

SESSION TWO: THE ROMANCE AND REALITY

by Phil Grotenhuis

IT'S A WONDERFUL thing to have a colleague like Paul Murphy in the ministry who shares your perspective on mission as well as some of your own experiences in church planting. Whatever culture or setting you are in, there are some things in church planting that are simply the same. Even ministers who are not part of a "church plant" recognize that whether you are in an established church or a newly formed church plant, people are people and sinners are sinners and the gospel remains the transformational antidote for both.

I want to begin by saying that I live in an area that is very, very different from New York City where Rev. Murphy ministers. I live in Springfield, Missouri which is in the southwest part of the state. Springfield is about 45 minutes from both the Arkansas border to the south and Kansas border to the west. It's a city of about 175,000 people with a surrounding population of about 400,000. Currently, it's the third largest city in Missouri. After listening to brother Murphy speak, it hit me just how different Springfield is from New York City. For instance, New York City is much more ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse than Springfield. The Springfield area is predominantly white, republican, and conservative. It's known as the "buckle" of the Bible belt. The headquarters for the Assemblies of God denomination is there. The primary seminary for the Assemblies of God is also there.

When you rub shoulders with so many different Christians from so many different denominations, you see that there are a number of things that you have in common. One thing you have in common is a zeal for church planting. The Southern Baptist Convention, which is very prevalent in the Springfield area, has a long history of planting churches. So does the Assemblies of God denomination. The Acts 29 Church Planting Network with Mark Driscoll is based in Seattle, Washington. The church he pastors has grown to about 4000 individuals. According to Driscoll, they give about ten percent of their annual church budget for the sake of planting churches in the United States. Their goal is to plant 4000 churches.

As far as Presbyterian and Reformed churches are concerned, the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) has been very vigorous in church

planting as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). Recently, the United Reformed Churches (URC) have been putting their hand to the plow in the planting of churches. I received a call a few days ago from a URC church in Salem, Oregon. They wanted to get a little information about establishing a church plant in the Portland, Oregon, area. There is an understanding that the church needs to be more proactive in planting churches simply because of the direction of our culture. Rev. Murphy spoke about living in an increasingly post-Christian society. We hear a lot today about post-modernism, the breakdown of the family, relativism, religious pluralism, and a Christ-less spirituality. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently published a report noting that almost a quarter of young Americans, ages 18-29, claim no religious affiliation. There is the idea today that while many people claim no formal or organized religious affiliation, their level of spirituality is quite high. What we find in Springfield and what Rev. Murphy is likely discovering in New York is that while spirituality is in, ecclesiology is out.

This is borne out by the recent book "Pagan Christianity" co-authored by Frank Viola and George Barna. The book clearly disparages the institutional church and strongly supports the populist-driven home church movement. The same thing has been noted in another recent book simply entitled "Quitting Church" by Washington Times religion editor Julia Duin. Based on numerous interviews, she describes the many reasons why people are leaving the institutional church and opting for either home churches or no church affiliation at all.

Again, there is the attempt to divorce true spirituality from the institutional church. Few understand the church today as a dispenser of the means of grace (Word and Sacraments) and embodiment of the communion of the saints.

Churches across the denominational spectrum are realizing that we are no longer living in a privileged position. Reformed and evangelical churches together understand that the church needs to be more proactive and more assertive in planting churches in order to confront the challenges of the culture.

Brothers, we're beginning to feel the effects of a generation that is increasingly broken. If the Lord leads people into your church through the invincible work of his Spirit, you will be amazed how many of them will come in with some form of brokenness. People are broken intellectually, broken educationally, broken sexually, and simply broken covenantally. Interestingly, their brokenness has not led them to the pit of strident and vitriolic atheism. Rather, it has led them to a genuine desire for truth and answers to their dilemmas. They can't escape what Calvin called the *semen religionis* (seed of religion) and the *sensus divinitatis* (sense of deity) that God has planted in them.

Lord willing, they are going to come to your church.

