

IS GOD CALLING ME TO START A NEW CHURCH?

A Discernment Guide for Curious Church Planters

By Dr. Ed Love

You could plant a new church! I know it may seem like a ridiculous idea. I remember when someone asked me the question, “Could God be calling you to start a new church?” At first, I was thinking there’s absolutely no way—I’m not good enough, gifted enough, smart enough, credible enough, experienced enough, or trained enough to start a new faith community. Not to mention I have a past. Oh, my past... yikes. Yah, there is absolutely no way God could ever use someone like me in that kind of leadership capacity!

My excuses were rational, reasonable, and realistic. However, I couldn’t help but notice God enjoys working through people who feel incredibly unworthy.

I’d like to share a story with you about one such fellow. He probably felt those same type of feelings described above; yet God went on to use him to start not one church community—but hundreds. In fact, without this individual, the Early Church movement may not have made it through the first century. This fellow’s name was Saul.

Saul was about as anti-Jesus as a person could be. Saul was a leader in the Jewish religious system and he had it out for the early Christ-followers. In the book of Acts, there is a story informing us about how Saul was involved in the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. The story went like this:

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named *Saul*. (Acts 7:54-58 NIV)

The author of Acts gives us a little clue as to who was initiating and approving of this murderous plot when he writes, “The witnesses laid their coats (or cloaks) at the feet of a young man named Saul.” (Acts 7:58) The word translated coat or cloak essentially means a type of clothing, mantle, or wrap. This was most likely the Jewish shawl or head covering.

In the first century, the act of laying your cloak or shawl at someone’s feet was a

nonverbal way of indicating you are a witness and supporter of an event, and you are willing to tell the whole truth regarding the situation. The person who received the cloaks at their feet was always the individual spearheading the event.

Even more, in other writings, we learn Saul had the authority from the Jewish chief priests to enforce drastic measures to end the movement of Christianity, which is exactly what Saul committed his life to doing.

If you are familiar with Saul's story, then you know he had a life-changing encounter with Jesus while on his way to a town called Damascus. While in pursuit of persecuting more followers of Jesus, Saul encountered Jesus and was stopped dead in his tracks. In a literal flash, the very man spearheading the persecution converted to Christianity.

With an inner change so drastic, the Lord decided to change Saul's name to Paul. A name change in the first century was a public statement of an identity change. Saul was truly a new creation in Christ Jesus. The new Saul, now Paul, had a story to tell and a burning passion to spread the Good News about Jesus. If there was anyone who wasn't good enough, credible enough, and trained enough to end up being a catalyst for Jesus' church—it was Saul.

God has a way of turning heads by using people who, by any human standards, should not be used. Even Jesus' disciples had a hard time accepting Paul into the fold. Paul was required to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to convince other Christians of his legitimacy and trustworthiness to be considered an apostolic influence in the Early Church. Nevertheless, Paul did not let what others thought of him hold him back from following through with God's call on his life. Paul saw the Light and he wanted everyone to see it as well.

Let me fast forward through Paul's story to the key section. Paul was eventually accepted by the early disciples and became a powerful missionary force. Paul risked his life and went on to make three long missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire—planting churches, preaching the Good News of Jesus, and giving strength and encouragement to many emerging leaders. Of the 27 books in the New Testament, Paul is credited as authoring 13 of them. We don't know for certain as to how Paul died, but the Early Church tradition asserts Paul was martyred for his faith in Christ at the hands of the Romans around 65 A.D.

Paul truly was an awe-inspiring example of someone who gave his life for the cause of Christ.

If there is one take away I could make from the life of Paul it would be this: The world needs more Pauls to show up on the scene and testify to the grace of God. Right now, much like the first-century Roman colonies, there are communities all over the world in desperate need of a Paul-like figure to show up on the scene announcing the Good News of Jesus.

Even though it may seem like there is a church on every corner in America, Christianity is declining and the religiously unaffiliated are on the rise. Based on the census data from 2011, there are 11 churches for every 10,000 Americans. Unless your region is an anomaly, it is likely your community has a high population of people who consider Christianity irrelevant and purposeless.

To find out the precise percentage of your county with no religious affiliation go to www.thearda.com and type your county in the search cue.

So, back to the original question... is it possible God could use you to reach the unreached?

Let's just suspend the external and internal judgment for a moment and ponder what it might look like for God to use you in that capacity.

The Discernment Zone

It is important to enter a serious discernment process in order to confirm if God is indeed calling you to start a new church. Without divine confirmation, you will likely start for the wrong reasons and quit when ministry begins to feel difficult. Yet, when the Holy Spirit confirms this unique calling, you will begin to tap into a deep sense of enduring faithfulness and obedience, continuing on with grit and perseverance.

