





# 13 PILLARS FOR PLANTING HEALTHY CHURCHES


WRITTEN BY MATT ROGERS

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# INTRODUCTION

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**Planting churches isn't enough. The goal of the missionary task is to plant healthy, strong, and biblical churches. That's how they portray the manifold wisdom of God and establish a long-standing, faithful witness to the gospel in our community.**

**But in order to accomplish this task, we need to know what the Bible says a church is.**

**The goal of this document is to describe 13 pillars for planting healthy churches. These are necessary supports. They aren't merely important "in the early days" but at every stage of development, even if it takes wisdom to apply them during different phases of a church's life.**



## PILLAR #1: A COMMITMENT TO BIBLICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

- ① The local church is the means and end of mission (Acts, Rev. 2–3).

God’s appointed missionary to evangelize and make disciples is the local church, to whom he has promised his ongoing care, granted his mantle of authority, and ordained as a pillar of truth and outpost of mission in a community (Eph. 5:29-30; Matt. 16:18–20; 1 Tim. 3:15; Acts).

When we say “biblical ecclesiology,” we mean a faithful attempt to understand and apply God’s intention for his church as revealed in his Word. Faithful church planters must begin here. As the creator of the church, God possesses all authority to declare his intentions for how the church should function.

Throughout the book of Acts, as the message of Jesus moves into new contexts and people respond in faith and repentance, God’s people form new churches. Missionaries certainly bear witness to Jesus, but the ongoing work is entrusted to local churches organized according to God’s design (Titus 1:5). Those joined to the church testify that they’ve been united with Christ and regenerated by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 6:5; Titus 3:5). These believers commit to building up the church, both in its depth of maturity and its reach to the world (Eph. 4:11–16).

Church planting isn’t an entrepreneurial endeavor designed to support independent missionaries. Nor is it a human construct that can be manipulated for pragmatic ends. Church planting is the outworking of God’s plan for redeeming his people through Jesus. It’s stepping into the work he is doing to save sinners and put the world back together again from the terrors of Satan, sin, and death (1 Cor. 3:9).

Church planters must begin their work with a deep-seated commitment to the local church, a clear definition of what the church is, and a dogged fixation to prioritize the health of these local assemblies.



## PILLAR #2: A COMMITMENT TO FERVENT PRAYER

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God is the ultimate church planter. Not only has he been planting churches for some two thousand years, but he's also the sole agent who gives life to those dead in sin and unites them to the church (Eph. 2:1–22).

Church planters acknowledge their deep dependence on God's Spirit through fervent prayer (Acts 6:4). They recognize that no pragmatic technique is sufficient or necessary to build God's church. Planters shouldn't repudiate all forms of strategy and planning, but they strategize and plan with their hope and confidence in God's activity, not their own.

This confidence shows itself in the life of a church plant in numerous ways, the first of which is prayer. Prayers of praise and thankfulness should be normal as the church enjoys God's blessings (Phil. 1:3–5). So, too, should prayers asking the Lord for wisdom and practical needs.

Additionally, churches should regularly pray together. Jesus declared that his people would be a house of prayer (Matt. 21:13). From the outset, a church plant's members should see prayer as one of the most important things they do together.

# PILLAR #3: A FOCUS ON RAISING UP FAITHFUL ELDERS

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The local church is a community led by qualified men who aspire to the work of pastoring God's people (Acts 20:17–38; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). The selection of a church's leaders is one of the most important decisions the church will make for its long-term viability and faithfulness.

Many church plants begin with a team of pastors. Some begin with only one "planting pastor." Sadly, in these cases, it's far too common for a potential pastor to nominate himself.

Generally speaking, solo pastoral ministry is not enough. Scripture is clear that pastors ought to lead and care for a church. A planter must begin finding and raising up other leaders who are either already qualified for such work or could step into this role with adequate training and support.

Sometimes, these people will be sent by a sending church and move with the planting team. Other times, they'll emerge from the planting context. In either case, the new church must know, observe, and affirm these men for the work.

And church plants need to be careful. A need for leadership is no excuse to rush the process (1 Tim. 5:22). Hasty appointments of new pastors are a recipe for disaster. A church should patiently determine whether or not a potential pastor demonstrates godly character. A man shouldn't desire a title, but rather to shepherd God's people from the heart. For those serving in international contexts or cross-cultural cities, it's wise to consider how best to train and appoint indigenous pastors to shepherd their people.

Pastors must forge vibrant, healthy relationships built on trust, love, and interdependence. Forming these relationships will likely pose the greatest challenge in the early days of planting and revitalization. But over time, they will bless the church for years to come.



