

# Lessons from a Church Plant That Didn't Take<sup>1</sup>

After six years of joyfully struggling to establish a Sovereign Grace church in Chester, Pennsylvania, the members of Cornerstone Church closed their doors and returned to the church that sent them.

Whenever church planter Arie Mangrum is asked if it was worth it, he answers with an unflinching “yes.” It was worth leaving a successful career as a computer-systems administrator to enter full-time ministry. It was worth moving his family from a church where they enjoyed rich teaching, worship, and fellowship to begin a church where there were few familiar faces. It was worth years of hard work and service to a small but strong congregation. And it was even worth going through the evaluation process that culminated in the closing of Cornerstone Church in January 2000.

Why was it worth it to take such risks and experience such challenges for a church plant that didn't make it?

## **1. God uses the challenges of church planting as a mirror to reveal things about ourselves.**

Church plants that don't make it remind us that God not only desires to work through us, but also desires to work in us. Arie says, “Through leading the church I learned much about the deceitfulness of my heart and the power of indwelling sin. My heart was revealed as I craved success and was confronted with leadership limitations. It was good because it was humbling.”

Attempting to lead a church plant helped Arie clearly define his gifting as a pastor. He was able to see what he did well and what he didn't do well. Arie explains, “When you're successful in some measure, it covers up your weaknesses; you're not as aware of the flaws that are latent. When success is less evident, the Holy Spirit is able to make you aware of what is truly there.” This gracious revelation about indwelling sin also convinced Arie of the need for accountability and having men around him who would encourage him and speak truth to him.

## **2. God exposes our weakness in church planting to put his strength on display.**

Arie says, “Caring for people's souls, setting before them some vision of God's purpose, being the only pastor counseling marriages, preparing for messages every week, leading

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented by Dave Harvey at the Pastors College of Sovereign Grace Ministries in February 2007. © 2007 Sovereign Grace Ministries. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked “KJV” are taken from the King James Version.

worship, setting the budget, overseeing all of the leaders was the most difficult work I've ever done. Amazingly, I found it was not burdensome or wearying, but enthralling and stirring.”

Time and time again, Arie found himself leading in weakness and relying on God's strength. For example, when the church needed a new facility, Arie looked desperately but with no success. For six months he prayed fervently, “Lord, what can I do?” This situation concerning a meeting place was an occasion to rely on God's power.

God provided in an astounding way. An older, predominantly white congregation had refused to move out of Chester though the demographics of the community had changed. In its prime, it was the “premier” church in the city, where the mayor, city officials, and other well-known citizens attended. The church met in their beautiful facility on Sundays, but for the most part the building was unused. It had a gym, a library, a nursery, classrooms and a sanctuary. This church was actually looking for another church to use their facility, one that could more effectively reach the community. Cornerstone was that congregation. The established church graciously accommodated Cornerstone, even inviting them to their Christmas Eve service each year.

This testimony is just one of many that built Arie's faith to view problems as opportunities for God to put his strength on display through caring and providing for a little church in Chester.

### **3. God uses the church-planting process to build perseverance in his people.**

Though the church in Chester was small, it was strong. Many qualities emerged among the believers in this congregation. Because of the demands of church planting, everyone learned to participate in the serving required in a corporate gathering. Arie says of the congregation at Cornerstone, “They were marked by their service to one another, which was enhanced by the interdependence we all felt due to our small numbers. Yet no one ever complained of weariness. I cannot recall any discouragement in our serving.”

God's glory displayed through his work in Arie's life and the lives of the members of Cornerstone is a theme woven throughout the story of a church plant that didn't make it.

Arie explains, “When we consider God's grace to us, God's mercy, there is room for little else but humility and gratitude. The joys of building his church and serving in that community far exceeded the hardships and the difficulties we shared. Our reward has been found in our experience of God and the growth of our souls in holiness and humility. Our hearts rejoice in hope, knowing the ultimate triumph of the gospel. We were blessed to have had the opportunity to preach it and apply it, we believe, in some God-pleasing measure.”

The challenges of church planting have a unique way of building perseverance in those involved, so that even when a local church shuts down, the people in that church are forever changed by the church-planting experience.

#### **4. God uses struggling church plants to highlight the importance of apostolic involvement.**

What would come of this strong, small congregation in which God had built humble servanthood and dependence upon God's strength? When Arie announced the possibility of closing their doors and returning to their sending church, many members had reservations. They were a predominantly African American church who enjoyed the camaraderie of their small congregation. The sending church was a predominantly white church and a rather large congregation.

Arie admits, "It was probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do; I don't believe I've ever prayed as hard about anything as I prayed for that decision about closing Cornerstone's doors and merging it with the sending church. To stand before that group of people who had sacrificed so heroically, who had labored and loved and laughed and cried together, well, it was most difficult to thrust them again into a place of trusting God and trusting my leadership."

One of the primary factors that helped Arie make this difficult decision with confidence and enabled him to lead effectively through the process was the counsel and perspective he received from the apostolic team member Sovereign Grace Ministries provided to care for the church.

Arie is grateful that he didn't have to make the decision on his own, and that he had someone to care for him while he sought to care for his people. This relationship proved to be extremely important as Arie sorted through the challenging decisions surrounding the future of Cornerstone Church.

#### **5. God allows some church plants to close down to remind us of his definitions of success.**

Was this church plant a failure? Were they too idealistic and naive in their hopes? Was it worth the risk involved? Was the labor, sacrifice, and hardship that ended in a church closing its doors a waste of time, energy, and resources?

No one is in a better position to answer that than Arie: "We would choose to do it all over again in a heartbeat. This wonderful, transcendent message of what God has accomplished in Christ, the message that we understand to be the gospel, is worth such risk and sacrifice. The gospel thrusts us again and again into that wonderful crisis of dependence upon God's character, and he never fails! Jesus said, 'I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Mt 16:18). He said, 'All that the Father

gives me will come to me' (Jn 6:37). Ministry success is not based upon human wisdom, human effectiveness, or marketing savvy. It is anchored upon that Word that is 'forever...settled in heaven'" (Ps 119:89, KJV).

Hidden in the sovereignty of God is what success will look like for any church plant. But never hidden is the blazing glory of a gospel worth taking risks for, and the Cornerstone venture is forever a monument to this truth.