

**“Dear Established Church Pastor: Welcome to Church Planting”**  
**A Resource for Uprooted Congregations**

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*There’s a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens: a time for giving birth and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for uprooting what was planted.*

- Ecclesiastes 3:1-2<sup>1</sup>

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For many of us in clergy and church leadership circles, church planting is viewed as a specialty vocation, engaged in by those who have a specific calling to it, who have been affirmed to possess a specific set of personality traits and skills, and who, perhaps, have received specific training. Consequently, many pastoral leaders of established churches—churches who would not (or no longer) self-identify as church plants—would be quick to say, “I am *not* a church planter.”

Enter the COVID-19 global pandemic. Since March 2020 pastoral leaders across North America have been thrust into an unexpected, uninvited, and largely unwelcome new context for ministry. The norms of established church life, regardless of denomination, size, or programming, have been severely disrupted due to mandated restrictions on physical gatherings, continued concern for personal and public health and safety, and a climate of uncertainty politically and economically that leaves many unsure of how to make sense of what is happening in the world, let alone the church. Add to all this the media-exposed police shootings of African Americans, calls for racial justice, and the eruption of on-the-streets protest and violence, and pastoral leaders find themselves trying to negotiate an emotional landscape marked by sharp divisions, confrontative politics, and fear for the future. The recent U.S. presidential election only accentuated the turbulence.

How are we to name and describe this new reality for the church? Multiple images and metaphors apply, but one that might be most apropos is “uprooted”. Churches of all kinds have been uprooted from the ground in which they had been planted, grown, and matured. Pastoral leaders and members of congregations have been dislodged from places of familiarity and relative comfort and are now left dangling in the exposed new air of change, struggling to find the ground which had been home.

What is the future for our uprooted churches? Appropriately so, this has become a hot topic in church leadership circles and projections have already been made and proposals put forward.<sup>2</sup> In addition, leading biblical scholars have provided theological frameworks to help us respond faithfully in times of crisis and change.<sup>3</sup> In this brief article I offer a very particular kind of resource: a prayerful, reflective process for local church discernment. It consists largely of

questions to be asked and answered in context. Only you and your people can determine a faithful response. So, back to our guiding metaphor.

In the world of landscaping and gardening, an uprooted plant must be re-planted if it is to have any chance to survive, let alone thrive. However, this cannot be a simple matter of hurriedly sticking the plant back in the ground from where it was uprooted. Rather, its transplantability must be carefully evaluated based on such factors as the effects of the uprooting on the root system and the size of the uprooted plant. Some uprooted plants will not be able to be successfully replanted. Those that are may need a different location, different soil, additional fertilizer, extra watering, a more diverse ecosystem, as well as more vigilant oversight during the early weeks of attempted reconnection with the ground, i.e., becoming re-rooted.

A church, like an uprooted plant, cannot simply be placed back in the ground it left and expect to reestablish as if there was no disruption. No matter how much pastoral leaders and members of congregations long to “get back to the way things were before the pandemic” or hope that racial unrest will “settle down” and politics “return to normal,” this is not how living organisms work.<sup>4</sup>

Though not starting from scratch like a traditional church planter, many established church pastors now face a challenge that they’ve not had to before: leading in the transplanting of their congregations, guiding a replanting process that cannot assume a wholesale return to what was. So, pastor of an established church—welcome to church planting!

There is no simple or straightforward formula to follow for this replanting process, but the wisdom tradition of gardening<sup>5</sup> suggests some important steps can be taken. Consider the following six as a framework for church transplanting to help you lead your community in discerning a way forward. Each element points toward an activity, posits questions for examination, and offers a passage of Scripture for prayerful reflection.

**Survey the damage.** A true uprooting event is more than a temporary pause, more than a simple bump in the road. Something live and organic has experienced disruption and perhaps even permanent damage. What are the casualties in your congregational context, especially at the “root” level? Be careful not to assume that all changes and adaptations have been damaging. Carefully and contemplatively look at that which has been uprooted and ask, “What has been damaged in the infrastructure and what only cosmetically? What might become damaged if not attended to immediately? What has been exposed that previously was hidden?”

*Scripture for reflection:* “When I reached Jerusalem and had been there for three days, I set out at night, taking only a few people with me. I didn’t tell anyone what my God was prompting me to do for Jerusalem, and the only animal I took was the one I rode. I went out by night through the Valley Gate past the Dragon’s Spring to the Dung Gate so that I could inspect the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down, as well as its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Spring Gate and to the King’s Pool. Since there was no room for the animal on which I was riding to pass, I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and returned by entering through the Valley Gate.” – Nehemiah 2:11-15

**Lament.** To be uprooted is to suffer loss and trauma. Name that which has been traumatic in your congregational context in the form of prayer and worship so richly evident in the Scriptures, especially the Psalms—in lament. Lead your people in expressing grief, confusion, fear, anger, bringing all their complaints before the Lord. Only with this honesty can a truly constructive moving forward begin.