# PILLAR #4: A PRIORITY ON RIGHTLY PROCLAIMED TRUTH

A pastor primarily leads the church through faithful preaching and teaching (2 Tim. 4:2). The Bible is God’s revealed Word. It is without error and sufficient for all matters pertaining to life and godliness (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:3). The pastor must shepherd the church to esteem the Bible as such.

A vibrant preaching ministry is essential for healthy church planting. Church planters are, of course, busy. Tasks pile up, as does the pressure to devote less time on preaching and more time on fill-in-the-blank.

A faithful pastor, however, will prioritize the time needed to study, prepare, and preach sermons that demonstrate the centrality of Christ in all of Scripture. He will model faithful Bible study skills congregants can replicate themselves. Over time, a church’s preaching—alongside a healthy prayer diet—will do more to develop the spiritual health of the church than any other practice. Other tasks are important, too, but none should replace the centrality of the ministry of the Word.

The weekly act of preaching to the gathered church isn’t the only instance of Word-centered ministry. As one author puts it, the Word should sound out from our pulpits on Sunday morning and then reverberate throughout the week—through discipling relationships, hospitality, evangelism, counseling, family devotions, and small groups.



# PILLAR #5: AN INVESTMENT IN JOYFUL EVANGELISM



The church is a corporate witness of the life-transforming message of Jesus’s perfect life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection. Those who have received this good news by faith are themselves then commissioned as ambassadors to declare that message to others (2 Cor. 5:17–21; 1 Pet. 2:9–10). Jesus’s famous parable of the sower reminds the church of its task to widely and indiscriminately scatter the seed of the gospel, even as we trust that God is the one who ultimately gives the growth (Matt. 13). He grants salvation; the church simply proclaims the message of salvation.

Church planters love to scatter the seed of the gospel. But evangelism isn’t just the pastor or church planter’s job. It’s the job of the whole church. In fact, there’s a sense in which it’s actually church members who are on the “front lines” of evangelistic efforts. They’re the ones whom God has placed in society among non-believers and, therefore, who can more easily proclaim Jesus to the watching world.

A church gathers on Sunday and then scatters throughout the week. In doing so, the whole church engages in evangelism both corporately and individually. Church plants should be known for their evangelistic fervor and their clarity and confidence in the gospel.

## PILLAR #6: A STRATEGY FOR INTENTIONAL MEMBERSHIP

As a church grows—either through conversions or transfers—it must do the hard work of upholding meaningful membership. What does meaningful membership look like?

First, faithful pastors will ensure, as best as they can, that member candidates understand the gospel, believe in Jesus’s finished work, and bear fruit demonstrating God’s Spirit at work in their lives. In other words, a church plant should have a clear membership process in which pastors explain what their church believes and how its members mean to care for one another. These beliefs and promises are generally spelled out in a statement of faith and church covenant.

A high view of local church membership also requires the occasional practice of church discipline, as explained in Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 5. Situations will arise in which a church member does not heed the Word of God and refuses to repent of known sin. In such cases, a church must protect its health and its witness by pursuing the member and, if unrepentant, by excommunicating them. The motivation for this action is always love—for the church at large, for the watching world, and even for the member in question.

While difficult, the practice of church discipline is vital for church plants. It should be taught and practiced from the outset because a sin-infested church full of unrepentant members will ultimately hinder its own mission and harm the name of Christ in a community.





## PILLAR #7: A CONCERN FOR SPIRITUAL HEALTH

This pillar of church membership and discipline doesn't mean our shepherding should be impersonal and structure-heavy. Rather, these practices simply mean that leaders care for the souls and spiritual welfare of each individual sheep.

A church committed to these practices will be full of burden-bearing relationships. It will be led by shepherds who know the sheep whom God has given them. Pastors aren't CEOs commissioned to lead an organization; they're shepherds who will give an account to God for the spiritual welfare of every single one of their people (Heb. 13:17, 1 Pet. 5:1–5).

As a church grows, pastors will entrust this work of spiritual care to more and more members. This is what it means for pastors to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, so that the body will build itself up. (Eph. 4:1–16). This work will happen informally as members take upon themselves the task of caring for one another, and formally through the various ministry structures of the church.

## **PILLAR #8: A COMMITMENT TO PERSEVERING DISCIPLE-MAKING**

God grows his church in his time, according to his plan. Church development will often appear slow, even grueling. There will be seasons when stagnation or regression seems unrelenting. However, church planters must trust the marching orders Jesus first gave his church and all subsequent believers (Matt. 28:18–20). The work of disciple-making—that is, baptizing and teaching among all nations—will not happen quickly. But it will be successful because Jesus stands beside us the whole way (Matt. 28:20).

In a church's early years, particularly during seasons of stagnation, leaders will be tempted to look for a "quick fix," some way to grow the church apart from the toilsome work of interpersonal disciple-making. But faithful planters and pastors will resist. They'll persevere in the work, regardless of the apparently slow progress.

