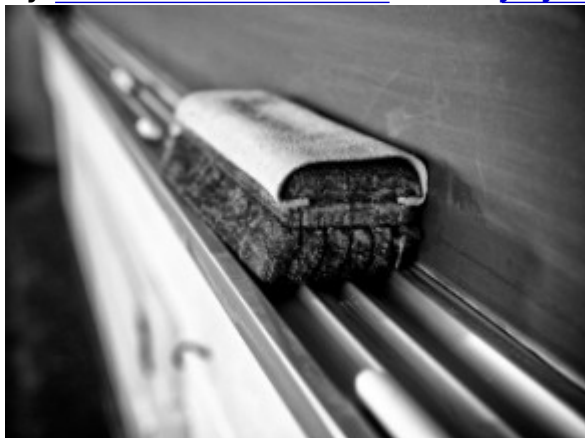


Missteps in church planting

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [July 22, 2015](#) issue



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As I sat in a circle of church planters discussing ministry, a stream of confession emerged.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

“I wish I would have done things differently.”

“I should have known better.”

After the group disbanded, I kept wondering about the conversation. Did people have particular missteps in common? If so, could we all learn from them? To follow up, I spoke with ten church development pastors, including people I have written about before and a couple who closed their community as a consequence of what they did wrong.

The most common mistake was not addressing stewardship in the early days. It can be awkward to be worshiping with six people and suddenly present the offering plate in the midst of an intimate gathering, especially when the pastor knows that many people in the community lack financial resources. The fledgling church might have a grant that covers the ministry, so there is not a lot of pressure to ask people to support a budget. Or the pastor may work another job and not anticipate the exhaustion that can come from long-term bivocational ministry. So it becomes easy to ignore stewardship.

Bec Cranford-Smith, a pastor who helped start a Disciples of Christ community in Atlanta with her husband, Terry Cranford-Smith, works as a volunteer coordinator on weekdays and realizes that she'll probably always need the income from a job outside the church. "We neglected to talk about money [in the church] because of past hurt and a Prosperity Gospel message that turned so many people off," Cranford-Smith said. "This persisted into year four, and we failed to develop a community of giving and support."

Of course, stewardship in any context is not only about the bottom line. By talking about money, we can nurture generous lives and communities. The church planters reminded me that the practices of early days become the expectations of later years, and that's important when grants are no longer available.

Another common issue is sharing the decision making and the vision. Pastors who start churches often need to have extraordinary initiative, doing everything from setting up chairs and brewing the coffee to naming the gathering and envisioning the mission. It can be difficult to allow other people to take ownership of the tasks and the vision.

One pastor, who asked to remain anonymous, said, "Recently I made a decision without getting feedback from a couple of crucial people. I was doing my best to make the decision, weighing the pros and cons, but I did not take the time to get the feedback and process it in the way that it needed and with the people that it needed." Making decisions alone may have been a necessity or an easy shortcut at first, but the pastor soon learned he needed to share the responsibility. "Not taking that time beforehand led to hours of conversation, a sleepless night of worry, and more conversations and processing afterward."

Pastors often didn't realize they needed to share the burdens of ministry, until they began to burn out or had a crisis in their own lives. For Cranford-Smith, the deaths of her brother and father within one year made her realize how much she needed help. "In hindsight," Cranford-Smith said, "I wish I would have fostered a deeper sense of giving and volunteerism." She explained that they could have learned to truly practice the theology that everyone is a priest and construct a wide table toward which they could all contribute.

J. C. Mitchell, a Disciples of Christ pastor who helped to start the Open Gathering with his wife, Mindi Welton-Mitchell, thinks the group started holding a worship

service too early in the process. “It became a drain on time before the core group gelled,” Mitchell said. They didn’t have a chance to figure out who they were and what they wanted the gathering to be.

To complicate matters, the couple lived about an hour away from where the community was to be planted and couldn’t form deep relationships with the community before launching the service.

Often pastors of new ministries need a year to build relationships with people and the community. This time can become frustrating for people who are overseeing or partnering with the church, because no one can point to visible results. One planter felt that pressure acutely and worried that she will look back and realize that she did “too many things, too much, too fast.”

Some of the “mistakes” seemed to be a case of different temperaments and contexts. For instance, while one pastor thought that being a tentmaker was a misstep and became frustrated with juggling the hours of a day job while trying to start a congregation on nights and weekends, another pastor loved having a steady income from an outside source. He was happy his income wasn’t dependent on denominational decisions.

For most innovators, failure is part of the process. They expect to keep trying numerous things in the hope that one thing might work. But it’s always good to stop, look in the rearview mirror, and learn from where we’ve been.