

When it comes to planting new churches, few know this territory better than Phil Stevenson. His vision is huge, his thinking is clear, and his experience is strong. His book, *Becoming a Ripple Church: Why and How to Plant New Congregations* offers proven and practical strategies for multiplying churches. Let's be candid—we desperately need to launch more new and vibrant churches. This book will help us all make that a reality.

—DAN REILAND, executive pastor, 12Stone Church;
author of *Amplified Leadership*

Becoming a Ripple Church challenges today's emerging leaders to embrace their role as catalysts for church multiplication. This resource is filled with practical, biblical methods that when implemented make “churches planting churches” the new normal.

—GARY REINECKE, ministry coach and trainer, InFocus

Phil Stevenson's concepts and research are tried and true. His heart for new churches is legendary. I hope that thousands of young leaders will pick up this book and start new churches. I pray that many older pastors will pick up this book and help start new churches. This book gives you the nuts and bolts that you need in order to spread the gospel effectively through new churches.

—GIL STIEGLITZ, executive pastor, Adventure Christian Church,
Roseville, California; author of *Leading a Thriving Ministry*

Every person has the opportunity to make an impact—positive or negative—every day. The same is true for churches. As Phil Stevenson points out in his book, *Becoming a Ripple Church*, it takes intentionality to “go and make” a difference for the kingdom of Jesus Christ. In this ready-made plan for making an eternal splash for Christ, you’ll not only learn about a doable model for parenting churches, you’ll understand what the Holy Spirit wants to accomplish through your life and church that will transform lives, churches, and communities with the hope and holiness of Jesus Christ.

—JIM DUNN, executive director, Church Multiplication
and Discipleship, The Wesleyan Church

Church planting is the single most effective form of evangelism, and Phil Stevenson knows how to do it better than anyone I’ve ever met. *Becoming a Ripple Church* is an excellent and practical guide for launching new congregations. We have a thriving daughter church as a direct result of following the outstanding suggestions offered in this book.

—MARK O. WILSON, senior pastor, Hayward Wesleyan Church;
author of *Filled Up, Poured Out*

BECOMING A RIPPLE CHURCH

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WHY AND HOW TO PLANT NEW CONGREGATIONS

PHIL STEVENSON



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This book is dedicated to the men and women who have courageously committed themselves to leading their churches in becoming multiplying congregations. It is the vision that they have beyond their local setting that has wide impact and influence for the gospel.



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FOREWORD CHURCH PLANTING: DON'T FEAR

I love church planting because I love seeing people reached for the gospel.

But over the last twenty-five years I've been involved, church planting has changed—locally and globally. And how churches, networks, and denominations deal with church planting has changed as well. Today, more people are asking how we (who make up those churches, networks, and denominations) should consider and engage in church planting.

With that in mind, I'd offer some advice based on what I've seen. It's quite simple advice for churches and denominations: Simply don't be afraid.

Over the last few decades, I have observed that the main hindrance for churches, denominations, and leaders engaging in church planting is fear.

The very nature of church planting usually puts planters on the forefront of innovation within their generation. One of the

reasons they are so effective at reaching the unchurched and dechurched is because they often allow the “how” of church planting to be shaped by the “who, when, and where” of culture.

Giving space for this to happen can be a scary thing for other church and denominational leaders. Churches, denominations, and leaders are afraid that church plants are too innovative, take too much sacrifice, and are too difficult with which to cooperate.

Those fears must be overcome for church planting efforts to thrive in the future.

OVERCOME FEAR

If we want to see a church multiplication movement like Warren Bird and I talk about in *Viral Churches*, we need to choose to overcome fear.

This fear—of the new generation and their church planting activity—remains in many denominations, though thankfully, not all. We must get rid of the fear that keeps us “doing church” the same way and for only one group of people. As long as a church meets the biblical definition of a church and has the biblical marks of a church, it can look and function many different ways.

What should drive us is a confessional identity that we believe together a certain set of tenets (which will be different for different denominations) and being committed to confessional identity with missional cooperation. The result will be all kinds of church plants with one common confession and mission. And that is worth the effort.

BE WILLING TO SACRIFICE

Church plants take sacrifice, and that scares some people. Church plants also require new ways to cooperate, and that scares some people.

If churches and denominations won't sacrifice, they won't reproduce. It will involve the sacrifices of sending people to start a new church, creating some controversy in the denomination, and funding that could go to other needs (with vocal constituencies). If churches and denominations won't sacrifice, they won't reproduce.

