

Sixteen Ways to Plant a Church

Over the years, we've learned that some church plant models are riskier than others, that some only work well in certain contexts, and that a strong, faith-filled leader is key to every model. Keep the pros and cons of each of these models in mind as you discern what approach will be the best fit for your church. And whatever model you choose, make sure you start with a strong church planter.

1. **The parachute:** Send a full-time planter into a new community to start from scratch.

Advantages:

- Can plant anywhere
- Your ministry reaches new areas

Disadvantages:

- Costs up to \$100,000 yearly in urban contexts
- Twenty-five to fifty percent success rate
- Need a motivated, strongly gifted leader with high assessment scores and experience in successful planting

2. **Team migration:** A group of Christian leaders and members move to a new community together to plant a church. Group size averages between 5 and 30 people.

Advantages:

- Capable leaders in place
- Strong emotional and financial support
- Improves the success rate to well over 75 percent

Disadvantages:

- Difficult to find group with freedom and willingness to migrate
- Few pre-existing ties to the community around the plant

3. **Hive off:** A large congregation (300 or more members) hires a planter for about nine months. The planter gathers a group from within the congregation with which to plant a new church, usually in the same area. Groups range from 30 to more than 200 people.

Advantages:

- Sizable starter congregation
- Ninety-seven percent success rate
- Plant becomes independent quickly—often in 18 months or less
- Strong ties between parent and plant

Disadvantages:

- Sending church loses members to plant

4. **Multi-site:** A sending church starts a congregation at a new location in the same region. It remains under the leadership of the sending church long-term.

Advantages:

- Low cost
- Eighty-five percent success rate
- Effective way to target groups you aren't reaching at your main location
- The plant doesn't need its own leadership and administration team

Disadvantages:

- Need a strong communicator to coordinate between sites
- Risk of sending church trying to make the new location too much like main location

5. **Satellite venue to spinoff:** An existing church opens new locations. Sites split off from the sending church when they have the capacity to be independent.

Advantages:

- Allows for a more gradual, tested planting timeline
- Fosters consistent branding in planting process

Disadvantages:

- This can require extensive technological expertise and a dynamic communicator from the sending church staff to pull it off well

6. **Adoption:** A sending church and its classis “adopt” an independent plant that wants to join the RCA.

Advantages:

- Low cost
- Plant is already set up and ready to grow
- Opportunity to improve the RCA’s diversity
- Good option for smaller congregations that want to parent a plant

Disadvantages:

- New church has its own history and leadership, so it may resist change
- Church leaders might not have ministry degrees

7. **Simple church network:** Smaller cells (groups) multiply into a network of organic churches. These groups are usually made up of 5 to 20 people.

Advantages:

- Low cost
- High member participation
- Mobility
- Often has a deeper discipleship impact than the congregational model

Disadvantages:

- Groups remain small and isolated without strong leadership
- Not everyone is ready to let go of conventional ideas and expectations about church
- Harder to work with typical denominational structures

8. **Fresh Expressions:** These congregations are contextual, smaller churches of 10-60 people designed for a changing culture, often organized around a shared interest, with volunteer or co-vocational leaders.

Advantages:

- Low cost and yet connected to an established church consistory and the RCA
- Nimble and flexible, empowering to a new generation of leaders in disciple-making and mission
- Can help create synergy for the established church to move outward in effective mission with niche people groups
- Strong on contextualization, listening, serving and multiplying disciple-makers

Disadvantages:

- May be less understood and celebrated by our larger organizational structure yet

9. **Sponsoring church/host campus:** A sending church invites a new church to start on its campus. The start-up is often made up of people from a different language group or economic class.

Advantages:

- Access to low-cost facilities can save a plant thousands of dollars
- Sending church doesn’t have to give up members for the plant to be successful
- Maximizes facility use for the sponsoring church

Disadvantages:

- Tensions can arise due to cultural gaps if there is a weaker relationship between the churches

10. **Church split:** Disagreements lead a group from within a congregation to split off and form their own church. This is not ideal, but it happens.

Advantages:

- People will work hard to make their church plant survive if they have a shared vision

Disadvantages:

- Painful for those who stay and those who split
- Hurts the witness of both churches
- New congregation might struggle to let go of its painful past so others don’t want to join

11. **Cell-celebration model:** This approach combines aspects of a cell church with a congregational model. A planter starts a church through multiplying neighborhood cell groups. These groups move from monthly private worship in one to four cells, to weekly private worship in five to eight cells. Ultimately, they progress to weekly public worship in nine or more cells. The cells continue to carry 50 to 75 percent of the worship, fellowship, and ministry of the church.

Advantages:

- Bridges the gap between the congregational model and the early church's model (an expanding network of house churches)
- More effective approach for reaching unchurched people than conventional models

Disadvantages:

- Hard work to develop groups that multiply effectively
- Doesn't lend itself to children's ministry

12. **Fresh start:** A new congregation moves into a church's building after it closes.

Advantages:

- Often quicker and easier than revitalizing a congregation
- Gives declining church a chance to leave behind a legacy of ministry

Disadvantages:

- One church has to close for another to open
- Hard on the members of the former church

13. **Re-launch:** A struggling church revamps its ministry with a new leader and a new mission. It often changes its name and location.

Advantages:

- Committed core of people that want to re-launch the church
- Opportunity to address core problems with ministry approach without changing legal structure

Disadvantages:

- Needs courageous new leadership and good coaching to succeed
- Problems with a church from before the re-launch can recur
- Fifty percent success rate

14. **Turnaround church:** New leaders revitalize a dying church so dramatically that it attracts a new congregation. The new congregation is often multicultural.

Advantages:

- Good option for communities with changing demographics
- Can reverse a sharp decline

Disadvantage:

- Difficult model to put in place unless the dying church and new leaders share a clear sense of urgency

15. **Catalytic missionary planter:** A planter forms a church and grows its congregation to around 120 members. Then the planter leaves to plant a new church and is replaced with a permanent pastor. This is similar to Paul's approach in Acts.

Advantages:

- Apostolic leaders become experts at establishing new congregations
- Can plant up to one church a year

Disadvantages:

- Costs \$100,000 yearly
- Usually requires classis support
- Difficult transitions from planter to first pastor are common. The shift is smoother when the second leader plays an active role in the church prior to becoming its pastor

16. **Apostolic regional missionary (ARM) from the body:** A single leader oversees a regional multiplication movement. The leader recruits and coaches planters through process.

Advantages:

- Fastest training and harvesting strategy
- Can plant up to five churches a year

Disadvantage:

- Costs more than \$100,000 annually
- Hard to do without classis support