The question is: How are you as pastors going to handle them? How are you going to minister to them? How is the church you pastor going to process, unfold, and disciple them? These are fundamental questions that need to be answered if you're going to be a kingdom-centered and intentionally mission-focused church. When I talk about being intention-

ally mission-focused, I am not talking about mission as an *addendum*, but mission as an *identity*. Some churches, particularly of Reformed persuasion, function in this way: they promote God-centered worship, authoritative leadership, fellowship before and after the worship services, men's and women's Bible studies, catechization for kids, Christian education, and so forth. The organization and machinery of the church is well-greased. And then, in addition to all these things, they have the standard "evangelism committee."

Recently, I received a letter of interest lately from a particular church. This church sent me a couple of pages talking about its ministry, about how many households it has, how many children, what ages the children are, and so on. One paragraph in the letter struck me. It said, "The outreach of the gospel extends into our immediate community by way of leading worship and song services in five area retirement nursing homes. We are involved in meals-on-wheels, ministry at an area abortion clinic, and more recently contributing to the support of a local halfway house for women and their children, bringing God's Word and financial assistance."

These works of ministry are all fine. Word is combined with deed. Praise God for this! But that's quite different than having mission as an identity where the Great Commission colors everything that you do in your ministry. Where mission comprises the very identity of the church, the church asks itself in every aspect of its ministry, "How are we not only going to feed the reached but how are we going to reach the lost?"

We must ask the hard questions, like, "How is mission going to inform our prayer group? How is mission going to inform what we do before worship or after worship? How is mission going to color how we actually "do" worship? Is our worship going to be conducted in such a way that it is intelligible and accessible to those who are outside of Jesus Christ? How is mission going to affect the pulpit ministry, including the way the pastor preaches the Heidelberg Catechism? That's what I mean by a mission identity. It colors everything about your ministry. If you're going to have mission as an identity, and pray and minister with a sense of expectancy, the Lord *will* send people your way. And many of these people, because they've been part of the kingdom of darkness for quite some time, are going to come in rather messy.

The fact of the matter is, we need churches like the church Rev. Murphy pastors in New York City; and we need churches like the church I pastor in Springfield. We need churches like these because of what they can do for broken individuals as they offer them a Christ-centered, confessionally Reformed, vibrant and transforming witness in their lives. But we also need these churches to show us how the gospel confronts broken individuals and transforms them into productive kingdom citizens.

Church planting is a unique calling, and there are certain qualities that you will need in order to be a church planter. I've prepared a number of questions for you to ask yourself. These are questions that I have had to ask myself as a form of self-evaluation

The first two questions are combined as they are closely related. Ask yourself, "*Do I have the heart of a church planter?*" And (this is essential),

“Do I have that burden for the lost?” The Apostle Paul says in the opening verses of Romans chapter 10, “My heart’s desire and my prayer is for their salvation.” He’s talking about his fellow countrymen. His heart is going out to them because they’re unconverted. There is a very interesting point when Jesus is dealing with a rich young ruler. As he’s conversing with him, the Bible tells us that Jesus had a love for him. There’s another point in Jesus’ ministry where Jesus is looking upon a crowd and it bothers him that they are like sheep without a shepherd. The Bible says that Jesus exercised compassion towards them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So the question is, apart from your theological training, do you have a heartfelt burden for the lost?

Third, ask yourself the question, *“Do I have an interest in cultivating a mission burden in the hearts of the elders and the congregation?”* Just because *you* may have that burden doesn’t mean that your elders or congregation will. On the other hand, the missional zeal of your elders and congregation may put you to shame. Whatever may be the case, it’s important that you not only educate your elders and congregation in the missional calling of the church but that you model it for them.

You may also find that if you promote mission as an identity, you may receive some resistance. Obviously, people will not come up to you and say, “Well, we’re against mission. We don’t believe in the Great Commission.” But what you may experience is a certain level of suspicion, reticence, and self-absorption where people say, “Yeah, we understand the need for mission but what about *us*? You know *we* have needs here, too.” Don’t dismiss that. You have to make sure you cover your bases when it comes to the shepherding work of the church. But also beware of smokescreens where complaints mask a certain level of sloth, self-absorption, and unwillingness to embrace a kingdom-centered and mission-focused identity.

