



Quality
Missions

Process to Planting

A Phenomological Study of the Call to Plant
Churches

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In 1963, 3 billion people lived in the world. Today there are over 7.8 billion people, and 3.3 billion are estimated to live in a culture or geographic location with little or no access to the gospel of Jesus (Joshua Project, 2022). Simply stated, there are more people today with no access to Jesus than there were alive one generation ago. The need to raise up church planters is vital to the mission of the church in our day. An essential contributing factor to the growth of Christianity in North America is the high amount of church planters that were sent to communities (Keller, 2012). We see in Acts 13:4 that raising up church planting missionaries is an act of the Holy Spirit. Yet, we also see in Acts 13:3 the church cooperating in obedience to the divine call. This research design is to help understand the human journey of experiencing a call to church plant in order to help churches cooperate with God in sending church planters for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Methodology

The qualitative research design is a phenomenological study of pastors and missionaries with experience in church planting. Phenomenological studies are appropriate when looking to explain a shared human experience, and have been useful to provide general insights into a ministry experience that can apply in other contexts (Bosch, 2019). Qualitative studies like this one are useful to answer the personal side of a research question like “why” and “how” instead of “how many” and “how much” (Keegan, 2009). This study will complement theological and biblical studies of calling by describing reality from the human understanding, environmental factors, and a timeline for the process.

I interviewed 15 pastors and missionaries. The sample population represents both men and women with international diversity from 5 countries and 3 continents that have all worked within the task of planting churches in 8 countries. Their experience ranged from 5 years to over 25 years of experience, and their ages ranged from their 28-63. All the practitioners were Protestant Baptist. Some of the environmental factors may be influenced based on a free-church ecclesiological model, but the findings may apply to other denominations as well.

I conducted the narrative interviews in the months of April and May in 2022. The interviews were recorded through researcher notes and digital format. I later coded the information according to phenomenological research design to uncover significant commonalities, findings, and statements.

Findings

Two significant findings came from the narrative interviews. First, interviews reported a similar timeline. The process is summarized by an outside experience awakening a desire for ministry that started a long journey culminating in long term church planting. Second, they all held a similar view of the application of Scripture in their life. They believed the Bible was regulative for their philosophy of ministry and they also believed the Bible interacted with their current, day-to-day experiences.

Timeline of the Process

The planting journey is similar among the interviews. I believe Newton's Laws of Motion is interestingly kindred to the narratives of the church planters' understanding in their journey I heard. It's not uncommon to find this metaphorical link in physical motion to 'other motions' in human experiences (Meyer Cuno, 2022). Inertia states a body at rest stays at rest unless an outside force acts upon it, and a body in motion stays in motion unless an outside force acts on it (Reese, 2022).

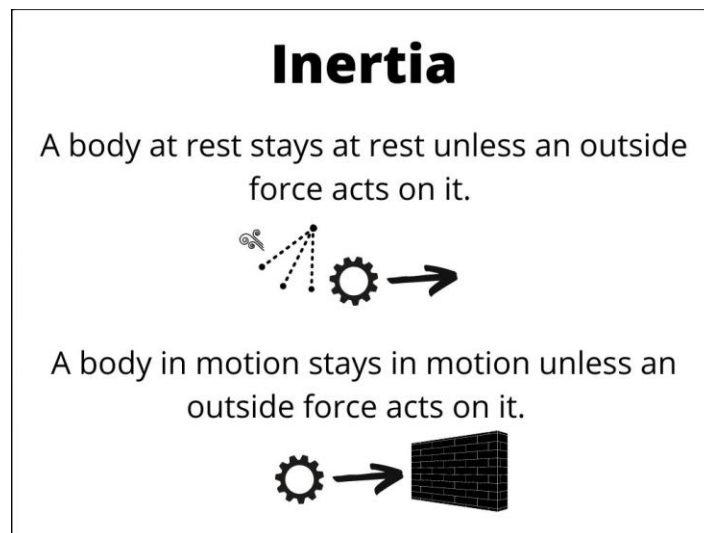


Fig. 1 A simple definition and illustration of the first law of motion, inertia.

