Replant*, 35.
9. Ulrich, John. Interview by author. Raleigh, August 21, 2018. John serves as the Lead Replanter and Pastor of The Church at Perry Creek in Raleigh, NC.
10. Steele, Jimmy. Interview by author. Email. San Diego, August 22, 2018. Jimmy serves as the Lead Replanter and Pastor of The Hill Church located in the San Diego area.
11. Devine and Patrick, *Replant*, 81.
12. Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 29.
13. Lewis, Dhati. Interview by author. Email. Atlanta, August 22, 2018 While serving with the North American Mission Board, he is also the founding planter and lead pastor of Blueprint Church in Atlanta, GA. He has also mobilized and trained others to plant and replant multiple churches.
14. John Ulrich, Interview.
15. Lewis, Interview.
16. The Church at Perry Creek has created a testimony time in many of their services called “I Believe in Jesus Because.” That opportunity allows people from the established group and new people to focus on telling meaningful stories of God’s work in their lives.
17. Steele, Email Interview.
18. Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 7.
19. Ibid., 65.
20. Lewis, Email Interview.
21. Devine, *Replant*, 60.
22. Steele, Email Interview.
23. Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 46.
24. Ulrich, Interview.
25. Lewis, Email Interview.