BUILD COOPERATION

Finally, if a true multiplication movement is to take place, it will require reconsidering the ways in which we cooperate. Instead of demanding methodological conformity, we should celebrate sharing common beliefs with a common confession and missional cooperation in different settings. In the process, we can open up new lanes for new church planters and see a revolutionary church multiplication movement in this country once again.

Yes, church planting can be scary. But Phil Stevenson is an experienced guide. In *Becoming a Ripple Church*, Stevenson inspires readers to become actively involved in church parenting and provides clear practical steps for planting a church from an existing congregation.

Written from experience, *Becoming a Ripple Church* effectively motivates planting new churches with biblical wisdom. It

is full of real-life stories and experiences, as well as practical insights that will help readers overcome their fears of church planting.

If churches, denominations, and leaders can overcome these fears, I believe we can—and will—see a church multiplication movement that will be both faithful and fruitful in our missional mandate to spread the gospel.

—ED STETZER
president of LifeWay Research, author, speaker, pastor,
church planter, and Christian missiologist




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To my wife, Joni, who has been a constant encouragement in my sharing of the ripple church vision.

To the Wesleyan Publishing House editing team led by Kevin Scott.

To my grandchildren, and to their peers, who will benefit from new churches communicating the gospel in a manner that will connect with them.



INTRODUCTION THE RIPPLE CHURCH

You've seen the image a thousand times. A rock is tossed into a pond. The rock makes a splash. Ripples emanate from the point of impact, spreading across the surface of the water until they reach the other shore. We call it the ripple effect.

In that same way, a new generation of churches is creating a ripple effect across the country. Led by men and women of vision, these congregations are extending their influence out from the center, into their communities and across their regions.

How?

A few courageous leaders have done what few in the twenty-first-century church are willing to do. They have turned their focus outward, planting new churches rather than simply gathering more people into existing ones. These ripple churches have become points of impact, generating a movement that is spreading around the world.

But it hasn't been easy for them. By choosing influence (evangelism and outreach) over influx (church growth), ripple churches have sacrificed their own comfort and security in order to bring forth the next generation of Christians. They have abandoned contemporary notions of success in order to bring about kingdom growth. They have been willing to swim against the stream of popular culture.

Is it worth it?

Nimbus Dam is located roughly fifteen miles east of downtown Sacramento, California, a short jaunt along the Highway 50 corridor toward the south shore of Lake Tahoe. Nimbus Dam controls the water flow of the American River as it makes its way west toward the Sacramento River and, ultimately, to the Pacific Ocean.

The river's current can be brisk, especially in the fall, when an extraordinary event occurs each year. Every autumn thousands of salmon make their way east from the ocean, swimming against the river's west-flowing current. The fish head upriver in order to spawn. The journey requires tremendous energy, and many salmon die along the way. But they make this trip, swimming against the flow, in order to reproduce. If they don't, their species will not survive.

The salmon could, I suppose, live out their lives downstream. It would be more comfortable for them, with no current to fight and no risk to them. Upstream territory is unknown to them. To swim upstream demands an effort they may not be able to muster. Yet these creatures seem to know that something exists upstream that can be found nowhere else: the opportunity to create a new generation.

In fact, the salmon that make their way against the current each fall are themselves the product of a preceding generation's

effort. Their predecessors expended the energy to swim against the tide so that they too could create new life. Every year yet another generation of salmon will make that same journey. The cycle of growth continues.

Today, the church desperately needs a new generation of leaders that is willing to swim against the current of contemporary church experience. Too many of us enjoy the relative calm of downstream life. We convince ourselves that gathering more people around us in a single church will ensure the existence of the Christian species. It won't. A large school of salmon swimming comfortably in their familiar ocean atmosphere will not survive indefinitely. Those salmon must fight their way upstream to create new life. Similarly, we must sacrifice our time, energy, and money if we are to create new congregations. The survival of the church depends upon it.

Planting churches will never be easy. In our current church culture, bigger is considered better. We measure ourselves by buildings, bodies, and budgets, and our bottom line is weekly worship attendance. In such a climate, the idea of planting new churches out of existing ones can raise a few eyebrows. Therefore, leaders who participate in the church-planting movement must swim against popular opinion. They must be willing to abandon commonly held notions about achievement and success.

To stay downstream is much easier. Yet, as Zig Ziglar noted, even a dead fish can swim downstream. The kind of multiplication that will ensure the future of the church can never happen in the downstream culture. We need to swim against the current.

So the challenge for today's church leaders is twofold: First, we must realize the need to propagate the gospel by multiplying congregations; and second, we must make sacrifices in order to

do so. That will mean resisting the temptation merely to grow larger as a congregation, and that will require faith.