These leaders will also commit to developing others who can take upon themselves the task of discipling believers to maturity. Even the best pastor cannot attend to a church's disciple-making needs alone (Eph. 4:11–16; 1 Cor. 12:12–30). The work must be distributed so that various members, with their differing gifts, collectively teach others how to follow Jesus (Rom. 12:4–8). This work is particularly necessary for new converts, who need church members to walk with them.

In the early years of a church, this process may be informal. But as a church grows, its leaders will likely need to develop systems to ensure that such disciple-making occurs among the body.

Finally, we need to remember that this process will take time. That's why pastors need to be willing to stay, to see it come to fruition. Leaders must be patient as they prayerfully wait for a disciple-making culture to take root among the people.



# PILLAR #9: A UTILIZATION OF DEEDS OF MERCY AND COMPASSION

Throughout Scripture, the inbreaking of the kingdom is demonstrated through signs of what life will be like when God puts all things back together again (Luke 8, Acts 2:42–47). These demonstrations of God’s power aren’t the primary focus of God’s redemptive work; they’re a spotlight that validates the identity and mission of Jesus.

Church plants stand out in their community not only through what they teach, but also through deeds of mercy and compassion. In a broken society, the needs are vast, even overwhelming. So planters must determine how to focus their church’s limited time and resources.

Evangelism and discipleship are the heartbeat of the planter’s task, but even a young church will be mindful of Paul’s exhortation to do good to all (Gal. 6:10). These good deeds are a means by which the church shines its light in a dark world, a light the Lord may use to draw people to himself (Matt. 5:14–16; Titus 2:14).

How do these deeds connect to the preaching and discipleship ministry of the church plant? In short, a church’s Word ministry should empower everything its members do as they apply the truths of the gospel in their workplaces and neighborhoods. As church members live for the glory of God, proclaim the gospel to their colleagues, and invest in good deeds of mercy and compassion, they provide a viable beachhead for meaningful relationships.



## PILLAR #10: AN EXPECTATION OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

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The enemy's efforts are focused on the work of the local church (Matt. 16:18). If Satan is working to derail the church, then we can rest assured the church is worth building. These attacks will be ever-present, particularly against the planter and his family.

The form of these attacks will vary, but common themes of spiritual warfare include intense anxiety or depression, sickness or undiagnosed maladies, marital discord and disunity, persistent temptation from previous sin strongholds (such as alcoholism or pornography), real or perceived loneliness, and conflict among the church planting team or key leaders.

Wise planters anticipate such attacks and prepare accordingly. They recognize them as spiritual battles that must be fought with spiritual means (Eph. 6). They're not ashamed by the assaults they face because they recognize the enemy's work and entrust themselves to God's power to fight on their behalf. They should also have a plan to pursue conflict resolution and fight for relational unity.

It also means that these planters and their churches might benefit from support systems outside of their local church that can walk with them through the battle.



## PILLAR #11: A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH A SENDING CHURCH

Church plants ought to maintain a close relationship with their sending church(es). The church planter likely received training and affirmation from his sending church. And it's under the care of that church that he and his team were sent on mission, similar to how the church at Antioch invested in Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–3).

A sending church functions like an aircraft carrier by fueling the planting team and releasing them into their mission. The sending church is also the most vital context for affirming if a church planter is qualified.

But the relationship must not stop then. The trust forged through this process prepares the planting team for a long-term relationship. This relationship enables the pastor and the church at large to enjoy long-term care, prayer, and advice.

The relationship isn't one-way; it's reciprocal. The church plant encourages their sending church by telling how the Lord is at work among them. They invite the sending church to pray, serve, and perhaps even financially support their ministry for the long haul. In this way, church planters and sending churches step into Acts's pattern of partnership between churches.