This metaphor can help us paint a picture of the stories the church planters remembered. They commonly had an experience that awakened them to the opportunity of ministry and church planting. They took immediate action in motion in pursuing this new vision. To sustain momentum, they joined or sought

a supportive community that encouraged continual action, and they were finally sent from the supportive community fully identifying as a minister with the goal of church planting.



Fig. 2 An Illustration of the 'inertia' journey to church planting.

Outside Force. Most of the interviews remembered an experience of awakening to the idea of ministry typically through the awareness of a need. This experience fits within a framework of renewal and restoration that Paul Hiebert (1994) explains. For Hiebert, the more mature a movement (i.e. Christianity in the US), there is a need for constant “transformative rituals” and “rituals of restoration” in order to facilitate change. These transformative rituals that ministries utilized played a pivotal role in awakening participants to the idea and need for ministry.

Some of the experiences were a one time moment, and for others it was a sustained season of exposure. For instance, one respondent was being cultivated for ministry over a period of time, and he sensed a general desire for ministry. But then, he was challenged when his local seminary brought a missionary from Central Asia to preach. The sermon brought to life the vast need in Central Asia for church planters, and the speaker specifically challenged the people to see if God was leading them to fill the need. A catalytic moment of transformation occurred setting this participant on a trajectory to overseas church planting.

In another example, a North American church planter was in his junior year of college where he went through a bible study with some other guys. The study was not a one time moment, but a season of wrestling that culminated to a

belief God had called him to ministry. He subsequently transferred to pursue ministry the following semester.

Some other seasons or events of renewal included a church training, a mission trip, retreat, and a missions book. While not everyone recalled a moment, there were a significant number of participants that pointed to a moment or set season of time that changed the direction of their life.

Four participants did not indicate a moment-in-time awakening. One gave me an illustration I found helpful: "It's like getting up in the morning. Some people have the blinds open and the gentle rising of the sun lifts from their sleep. They gently wake up. Others have the blinds ripped open and it's a startling experience. Yet, they both wake up." The four interviews that did not report a startling "wake-up" experience did report a cultivating experience within their church like VBS missions emphasis as a child, missionary parents, church planting grandparents, and Christian college influence.

The outside force beginning the journey is significant on two levels. First, events, emphases, and seasonal studies are important to schedule to facilitate the idea of "transformation rituals." Below, Table 2 shows the types of activities that acted as an outside force, and over half were out of their normal church routine (i.e. guest preacher, mission trip, retreat, etc.) Second, seasons of renewal are important to the life cycle of growth. Outside cooperation with other ministries / ministers seems to be crucial to fulfill the multiplying goal of church planting. Cooperation with other ministries is inherent in pursuing a "transformation ritual." A guest preacher, a mission trip, an intense training were all critical factors in realizing the potential for church planting.

Immediate Action. Every, literally every, participant was active in ministry tasks immediately after feeling awakened to ministry. A couple of participants went on Tuesday evangelism visitation with their pastor, a few scheduled mission trips, one conducted a Spanish speaking bible study, one immediately started church planting, two began serving in outreach with their college ministry, and a couple led small groups or discipleship groups. These examples are listed to highlight the variety of activities, but they all had something in common. They were all proactive outreach and most contained a component of travel. If you include a move for seminary preparation, every church planter had a component of travel within the preparation phase significant to their journey. These two specific actions of outreach and travel undergirds the metaphor of inertia, after an outside force acts upon the person; they go. Creating a culture of opportunities to engage people outside the church is an important structure to implement to develop future leaders.

MOTION BY THE NUMBERS		
ACTIVITY	# OF PARTICIPANTS	% OF PARTICIPANTS
Outside Force	11	73%
Immediate Activity	15	100%
Supportive Community	15	100%
Previous Ministry Staff Experience	4	23%
Average Time of Journey	6 Years	

Table 1. Percentage and Number of participants that experienced the metaphorical inertia journeys.