Fourth, ask yourself the question, *“Do I have an interest in apologetics?”* Do you enjoy the study of apologetics? Does Acts 17 turn your crank? And do you find yourself praying that God would open up a door for you to present the truth claims of Christ? Realistically, how often is that a part of your prayer life? That’s a telling thing, whether or not you have a church planting heart. Do you have a burden for the lost in your heart? Do you regularly pray for contacts with the lost?

Upon occasion I will have to fly somewhere on church-related business. Many times I will pray, “Lord, give me an opportunity on the plane to talk to somebody about the gospel.” There are many times when something just doesn’t open up. But I remember one particular occasion when it did. It was on a flight from Seattle to Kansas City. I got on the plane and started to head for my seat. As I neared my seat I saw two young women and an empty seat between the two of them. I looked at the seat, checked my ticket, and in God’s providence that’s where He placed me. I sat down next to a young woman who was eighteen and the other woman was in her mid-twenties. The young woman next to me was rather talkative. A good sign, I thought. We exchanged small talk for awhile and then shortly before take off she asked the question, “So, what do you do?” How would you answer that? If you say “Pastor,” a lot of unsaved people

will ask, “What do you mean, ‘Pastor?’” If you’d say “Priest,” they will identify that with being a religious and formal person, and besides I’m not Roman Catholic. So I said “I’m a minister.” And the young woman next to me said, “Oh, really? I’m Wicca.” And the other girl turned and said, “And I’m a Mormon.” And I’m thinking, *I hit the jackpot!* God’s ways are certainly inscrutable and his paths are beyond finding out.

Well, for three hours I talked to them about the gospel. I said, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to set the parameters of the discussion.” They said, “Ok, whatever. That’s fine.” So I said, “Let’s talk about these four basic things: origin, meaning, morality, destiny. Origin: where did I come from? Morality: how should I live? Meaning: why am I here? Destiny: what happens when I die? Are you okay with that?” I then added, “All I’m going to do is tell you about what the Bible teaches regarding these things.” They agreed to the parameters of the discussion and we talked for three hours. I won’t forget this gospel opportunity for a long time.

Again, pray for these situations. You might be surprised at how the Lord answers prayer in ways that transcend expectations!

Fifth, ask yourself the question, “*Do I enjoy speaking with pagans more than I do with Christians?*” You might ask me, “Do you really have a pastor’s heart?” And my answer is “Yes. I enjoy talking with brothers and sisters in Christ. I love the people that I pastor, but I also love talking with unbelievers—even more than I do believers.”

Sixth, ask yourself the question, “*Am I aggressive and creative with finding ways to get the gospel out?*” If you’re going to have mission as an identity and not as an addendum, then you’re always going to be challenging yourself, your elders, and congregation to get the gospel outside the four walls of the church in ways that are creative without being compromising.

Seventh, ask yourself the question, “*Do I really have confidence in the gospel?*” Ed Stetser, a Southern Baptist and operative in the church planting network of the Southern Baptist Convention, spoke recently at the Assemblies of God Seminary in Springfield. He talked about the evangelical church and its lack of confidence in the gospel. As a result, he noted, evangelical churches have fallen into pragmatic approaches in worship and ministry. You know, it’s a real temptation to lose confidence in the gospel when converts are few and pastoral envy sets in. I remember Dr. Robert Rayburn of the PCA saying to me, “Phil, beware of pastoral envy. It is *the* besetting sin of the ministry.” He was right and you’re particularly susceptible to it in church planting. In the face of temptation and periodic drought in your ministry, are you willing to step back and say, “Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it”? Don’t lose confidence in the gospel. It’s powerful and it’s effective in those who are being led by God’s invincible grace. And always remember: God has ordained it as the primary and effectual means to save sinners and usher them into His kingdom.

Eighth, ask yourself the question, “*Do I have the ability to keep focused when everything around me seems to be chaotic?*” The rigors of seminary training are intentional. The professors will tell you that. You don’t understand that until you get out. There are times in your semi-

nary training where you just think that you're drowning. That's intentional, because the professors want to know if you're going to be able to handle the rigors of ministry when everything around appears to be chaotic.