# PILLAR #12: A SUSTAINABLE FINANCIAL MODEL

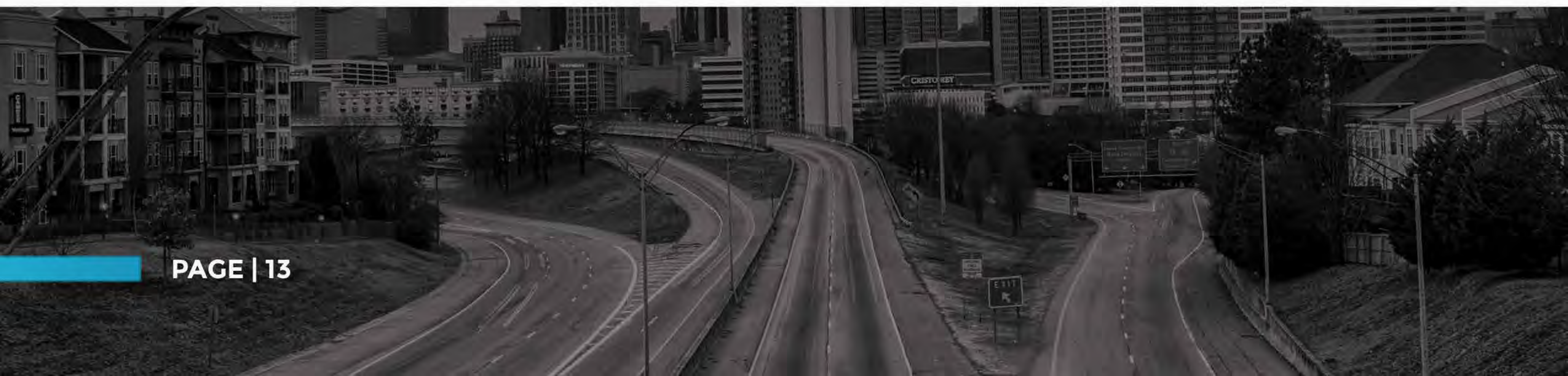
Believe it or not, money for pastors and church plants comes up fairly often in the New Testament. Paul called the churches he planted to invest in his ongoing missionary labors (2 Cor. 11:9). He also recognized the need for pastors to be paid for their work (1 Tim. 5:1–18). Even the Lord Jesus himself had financial supporters (Luke 8:1–3).

Church planters generally face a unique challenge. Their church can't fully support them. Planters need to reckon with this; if they don't, it's unlikely their work will endure. Even if they scrape by in their new city, the strain on the family from scarcity will likely zap ministry vitality over time. In response to this, some pastors pursue secondary work to make ends meet. But that juggling act often proves challenging.

So what should a pastor do?

Put simply, church planters should strive to develop a financial model that positions them to do the work of ministry for an extended period of time. Far too often, planters' financial resources dry up long before the church has moved out of infancy. In some cases, particularly in urban centers, planters and churches may never be fully self-supporting. These leaders need to have a plan for long-term, outside support—both for themselves and, possibly, for their church at large.

A healthy sending church should help a planter to develop this model. Based on the unique needs of the planter and location, a basic budget and fundraising plan should be developed from the outset. While the sending church may support a significant portion of these needs, it's often wise to empower the planter to raise some money as well.





## PILLAR #13: PARTNERSHIP WITH LIKE-MINDED CHURCHES

The work of missions can be lonely, especially for those who are used to a vibrant and growing Christian community. Because planting a healthy church will take time, planters should expect some relational hardships and even loneliness.

One antidote is fostering relationships with like-minded churches in the new location. These friendships will be easier to come by in some places than others, but regardless of the context, a pastor needs to find a fraternity of friends with whom he can relate, share, and serve. Different pastoral and church networks like the Pillar Network can help for this purpose.

There are also likely pastors in the city who have been laboring in the mission for years, even decades. Planters would be wise to humbly enter these relationships, ask questions, and listen. It's easy for a planter to enter a new place with something to prove and seek to validate his identity by doing something better than anyone else who has come before him. This results, even unintentionally, in adversarial relationships with existing leaders. Such tension does little to advance the shared cause of God's work in a place. While not all existing leaders will prove favorable, a wise planter will seek to earn the right to enter a place by fostering relationships with leaders who are already there.

What's most important, however, is that the planter fosters relationships with like-minded leaders who mean the same thing when they speak about the gospel of Jesus, the mission of the church, and the task of the pastor. These doctrinal commonalities establish a basis for partnership both in the present and even future planting endeavors. Through these relationships, a brand-new church plant can support the work of like-minded churches who themselves are somewhere in the process of planting.

Sometimes, a planter's denomination offers this for him. But denominational links can be so broad that a planter seeks a "tribe within his tribe" for true partnership in the work. However these relationships are formed, pastors and churches need meaningful relationships with other churches—for encouragement, for edification, and for a fuller picture of God.



# CONCLUSION

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**Planting churches is one thing. Planting healthy churches is another.**

**These 13 pillars will play a role in establishing healthy local churches.**

**As already mentioned, leaders need to be committed to these—not only from the outset, but throughout the entirety of their ministry.**

**Their importance never fades, even as needs change over time.**

**The Pillar Network exists to encourage churches to plant healthy churches who, together, worship the Lord Jesus and invest in his mission until that great day when he returns.**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt and his wife, Sarah, have called Greenville home for most of the last two decades after graduating from Furman University and North Greenville University respectively. They have five children—Corrie, Avery, Hudson, Willa, and Fuller. Matt is the pastor of The Church at Cherrydale where he leads in various mission and church planting endeavors, equips the next generation of pastors and missionaries, and preaches consistently. Matt holds an MA from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, as well as an MDiv and PhD from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he also teaches.

