Obstacles and Opportunities for Women Planting Churches

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In July of 2015, someone asked if I’d ever thought about planting a church. That question changed my life.

I was thirty-four at the time—twenty years a Christian with seventeen years of paid ministry experience. I’d graduated seminary with an MDiv, been ordained in the PCUSA, served in five different churches as everything from a youth intern to a head of staff, and worked as a hospital chaplain.

Throughout my ministry journey as a woman leader, I’ve faced significant opposition. But I’ve also been ballasted by many professors, pastors, and colleagues who passionately championed women in leadership, and my giftings and call in particular.

These amazing leaders helped me discern my call as a pastor. They used their influence and sponsorship to open relationships and doors, and were unfailing sources of encouragement and support. I couldn’t be more grateful for each of them.

And so it was that in 2015, despite serving a wonderful church full of people I love, I started to experience some holy discontent. Like most established churches, our bread and butter was the Sunday morning service. We were highly programmatic and we functioned under the ever-present 80/20 rule: 20% of our people were highly invested—and doing 80% of the work.

We had a truly incarnational desire to move beyond the walls of the church to engage our community, and we put people and money into meaningful local and global causes. Still, much of the life of the church centered on the physical building: Sunday mornings; midweek programming for children, teens, and adults; midweek ministry team meetings; midweek elder/deacon meetings. Our goal of creating a strong discipleship environment continued to be elusive.

Over the next couple of years, I discerned a new call. With a desire to focus on making
disciples who, in turn, make disciples, I left the security of my established church and in the process, I began to rethink much of what it meant to be a pastor and leader. Together, my friends and I set out to explore a new way of being the church: church planting.

We imagined a community that welcomed people at different stages of the faith journey. A community that wasn’t defined by a locally-rooted building but by the locally-rooted presence of its people. A community where transformational discipleship was the norm; where we lived on mission—together—for the good of others and the community; and where growth meant the multiplication of new communities instead of the enlargement of a single church body.

As we began talking about that vision, we sensed that God was already at work—fostering excitement and courage in the hearts of our families and friends. But we also encountered some difficulties. Our church was multi-denominational and as we looked for a church planter assessment, we found that many simply wouldn’t even assess a woman lead planter, or they were willing to assess women planters in theory but were hostile toward us in practice.

Well before fundraising began, it became clear that it would be difficult to execute our vision for a multiplication of micro-churches. It was one thing to be a young, white man with a vision for a church. It was entirely different to be a woman with a bold church-planting vision. We learned we would have to show the proof in the pudding if we wanted to secure stable financing.

Finally, in July of 2017, Gather Tacoma was born. We eventually settled into a rhythm of open Friday night gatherings—where any and all are welcome to eat, pray, sing, learn, and practice faith together. As we lived into our call to gather around a shared table, on a shared journey, and for a shared purpose, the roots we planted took.

As I reflect on my journey as a woman church planter, I’m reminded of what it took to get here. We face many barriers and obstacles. In addressing them, I hope to equip and encourage women who feel a call toward church planting. I also hope that churches and denominations will note these hurdles and make institutional changes. Here are four obstacles for women church planters and how we can begin to address them.

Obstacle #1: Not Invited

For women who feel called to lead in denominations that don’t welcome their gifts, church planting can be a great opportunity. It often happens outside of the established church, sometimes allowing women more freedom to lead and use their gifts.

Additionally, Christians who are called to plant churches may have very different gifts than Christians who lead in the established church. Shepherding and teaching gifts are valued and elevated in traditional contexts, while evangelism, a prophetic ability to “embody a countercultural community,” and a pioneering spirit are often prized in planting contexts. It’s a grassroots effort that is, in some ways, very unlike pastoring a traditional church. But if our understanding of ministry leadership is limited to the role of pastor in an established church—and particularly one that excludes women from leadership—we may never consider church planting. There’s also a general sense that church planters should be young, aggressive men, making it even more difficult for women to enter into and succeed in those spaces.

I never expected to be a church planter. In seminary and in my denomination, I was trained to pastor the established...
church. I never took a class on church planting and I never visited a church plant. No one had ever even said the words “church planting” to me until seventeen years into ministry. For many women, planting is never presented as an option—even in denominations that affirm women in ministry.

We should ask ourselves if trained women are being overlooked because they don’t fit a leadership type that we associate with planters. Or are they being redirected to more conventional roles in the established church? Either way, we must ask the question, denominationally and at the seminary level, are we not inviting women to consider church planting because our imagination for the ministry of our women leaders is too small?

Obstacle #2: Lack of Imagination

I’m grateful for educators and mentors who affirmed my leadership gifts and encouraged me to pursue the highest levels of leadership in the established church. But I wasn’t encouraged to consider less orthodox leadership opportunities, or the benefits and challenges for women called to plant churches. I knew little about church planting, but it conjured up notions of fifteen-hour days with little sleep and even less pay. The ideal church planter also appeared to be a dynamic young man (preferably with a wife and kids) with an authoritative leadership style, who could draw a crowd to his platform and cast a vision compelling enough to convince people to buy-in with their time and money. I didn’t fit that ideal and nothing about that model appealed to me. In other words, my own imagination for church planting was limited by a caricature of both the process and the kind of leadership required to succeed.

