

Time to Get a Life

By Dr. Archibald Hart

People who take on things like church planting are a certain breed of person. They don't need a lot of support, unlike those of us who need to be in a safe little nest if we're going to risk anything. They jump out of the nest - that's what makes them so unique. But that means they live with several inbuilt risks. In church planting, the need to be successful is great. The pastor of an established church may be content just maintaining things. But those in church planting are more focused on success, and therein lies a whole slew of risk factors. The disappointments in church planting bring depression, while the times you "win" bring elation. And in between the two is havoc. The risk of burn-out increases dramatically. It's not just stress that we have to be careful about, but the emotional seesaw, day in and day out. It's like taking an elastic band and stretching and relaxing it over and over. Sooner or later it is going to show signs of wear and tear. The church planter is uniquely subjected to those sorts of fluctuations.

Adrenaline Addiction

There is also the risk that church planters become addicted to their adrenaline, which comes with risk-taking and "highlight experiences". There is a lot of novelty associated with church planting, and you become very quickly adapted to this adrenaline surge, which biologically impacts the brain's pleasure center quite significantly. That slowly builds an addictive process. In the beginning of a church plant there are a lot of ups and downs, which can build into an addictive process. The gambling addict would not be an addict if every time he played poker, he won! It's the risk factor - the fact that you lose more often than you win - that makes it addicting. That same is true in church planting. You seem to be winning...and then suddenly you appear to be losing. With a new church, the first time you get 20 people is a high! But later on, if only 20 people come you go into a deep depression.

Understanding Our Bodies

I think there needs to be special training for those going into church planting. You need to understand your body in order to know when you are violating the laws that God has built into your body. And you need to know how to break the development of that addictive process. I have come, quite frankly, to a much greater level of awareness of this addictive process and how it works in our evangelical Christian circles. Other church traditions don't develop it as much because they don't obsess with succeeding the way we do! That has its penalty - our "downs" are much more profound. What can you do to protect yourself? You have to maintain a balance in your perspective. God did not call us to win the race, but to finish it. God is not in the success business; he's in the refining business. It could very well be that God has out you in a church planting situation not to grow a church, but to grow you. That's the sort of God we follow. He is more interested in who we are becoming than in what we are doing. We have to get that straight. I think this is an important theological issue, and it's not a dominant strain in evangelicalism. If

you think that the only way you are going to please God is to do some fantastic thing and build some fantastic church, think again. It is you that God is dealing with. And sometimes it's the work that God is doing in that pastor's heart that is preparing him for something more significant.

A Balanced Life

I also think you have to get a proper balance in your personal life. Get a life, pastor! Go and get some exercise. Play a game. Make sure you have a hobby. Have friends you are not trying to win to Christ or win over to your church - friends for friendship's sake. Have time with your family so they are not getting the bottom of the barrel of your energy. In my opinion, the pastor who fails his family fails God's kingdom. I don't care how big a church you build. There is also a balancing of your body and mind. You've got to make sure you get proper sleep. You've got to make sure that you take a Sabbath. Pastors don't keep the Sabbath! The day when everybody else is going for worship is your job; you're working! Make sure you take a day off per week. Make sure of it - it's your spiritual responsibility. I think church planters are notoriously negligent when it comes to taking a Sabbath, taking time to rest.

Managing Stress

There are a few things church planters should know about how their bodies work. There is nothing more destructive to your body than abusing the adrenal system. Abuse of adrenaline is the stuff of which early heart disease and high blood pressure is made. It's the stuff of which depression is made. I wrote a book called *Adrenalines and Stress* because stress is all about using too much adrenaline. The problem with the adrenaline is that it makes us feel good! We have a wonderful body; God has created us in marvelous ways. When adrenaline is high it is designed for emergency - but it also makes us feel good, because if you have to deal with an emergency, it is not the time to make the body feel bad. So there is always exhilaration, a sense of enhanced well-being that goes with the adrenaline rush, and that's where it becomes deceptive. We think that because we are enjoying something, it is not stressful. That's a lie! The people who drop dead from heart attacks, when we put them in the box, are smiling! They were enjoying the ride right up to the last minute. So the danger is that if you do not understand this, you think, "If I'm enjoying this, it cannot be stressful." And then you have to watch out for depression. We know a lot of things about biological depression now, and increasingly we have come to realize that serious depressions are in fact caused by stress. While stress is chemically related, the difference is that we used to think that the chemical disturbance came from genetic factors, but now we realize that while some are at a genetic predisposition to depression - your father's depressed, your grandfather's depressed, you have a long family history of suicides, that sort of thing - it's actually only a small percentage of the seriously depressed people. What is more common is that the high adrenaline stress arousal is depleting our brain chemicals, particularly a neurotransmitter called serotonin. We develop deficiencies, which we treat with SSRI medication like Prozac. The reason we need them in the first place is that we have abused our systems; our stress levels are too high, and it depletes those

neurotransmitters. Once they are seriously depleted, you have no alternative but to take the medication. The long-term solution, however, is to get back to a balanced lifestyle. Of course, we tend to worship the pastor who is killing himself. We reinforce it! But let's not always blame the people; pastors are their own worst enemies. When you have that first heart attack, trust me, you will quickly restore balance to your life.