The stories of the immediate action in ministry from the participants reminded me of the advice of Peter Cartwright, a Methodist circuit-riding minister in the 1800s. Cartwright lamented that men feeling God’s call to preach hunted a college to attend rather than a pony to ride (Finke and Stark, 2005). I hope this research shows the importance of both immediate action and supportive communities of preparation like seminaries. Both have their place. However, it is evident from this study, we must get the order correct. Immediate action comes before support and knowledge. We must encourage Peter-like submission that hears the beckon to “follow me” and drops everything for immediate obedience. This study suggests long term deployment depends upon it.

Supportive Community. During the timeline, this middle stage of a supportive community was the longest season. Outside of ministry studies, Angela Duckworth (2016) has popularized the idea that perseverance and excellence in a task are often pursued in a community. I found the same to be true of those called to ministry seeking an outlet through church planting.

The most common organization mentioned was the local church, however other specific examples mentioned alongside church were seminary, missions agency, local Baptist association, college ministry, and bible study. It is noteworthy, although not surprising, that every participant was heavily involved in a local church before church planting. The other organizations mentioned were often supportive of local church work in their area.

Each participant was asked if their local church supported church planting. Every participant answered yes, and there were two types of churches they talked about. The first was a church that verbally talked about missions giving and local evangelism. The second type was a church that participated in church planting through prayer and trips with partners. The first type of church was reported as important to awakening to the idea of ministry and immediate action. However, typically there was a consistent migration to a local church or community with active church planting vision and partnerships. For instance, one interview reported working in local visitation and bible studies in apartment complexes. Then, when he worked with a missions agency, the idea of church planting formed more concretely. So, his journey migrated from local church to missions agency. Another interview reported growing up with church planting grandparents and missions giving was always important in the congregation his father pastored. However, church planting was more explicitly encouraged in a church they interned at in seminary. Both of these examples demonstrate the importance of both types of churches, and the study exhibits a baseline of verbally casting vision for missions giving and evangelism to raise up church planters.

The main observation is that the supportive community encouraged and provided opportunities for consistent seasons of outreach and travel as a strategic initiative for ministry. Every participant mentioned a major move of migration or travel in their journey. A move to seminary, international mission trips, a move to a different city to pursue a ministry post were all examples of the travel that participants reported. Also important for this study is that church planters moved between interconnected Christian communities. The most common moves between cooperative ministries were collegiate ministry to local church, local church to seminary, and local church to same denomination local church. Cooperation among ministries was important to encourage the travel component of the church planter's journey. The outreach and travel components activity support the hypothesis metaphor of inertia that a body (or church planter) in motion stays in motion. Each participant sought continued activity of missional tasks during the supportive community phase, and often they moved to a different, yet similar supportive community at some point in the journey.

Being Sent / Identity Formation. A final common element to the timeline of participants was meaningful mentorship. I define meaningful mentorship as a person of leadership that encouraged the tasks that are present in church planting; outreach and going. I was expecting an intimacy to these relationships where people described a parental type of mentorship. For instance, one

participant reported a couple, former missionaries, who took her under their wing and mentored her at church. However, I would describe the nuance typically reported as more *centrifugal availability*. The mentor role was available for the people to interact with and encourage activity outside the walls of the ministry; however tasks were mentioned as influential more than relational activity. For instance, two participants shared visitation with their pastor as pivotal.

Both relationship and tasks, by necessity, had to be present, but participants reported the tasks as meaningful to encourage their church planting momentum over and above the relationship. Also, an important nuance is that it was not one critical mentor role that propelled them overseas. There was a peppering of influence. For instance, one international church planter went through a few church internships in order to launch overseas. Each one was helpful in a certain stage of his supportive community development. In another example, a man worked in internships with his church and a local Baptist association, and then more activity in seminary before launching into church planting. The adage, it takes a village to raise a child could be contextualized to our study; it takes the Body of Christ to raise a church planter.