Ninth, ask yourself the question, "Do I enjoy cultural analysis?" Are you willing to invest some analysis in the culture in which you minister? Are you willing to wrestle with the issue of contextualization which deals with how the gospel relates to the culture? How are you going to relate the timeless gospel to the ever-changing culture without assimilating to that culture on the one hand, and separating myself from it on the other? You've got to think through and wrestle with these things.

Tenth, ask yourself the question, "Am I willing to break down difficult concepts and make them understood by the non-Christian?" You have to do that all the time in church planting—not only for the sake of the lost but for the sake of the children in your congregation. This is a constant challenge. You want to feed and disciple those who are in Christ. On the other hand, you also want to speak intelligibly and in a way that is accessible to those who are unconverted or new to the faith. This fine balance is not always easy but at least the attempt must be made. It requires *at the very least* that you compose sermons with the possibility that those unfamiliar with the gospel might be present. In my estimation, if you preach in the language of the herd, the herd is all you'll ever have.

Eleventh, ask yourself the question, "Am I able to read people?" Now that's not always easy. People are sometimes complex creatures. But you need to "exegete" them to the best of your ability. This is vital in the ministry and is especially the case in church planting. The welcome mat may be out and the welcome sign might be in front of the church, but that doesn't mean that once people visit your church they will be welcome to stay. Perhaps this appears harsh, but hear me out on this.

If you welcome enough visitors, there will be certain patterns that emerge. You will start to decipher certain categories of people who pose a threat, either small or large, to the church. Now, you have to be careful here because the tendency is to pre-judge and peg people before you've had a chance to spend time with them. At the same time, the Lord does call us to be discerning and discriminating in the best sense of the term. And so, in the end, beware of paranoia. Beware of contempt. Beware of arrogance. Beware of pre-judging someone's character. At the same time, be discerning and know when to walk away from a situation that has the potential of consuming you and members of your congregation.

Twelfth, ask yourself the question, "Am I able to live with a constant sense of vulnerability?" If you take on a church that's been established for a while, you will likely have a number of things in place. You will have elders and deacons in place. You will have programs in place. You will have catechism classes in place. You will have Sunday school in place. You will have families in place, some multi-generational, who possess a strong sense of what it means to be members of the church. All of these things offer a sense of stability. Budding church plants, however, may not have many of these things in place which results in a certain sense of vulnerability. When you are small and emerging you wonder if the

church is going to make it because the line between making it and breaking it is exceedingly thin. Everything is felt more acutely in a small church plant. You feel acutely the loss of members and the gaining of members. Periodic tension between members is also felt more acutely. The financial footing of the church is more tenuous. There are many times when you wonder, "Are we on the verge of taking off or crashing?" It certainly makes you a man of prayer!

Thirteenth, ask yourself the question, "*Am I prone to depression when disappointments come?*" Let me ask you this: Do you have the ability to let water roll off your back? When you face the next exegesis paper or the next bluebook test or the constant language requirements, do these things sometimes keep you awake at night? Well, they should. Fact is: you're going to face difficulties in church planting that are going to tempt you to stay awake at night. Sometimes they will. But, over the long run, you have to have the ability to let water roll off your back; otherwise you will be a prime candidate for emotional burnout.

Fourteenth, ask yourself the question, "*Do I have a sense of humor?*" You have to be able to laugh sometimes at your circumstances and not take yourself too seriously. Your flock needs to see this in you as well. I hope the professors here, if they see a student who is too serious, will come alongside the student and say, "You need to lighten up a little bit." Humor is so incredibly important. True. The Apostle Paul says to Timothy that he needs to be sober, serious minded and be willing to endure hardship. But there are times when humor serves as a release valve. The writer of Proverbs puts it well, "A joyful heart is good medicine but a broken spirit dries up the bones." If you can't ever laugh at your situation, you'll become either calloused, bitter, disillusioned, burnt out, or all of the above. And that doesn't make for a very effective pastor!