The Dangers of Success

There is one other area of risk associated with church planting, and that is the risk of becoming highly successful. It is unusual to have a church that is established for 100 years to suddenly become a mega church. Most mega churches are ones that were planted and then grew. Church planters therefore subject themselves to certain risks unique to success. Those risks have been identified - even in the secular world - as characterized by these 4 companions to highly successful endeavors, all of which start with "A":

The Four Risks of Success

1. You develop a certain aloneness. You have no peer, so you become a loner. 2. You develop a certain arrogance. "Who can teach me anything? I'm the one that's been successful." You stop being accountable to anyone. 3. The third step downwards is that you develop an addiction to being successful. Your body adapts to that level, so you've got to up the ante, start new projects. You've become so addicted to the physical pleasure associated with new things that you have to keep starting new things and being successful in them. You're now in a chase - you're in a tail spin kind of cycle. 4. After awhile, the pleasure center in the brain that controls all of this can no longer be satisfied with ordinary achievements, so this risk develops: adultery. You don't see this spoken of so much in the secular world, because adultery is so commonplace and doesn't mean anything. But in our Christian subculture, highly successful pastors can no longer derive any pleasure from anything they are doing. They only thing left is the sexual impropriety. I believe this explains why we have seen a spate of falls in top leaders. It's led me to say, "I pray everyday that God will preserve me from big success." I want to be successful in a way that is faithful to my calling. But pray that God preserves you from big success, because the risk - if you don't understand yourself - of ultimately falling sexually increases dramatically. I've seen sexual impropriety in two categories of pastors: at one end, those who have struggled and failed a lot, who then turn to sexual immorality to make them feel better - and, at the highly successful end of the spectrum, those for whom great success no longer brings pleasure. At both ends, there is a risk of which pastors need to be aware, and take measures to protect themselves. And I'm not talking about pastors who are not living Godly lives, who aren't sincere in their spirituality! But they have lost accountability, and I think every pastor needs to be in some sort of accountability relationship - with peers, a mentor, a spiritual director, a board. In order to protect yourself, you've got to work your way back up that "A" ladder. You've got to un-do the addiction. You've got to begin to get pleasure out of sunsets, out of playing with your children. One step up from that, you've got to develop some humility again. One step back up from that, you deal with the aloneness - find that

accountability. You need a private confidante, someone with whom you can really share with. For many pastors, to break that addiction would mean starting fewer things, maintaining what you've got. Why must you have a new branch, a new extension? We rationalize and say "It's for God's kingdom." But that's not always honest. Besides, you could let other people do some things too.

A New Approach Needed

The risks are phenomenal, and it's not going to get better. In this new millennium the addiction levels are higher than they've ever been, the depression level is higher, and anxiety is higher. I think it's becoming dangerous out there. I know there are pastors today who understand that their task is to be faithful, who are looking not for signs of outward success but for signs that they can be true to God...but they are rare gems! In the American church, bigness is the proof of God's blessing. That's our theology. But that's a new theology. It started with the church growth movement in the 1960's, though I don't think it's a true reflection of what was intended there. What was intended was simply to remove obstacles so churches could grow. But now the pendulum has swung and it has become an obsession, where egos are defined by it. I think we may be in for a correction. One of the things I am seeking is that the fourth "A", adultery, is taking its toll. And we only hear about a small percentage of that. This last year alone I have spoken at conferences to over 10,000 pastors, and universally I am getting the message, "I am worn out. The job isn't satisfying. Either God's deaf or not interested." There is a fair amount of disillusionment setting in. The incidence of depression is higher. I think the big crash is yet to come, though maybe it won't. We can't have mega churches everywhere. I think the time has come for churches to focus not just on keeping all the growth for itself. We have to teach pastors that there is an optimal size for a church and then it is ready to plant, rather than put everything back in its own big basket. I think there is some theological thinking needing to be done. Pragmatists have done too much dictating of late. Of course people like big churches - they like the big programs, and they can sit in the back and be anonymous. But is that really the church?

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