*Scripture for reflection:* “We have heard it, God, with our own ears; our ancestors told us about it: about the deeds you did in their days, in days long past . . . But now you’ve rejected and humiliated us . . . You’ve made us a joke to all our neighbors; we’re mocked and ridiculed by everyone around us . . . Wake up! Why are you sleeping, Lord? Get up! Don’t reject us forever! Why are you hiding your face, forgetting our suffering and oppression? Look: we’re going down to the dust; our stomachs are flat on the ground! Stand up! Help us! Save us for the sake of your faithful love.”  
– Psalm 44:1, 9a, 13, 23-26

**Assess the root system.** Times of disruption and trauma bring a shock to the system, but they also provide opportunity to ask important discernment questions:<sup>6</sup> What happened? Why is it affecting us the way it is? In what ways have we been well-grounded or not? What has been the basis of our identity? What remains from the uprooting that is worth celebrating and can be a foundation upon which to grow? Is there anything that our roots became disentangled from that has brought new freedom? In short, this is an opportunity to consider how the church might be brought back more into line with Jesus Christ as our Source and Christ’s Body as our identity.

*Scripture for reflection:* “Whoever doesn’t carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. If one of you wanted to build a tower, wouldn’t you first sit down and calculate the cost, to determine whether you have enough money to complete it? Otherwise, when you have laid the foundation but couldn’t finish the tower, all who see it will begin to belittle you. They will say, ‘Here’s the person who began construction and couldn’t complete it!’ Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down to consider whether his ten thousand soldiers could go up against the twenty thousand coming against him? And if he didn’t think he could win, he would send a representative to discuss terms of peace while his enemy was still a long way off. In the same way, none of you who are unwilling to give up all of your possessions can be my disciple.”  
– Luke 14:27-33

**Evaluate conditions for replanting.** Rather than assuming that going back to what *was* is the ideal, consider how changes in our context may point toward new possibilities for being the church. In a season of a public health pandemic and racial and political unrest, what might be the optimum conditions for locating, placing, and structuring the church? This is a critical time for congregations to re-examine the “soils” of their budgets, properties, buildings, technologies, schedules, and programs in light of the changing “climate” of society. How and where might your congregation be replanted to more deeply embody the *shalom* of the Kingdom of God and live in the *kairos* of God’s timing?

*Scripture for reflection:* “[Jesus] said many things to them in parables: ‘A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn’t deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. Everyone who has ears should pay attention.’”  
– Matthew 13:3-9

**Supplement nurturing resources.** The successful transplanting of flowers, shrubs, and trees typically requires intentionally supplementing the natural resources of soil, rain, and sun with additional fertilizer, watering, and food. So, too, a transplanting congregation needs intentional formation & discipleship practices to facilitate the tender, vulnerable processes of re-rooting. What practices and disciplines, individual and corporate, keep your congregation rooted in the dynamic life of the Spirit of Christ? What unique stresses and temptations from the pandemic and from racial and political conflict need to be named and addressed through opportunities for prayer, fasting, acts of compassion and justice, fellowship, gathering around Scripture and the sacraments?

*Scripture for reflection:* [Jesus said]: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don’t produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can’t produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can’t produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can’t do anything. If you don’t remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned.” – John 15:1-6

**Prioritize vigilant care and oversight.** Transplanting a congregation in times of significant disruption and change, whether or not there is a change in physical location, is not a straightforward, formulaic process. Rather, it is organic and dynamic. In these times, pastors are invited to frame (or reframe) their primary work as shepherds or gardeners or superintendents—guiding the People of God to do the Work of God for the Glory of God and for the sake of the World That God Loves.<sup>7</sup> How have the stresses and challenges to “keep things going” at your church affected your identity and function as pastor? How might the critically necessary yet difficult and time-consuming ministries of pastoral care and spiritual direction get squeezed out or neglected in your congregational context? What is the “one thing needed” for you to faithfully fulfill the call God has placed upon your life as a pastoral leader for this time, this place, these people?

*Scripture for reflection:* “Therefore, I have a request for the elders among you. (I ask this as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings, and as one who shares in the glory that is about to be revealed.) I urge the elders: Like shepherds, tend the flock of God among you. Watch over it. Don’t shepherd because you must, but do it voluntarily for God. Don’t shepherd greedily but do it eagerly. Don’t shepherd by ruling over those entrusted to your care, but become examples to the flock.”  
– 1 Peter 5:1-3

As an established pastor in an established church, you may not have thought of yourself as a church planter, nor desired to be thrust into a position of having to function as one. Nonetheless, here you are. The good news is that this work, this opportunity has become where the Holy Spirit of God is present in our disrupted world, including our disrupted churches, that are “groaning in labor pains” (Romans 8:22). This may very well be what the Holy Spirit of God is doing to “reconcile to [God]self all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Colossians 3:20). Would you allow God to replant you so that you might lead in the transplanting of your church?

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<sup>1</sup> Scriptures are taken from the *Common English Bible* translation (CEB 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Nona Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Zondervan Reflective 2020), Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of your Congregation* (Tyndale Momentum 2020), Bob Whitesel, *Growing the Post-pandemic Church: A Leadership.church Guide* (Independently published 2020), and websites such as George Barna <https://www.barna.com/stateofthechurch/>, Carey Nieuwhof <https://careynieuwhof.com/>, Ed Stetzer <https://stetzerleadershippodcast.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (Zondervan 2020), and Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety* (Cascade 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Anna M. Robbins helpfully explains the dangers of “nostalgia” in “The Mission of the Seminary in an Age of Nostalgia,” *In Trust* (Summer 2020), 14-17.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Judith Suter, *The Vinedresser’s Notebook: Spiritual Lessons in Pruning, Waiting, Harvesting & Abundance* (Abingdon 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Susan Beaumont in *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Roman & Littlefield 2019) provides a methodology to help congregational leaders engage in spiritual discernment.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Root in *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Baker Academic 2019) reviews the various metaphors for pastoral ministry across Christian history and points toward the need for a primary frame of spiritual guidance in our current context.