We risk much by swimming upstream. It's always easier to stay where we are, complacent and comfortable. We need leaders who have the God-given faith to move forward in spite of fear and uncertainty. By stepping out in faith, we will lay the foundation for an entire new generation of believers. Lives will be transformed. The church will be revolutionized. The entire world will be changed.

Will you accept this challenge? Will you move beyond the small circle of your own comfort and begin the ripple that will affect your community and your world? I saw a television advertisement that touted its product this way: "It began with a drop that caused a ripple, which caused a wave, which caused the whole world to stand up and take notice." One drop does make a difference. One leader can begin a great movement. One ripple can change the world.

Will it begin with you?



PART 1

WHY PARENT CHURCHES?



THE DIMMING OF THE CHURCH

1

In a recent conversation that I had with Ed Stetzer—author, missiologist, lecturer, church planter, and president of LifeWay Research—he told me, “The church in North America no longer has home-field advantage.” He was saying that the church is no longer a key element of North American culture. We cannot assume that people in our society have a basic understanding of the church or of Christianity. The once-bright light of the church is quickly dimming.

We need to heed the voices of concern.

North America has transitioned from being at the center of Christianity to becoming a largely unchurched culture, says Joel Comiskey, cell church expert: “North America has so many unchurched people that it’s now one of the mission targets of Christians who live in other countries.”¹ This transitional reality seems to go largely unnoticed or ignored by church leaders

today. Many point to the megachurch as an example of continued effectiveness in reaching North American culture. However, Comiskey paints another picture: “Often we define church growth by whether a few congregations are growing, rather than looking at the overall church in the nations. It’s easy to point to certain megachurches and imagine that North America is exploding with church growth. Statistics, however, point to another reality.”²² The fact that a few churches are growing is misleading and tends to instill an unwarranted optimism.

Comiskey, who is a church planter, has discovered the statistical reality that “18 [percent] of US churches are growing primarily by transfer growth [and] 1 [percent] of the churches are growing by conversion growth.”²³ This objective measure ought to give the North American church pause as it strategizes to effectively reach a culture that continues to distance itself from the gospel. Mike Regele of the Percept Group observes the challenge of the widening chasm between church culture and the changing shape of society: “Throughout most of the twentieth century the larger culture began to noticeably separate from the traditional church culture—and it did so with ever increasing speed as the century drew to a close. As we move forward into the twenty-first century, the church culture and changing shape of American society continue to grow further apart. It is this growing gap that contributes to the reality that mission in the twenty-first-century North America is cross-cultural.”²⁴ The Great Commission, Jesus’ evangelism mandate to his followers, is not to go and bring others from another church but to “go and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). “All the nations” includes North America.

While Christians rejoice that some individual churches are growing larger, this growth alone will not meet the challenges of

the twenty-first century. Gaining new church members alone will not effectively engage the changing landscape of North American culture. We need to start new churches. New churches are better leveraged to connect with those who do not seek their spirituality from the existing church. Regele states, “Church planting is necessary for the church to stay relevant in the twenty-first century.”⁵

The church must not be content with growth, but must pursue expansion. The Holy Spirit must be trusted to move the church beyond property lines and outside defined brick-and-mortar walls so it can break through preconceived barriers of evangelistic effectiveness.

The growth of the church and its ability to effectively engage the culture in which it finds itself will require a combination of two things: current Christ-followers sharing the gospel, and existing churches being willing to start new ones. This is not an either/or proposition but a both/and necessity. Pastor and church founder Fred Herron, in his book *Expanding God’s Kingdom through Church Planting*, emphasizes this connection: “Both church planting and church renewal are needed but a focus on church planting prevails.”⁶

Lyle Schaller, church growth consultant, observes, “Historically, new congregations have turned out to be the most effective approach to reaching new generations of people.”⁷ Underscoring Schaller’s comment, Elmer Towns, cofounder of Liberty University and dean for its School of Religion, in his foreword written for *Spin-Off Churches*, states, “Church planting is not a denominational priority; any church can plant a new one. Church planting is not the outgrowth of a particular theology. All groups can do it whether Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal, Mennonite, Community,

or other. Church planting is not a strategy of megachurches; all churches can plant a new one.”⁸ Church planting is a methodology for kingdom expansion that crosses denominational lines.

Christianity no longer holds priority in our culture today. Many existing churches are unable to transition enough to meet the demands of this new mind-set. However, existing churches can help spawn new congregations to address this changing climate.