Another significant observation is the little experience participants reported before being sent in a formal way. One participant had significant pastoral experience before he was sent as a church planter, and only 4 had staff experience at all. Everyone else had no ministry positional experience, although they were active and experienced in tasks associated with church planting like evangelism. There are two implications I draw from the narratives of the participants and their lack of experience reported. First, creating pathways of informal leadership for members to pursue is critical for ministry development. Recruiting small group leaders, bible study leaders, VBS volunteers, visitation groups, and more of these types of roles is an important step to cultivating church planters. Second, we need to consistently recruit from our ministry volunteers those who are interested and called to church plant.

Also significant to experience, most interviews expressed church planting as an *outlet* God guided them to in ministry rather than the initial calling which was more general in nature. This observation is consistent with the timeline of the narratives; participants (all but two) shared a general call to ministry before a call to church plant. It's also consistent with the experimental, supportive community phase of tasks (internships, seminary, local church leadership). People tried multiple avenues of tasks before settling on a primary identity of church planting. Therefore, it may be accurate to say church planting

vision is nurtured among people experiencing a call to ministry seeking an outlet to get started.

MOTION BY CATEGORIES		
OUTSIDE FORCE	IMMEDIATE ACTIVITY	SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY
Preaching	Evangelism (33%)	Local Church
Mission Trip	Mission Trip (33%)	Missions Agency
Scripture	Move to Seminary (33%)	Denomination Events
Missions Book		Bible Study
Pastoral Challenge		Seminary

Table 2. A list of the types of categories participants experienced.

View of Scripture

While speaking about the Bible, the interview questions did not focus on the nature of the Bible theologically, but rather on the posture to the Bible the people possessed. What was the Bible's impact on the person? Two common postures became evident: submission and dynamic.

First, interviews consistently pointed to the objective meaning of Scripture as why they are church planting. In other words, they submitted to the Bible's pattern of church planting. Matthew 28:19-20, what is often known as the Great Commission, was a consistent driving force to start ministry. One person said, "The Great Commission [Matthew 28:19-20] communicates the command to go, and it's not optional. My wife and I felt very early on that it was an obedience issue." An urban church planter stated his vision for a multi-ethnic church came from Revelation 7:9; God burdened him to see the vision of Scripture in reality in his city. For a final example of submission, an interviewee said, "There's a specific passage in Scripture that was a convincing passage in which I submitted myself in the call to ministry. I thought, 'What if God calls me somewhere dangerous and I suffer?' 2 Corinthians 11 is a picture of Paul's suffering, and listening to this preached I sensed a burning in my heart from God that even if this is the road for me, it's a worthy calling."

Also notable is the place of Scripture the interviews reported to their calling. It was less reported that Scripture was instrumental in awakening them to the idea of ministry. This place was reserved for an outside force like a

challenge from a leader or opportunity to meet a need like a mission trip. However, the Bible in each interview pointed to Scripture to clarify and encourage the long term perseverance in church planting and ministry.

The interviews also relied on Scripture for methodology to their ministry. A Church Planter in Latin America said, "Of course I've made mistakes where I've gone too fast, I remember a young man where he was a great evangelist but there were flaws in his character. . . When I made the mistake of overlooking the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3, it did not go well." Another church planter in South Asia said we make things too complicated sometimes. In speaking of how to model ministry after the New Testament; he said, "Get as much Bible and theology as you can get. Love Jesus, love people. Don't make it complicated." One pastor said, "There are two offices to the church, pastors and deacons in 1 Timothy. Where there are not healthy churches, we plant because we are called and desire to pastor."

Second, the relationship between interviews and the Bible could be described as dynamic. There is an emphasis on the "living" nature of the Word. They anticipated God to guide them directly in their circumstances. This dynamic relationship gave them joy and confidence when they made a bold decision to give their life to church planting. Each interview made a significant move to church plant outside of their community, so confidence is a crucial element.

One theory example of this type of dynamic understanding in Scripture would be Henry Blackaby's *Experiencing God*. Blackaby says, "God speaks by the Holy spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways" (Blackaby, 1999, 50). It's important to hear what Blackaby is saying rather than what he is not saying: specifically, God interacts with his people through His word and specific circumstances on their lives. The Bible stands alone in authority, but God speaks to his people in the midst of their circumstances. God never speaks devoid of his word, but his word illuminates and gives meaning to our lives dynamically. Some have argued this is an anti-theological way of interacting with the Bible, however many of the interviews talked about the importance of a proper reading of Scripture in order to apply it in a dynamic way. One interview even said, "Get as much Bible and theology as you can get." The dynamic work of the Word goes hand in hand with a deep knowledge of the Word.