Every disciple is born into the kingdom of God as a missionary. We are all sent-ones. Our identities as children in God's kingdom and participation in his mission are like a tree connected to its root system. Jesus described this direct connection to all of his disciples when he said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere." (Acts 1:8)

This mandate does not necessarily mean every disciple will be called to start a new faith community, although in some situations, this will be the end result. We must agree Jesus' first call was simply to follow him wherever we go. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus said, "As you go, make disciples..." Jesus did not say, "As you go, plant churches..." However, what ends up happening when you make a lot of disciples? You need to plant a lot of churches that continue the disciple making movement! This picture was God's plan all along and God gifts certain leaders to spark these new missional initiatives.

It is important to know God expresses his calling differently in every leader. Some people receive a bolt of lightning; some people receive continual and progressive nudges throughout their lifetime. Even though no calling experience is the same, there are transferable principles we can come to acknowledge.

As you proceed into the discernment zone, here are three dynamics to prayerfully consider:

1. Consider how God has WIRED you.

Catalytic Innovator:

- Do you like to start new things?
- Does innovation inspire you?
- Do you enjoy the start up process?
- Do small business atmospheres motivate you?
- Do you have a history of starting new things from the ground up?
- Do others know you as a risk taker?

My Reflections:

Vision Caster:

- Do you dream big?
- Do people tend to follow you?
- Do you enjoy communicating what God is up to in the world?
- Does your heart break for people disconnected from Christ and the church?
- Do you enjoy developing a strategy to support your vision?
- Do you respond to challenges with solutions and get things done?

My Reflections:

Friends with non-Christians:

- Do you enjoy spending time with people who are far from God?
- Do you have non-church going friends in your cell phone contact list?
- Do you enjoy hosting events or meals with people who aren't in your church?
- Do you pray for God to use you as a light within your relationships?
- Do you pray for people, by name, that do not yet know the love of Christ?

My Reflections:

2. Consider how people RESPOND to your leadership.

While God’s calling does not originate from other humans, you will find people close to you have an uncanny ability to recognize church planting fruit in your life. Remember, the Early Church eventually affirmed the apostle Paul by recognizing his call to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:1-10; Acts 13:1-3). In the same way, if God is calling you toward starting a new faith community, God will use others to affirm this calling. Here are a few discernment questions to consider:

- Have you developed a relationship of trust with the leadership of your church?
- Do those whom God has placed in leadership oversight of you know about your interest in starting a new kingdom project?
- Do you submit well to the leaders God has placed in your life?
- Are you open to going wherever God may call you?
- Do you get the sense others might follow you wherever you go?
- Do people tend to enjoy being around you and your ministry culture?
- Do people come to you and ask questions about life and God?
- Does God regularly use you to bring about change in the lives of others?
- Have you led people to Jesus outside of a church setting?

My Reflections:

3. Consider the perpetual PASSION of your heart.

While it is not uncommon for leaders of new churches to be dissatisfied with the status quo, this dissatisfaction must not be about a lack of style or programs—it must be born out of a hunger to reach those who are far from God. Here are a few discernment questions to consider:

- Do you believe the good news of Jesus changes lives?
- Do you love seeing people put their faith in Christ for salvation?

Do you crave seeing people commit to Christ through baptism?
Do you love being transformed by Jesus?
Do you love learning more and more about the Bible?
Do you have a spiritual boldness?
Do you daydream about fresh ways to express God's purposes in the world?
Are you willing to say NO to other opportunities in order to say YES to the growing pains of developing a new faith community?

My Reflections:

These three principles and questions related to your wiring, people's response to your leadership, and your involvement with non-Christians may not be a complete checklist, but they can serve as a conversation starter to express the desires of your heart to your spouse, a best friend, pastor, or district superintendent. If you feel as if God is beginning to confirm a church planting calling on your life, then proceed with humble confidence, knowing that with God ALL things are possible (Mt. 19:26).

If you do feel led to discover more about your unique wiring, one next step is to take the church planters pre-assessment found here:

www.wesleyan.org/818/church-planter-assessment-center-events

If you do not feel led to take a next step, then know this: Not everyone is called to plant a new church, but everyone needs to be *about* church planting. Church planting is like raising a cell phone tower in order to increase coverage in areas desperate for the Good News of Jesus. Without a doubt, church planting is an effective form of evangelism in our day and age and the world needs more mission-minded communities, not less. It's possible God might not be calling you to lead the charge of a new initiative, but maybe God is calling you to leave your comfort zone and participate in a new kingdom work. If this is the case, begin praying for God to raise up a specific leader for your area or prepare your heart to go when the opportunity presents itself.

God's first command was to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28), and Jesus' last command was to go into the world and multiply (Matthew 28:19-20). Multiplication is at the core of God's heart and God longs for multiplication to be at the core of our hearts as well. May you discover the great joy of being a multiplier in God's kingdom...