We need more imagination about what it means to plant a church. As a woman, wife, and mother, I now see church planting as a beautiful intersection of the most important parts of my life: my faith, my family, and my community. We also need to expand our picture of what church planting leadership should look like to include women and people with less authoritative leadership styles.

As a person with catalyzing and teaching gifts, church planting allows me to step more fully into my entrepreneurial abilities. But instead of starting programs, I’m starting relationships and equipping everyday people to lead in their everyday lives. What if we invited people to consider a new/old way of church planting? What if we lifted up the values of the early church: “tight-knit community, life-forming discipleship, locally-rooted presence, and boundary-crossing mission”? If these became a defining a set of characteristics and practices for church planting, perhaps we would see more women step into this opportunity.

Obstacle #3: Fear of Failure

As with any experiment or new venture, women church planters risk failure. As I stepped out of the known and into the unknown of planting, I was terrified of failing. Failure is tricky. It’s something we all experience and it’s a necessary part of our growth. But as a woman in ministry, I’ve found that my sisters and I experience failure differently than our brothers.

I was recently reading an article in a research journal on the referral effects of a surgeon losing a patient on their operating table. The research showed that when a male surgeon unexpectedly lost a patient, there was minimal change to the rate at which other doctors referred patients to them. But when a female surgeon had a patient unexpectedly die, her direct referral rate diminished by fifty-four percent, and so did the referral rates for every woman surgeon in the same specialty in her geographic area. When women fail, there is always a chance that our failure will be used not just as reason to question our own competence but to undermine other women as well. There is always a chance that my failure will inhibit the opportunities of women that are right behind me, and that some people will use my failure to call into question the leadership of women in general.

Failure is one of our best learning tools. Even though I know that to be true, failure still comes hard for me. Like me, many women feel pressure to perform perfectly in their professions. Failure is not just a sign of weakness; it feels like a mark of gendered incompetence. But knowing that women have tried, failed, and tried again gives me the courage to risk failure. If we are going to cultivate hospitable environments for women to experiment with church planting, we need to create a culture of vulnerability and transparency that acknowledges
and pushes back against the implicit bias women encounter when facing failure. We must portray failure as the natural repercussion of testing a bold hypothesis, not a risk that could derail a woman’s ministry.

**Obstacle #4: Loneliness**

Finally, we must begin to build a community of women church planters, a space in which women can access each other and find mentors and resources. Church planting can be exhausting and isolating—all the more so for women. As I began my church plant, I quickly realized that planting was different from pastoring. I retained all my local pastor connections and thought they’d be a sufficient ministry community, but I quickly felt the yearning to know other women who were living into this unique ministry. I was lonely. A year into planting, I only knew two other women church planters. That’s not enough. If women planters are going to start and sustain communities, they need to see plenty of other women at the table. And not just see them but have avenues to create relationships, hear stories, commiserate as needed, and celebrate as often as possible!

I want to see more women planting churches because I believe that it is necessary for the flourishing of the church. I believe that as women step into church planting in greater numbers, we will see more creative expressions of what it means to be the church.

We all have a part to play in making this dream a reality.

**Seminaries and denominations:**

Ask yourselves if your imagination for the leadership gifts of women is big enough. Are you training toward holistic or authoritative styles of leadership? You can make a point to ask the women under your influence if they would seriously consider a vision for church-planting that values their unique skills and gifts.

**Church planting networks and organizations:**

Ask yourselves if you’re creating hospitable places for women to experiment with church-planting. Have you created learning environments where women can access other women? Is there mentoring, from both women and men, available? Does your training take into account the unique experience of women planters? And are you intentionally creating space to talk about the experiences of those on the margins?

**Local churches:**

Invite women to be equipped as leaders and disciple-makers. Question your implicit bias, learn to be honest with yourselves when you’re championing predominantly authoritative, CEO styles of leadership. Instead, cultivate leadership environments that emphasize leading from vulnerability and transparency.

**Individuals:**

Invite others to consider a call to church planting. When you meet, gifted, Spirit-filled women, both “lay-leaders” and clergy, ask if they’ve ever considered planting and what their hopes and dreams are for the future of the church. As I look to the future, my hopes and dreams for the church are more wild and imaginative than when I started ministry. I see a new church on the horizon, a church where men and women are equally invited, equipped, nurtured, and sustained to live freely and completely into their unique gifts as sent people.

My life changed when someone asked if I’d ever thought about planting a church. So if you’re a woman and unsure about stepping into your calling, I have a question for you too: have you ever thought about planting a church?

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1. JR Woodward and Dan White, Jr., *The Church as Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 44.

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