For example, one interview said he had to learn to pray. Too often, he confessed he made up his ministry plans and asked God to bless them. He decided a better way was to listen to God through prayer and the word with an anticipation God speaks to guide your circumstances. In fact, in an example

specific to church planting, he prayed his Senior Pastor take the initiative to talk to him about planting a church to make sure it was from God and not selfish ambition. He was burdened through the Word to plant, and asked God to make it clear in guiding through his Senior Pastor's relationship. When this prayer was answered a week later, he said he didn't need anything else: "I trusted God, and shot my shot."

Another city church planter spoke of hearing God through the circumstances of sharing the gospel in his city on a vision trip; it affirmed for him God's promise in Acts 18 that he had people in the city that needed to hear the good news. The church planter said in those early days, God gave us affirming experiences that kept us confident we were on the right track.

Multiple respondents said preaching or a bible study was a timely awakening to their journeys of the needs in the world for church planting. It was this sense of timeliness and direction that gave a dynamic nuance to the way the participants reported reading the Bible. Then, a conviction to obey followed. A dynamic relationship with the Word was common to how the decision making process of the participants.

Conclusion

I believe there are a few strong applications to encourage based on this phenomenology's findings. First, outside forces that were meaningful from participants were guest preachers on missions and church planting, mission trips, planned evangelism events like visitation, children's activities like VBS, and missions resources like books. While the forces were different a consistent ministry plan of the combination of the Bible's story and the world's need opened the eyes of the participants. Ministries need to make sure to schedule these types of activities consistently and seek to prioritize recruiting new participants into these activities. Also, ministers need to create a follow up plan of participants to see if there are people experiencing a new awareness to ministry that requires 'immediate activity.'

Second, as the participants' continued to act in ministry, they were challenged to continue in the activity of outreach and travel. They were given opportunities to see outlets of ministry in contexts different from their context. Applied ministry is a major factor in long term church planting identity.

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS		
RECOMMENDATIONS	STUDY FINDING	THEORY REFERENCE
Regular Renewal Events focused on Missions	Outside Forces positive correlation to calling	Paul Hiebert <i>Anthropolgoical Insights for Christian Mission</i>
Scheduled Evangelism and Mission Trip Opportunities	Immediate Action and Supportive Community Positive Correlation to Perseverance in Vocational Identity	Angela Duckworth <i>Grit</i>
Model Dynamic View of Scripture	Emphasis on the applied Word to everyday circumstances	Henry Blackaby <i>Experiencing God</i>

Table 2. A list of the types of categories participants experienced.

Pastors and ministry leaders play a crucial role in the development of church planters. The specific availability that made a lasting impact is encouraging and affirming opportunities of the tasks associated with church planting. The old adage to “take someone along with you in every ministry activity,” is a demonstrated concept. It was crucial for future church planter’s in this study to be given ministry tasks from local church leaders they were around.

Modeling the faith that anticipates God speaking in our circumstances through the bible is a crucial development instilling the confidence to make a bold missionary move. While mentorship and supportive communities are instrumental, each participant reported a confidence that God led them to the area of church planting they are serving in.

In summary, none of the activities listed in this study are new. However, the striking consistency God used similar activities in multiple cultural can give us confidence and increase the small activities we pursue in ministry. Two illustrations come to mind. First, God is the master painter of the church planter journey, and the local church contexts we belong to are the brushes he uses to paint the mosaic. Second, when I played basketball our coach asked us to to ‘trust the process’ as we learned the offensive and defensive system every year. During the journey of being sent over the average of 6 years, I think a similar slogan of ‘trust the process’ can encourage those on the journey. As Eugene Peterson (2000) so aptly put it; long obedience in the same direction seems to be the best advice to encourage perseverance.

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