Fifteenth, ask yourself the question, "*Am I able to be thankful in adversity?*" Do you know what happens in the ministry? All it takes is one difficulty in the pastoral ministry, and your mind fixates on it. Do you know what's happening? First, you have opened yourself up to the discouragement of the devil. And, secondly, you have opened yourself up to a sin of omission because you've failed to give thanks for God's blessings in your ministry. Sometimes you have to say, "You know what? I'm not going to focus on the things that are not going well. Rather, I'm going to focus on the things that *are* going well." There have been times in my prayer life when I have said to the Lord, "Lord I'm not going to mention any problems today. You know them better than I do. I'm just going to list all the things that I am thankful for." And before you know it, you have fifteen or twenty things to thank God for. Remember to thank God for them. Remember the ten lepers. Remember the one who came back to thank the Lord while the other nine were consumed with other pursuits.

I want to end this lecture with something that was not broached in seminary (at least when I attended). What I've learned is that if you're going to be a church planter *you must know, love, and be willing to adapt to your culture*. If you don't love your culture, you won't be able to effectively minister to it. Tim Keller wrote this: "God outlines a relationship with pagan culture; his people are not to withdraw from it, nor are they

to assimilate to it. They are to remain distinct but engaged. They are to be different; but out of that difference they are to sacrificially serve and love the city where they are exiles. This is one of the problems of Jonah. He went to the city but he didn't love the city."

Now, the reason I don't think this was always brought up when I attended Mid-America in the early '90s was because a lot of the men who graduated from Mid-America entered a pretty uniform cultural and ecclesiastical context. However, today you have is a number of men who attend Mid-America, Westminster West, RTS and other seminaries that are going into cultures and ecclesiastical contexts that are in some cases quite foreign to what they have been accustomed to in their upbringing. The transition to these contexts is not always easy and some are able to adapt better than others. The point is: before you consider a church plant, you really have to read the culture in which the church plant ministers and search your heart about your suitability and love for that culture.

In this lecture, I've talked about the romance and the reality of the ministry. I want to leave you with one personal example of each.

There are times when you invest in people's lives and there's little return. Sometimes there's no return. I was reminded of this recently at a local car shop. One day I was getting my car serviced at a local automotive shop. While I was sitting in a waiting area, I was reading Michael Green's *Evangelism in the Early Church*. A receptionist came up to me and asked me what I was reading and I said, "Oh, I'm just reading this book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*." She said, "History is an important thing; we need to understand history." "Yeah, that's true," I said. We exchanged some small talk during which I explained that I was a pastor and then a few minutes later she walked away. Two minutes later she came back, "You're a pastor, right? I have some questions." So, to make a long story short, I shared some of the gospel with her and then I said, "You know what? I'm starting a Christian Foundations class in about a month's time. Would you like to join it?" She said, "Could you give me some information on it?" I said that would be no problem. So, I got the information ready, got the whole curriculum ready, brought it to the place where she worked, and someone informed me that she no longer worked for the company." Well, I had her phone number and so I gave her a call. She answered and she asked if I could forward the information to her in the mail. I said, "Yeah, sure. No problem." And so, I got all the material together, went to the post office and mailed it to her. After about a week, I received a little card in the mail that said, "Dear Phil, please accept my thanks for sending me the outline of your Christian Foundations course. Please, please accept the money for all your expense and time in running a copy for me and sending it." She ended with these two sentences: "I have no excuse for not being able to take your course at this time. Thanks again for your effort and time." And I thought to myself, "At least she's honest! But it's a sad statement, isn't it? And it's part of the ongoing challenge of the ministry. How many times don't we cry out like Jesus, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I have wanted to gather

you like a hen gathers chicks beneath her wings, and yet you were unwilling.”

But the challenging and sometimes disheartening realities of the ministry are also tempered by supreme joys. There’s a woman in our congregation named Michelle. She came to us through a mutual friend who got her into a more discerning and fervent relationship with Christ. He also “infected” her with Reformed theology.

Michelle sent me an e-mail recently. In it she wrote, “Dear Pastor, although it’s not said often enough, I appreciate you and all the work you are doing here in Springfield. These past months have been a great time of growth and gaining understanding for me. Having the Word preached faithfully and being given an example of a solid Christian family from you has enriched my life more than I can possibly express with words. Knowing that you bear the weight of being the only elder in residence makes me all the more grateful. I cannot begin to imagine what you, Joy, and the children are carrying for this congregation. With our body’s seeming inordinate number of needs, and procuring support from other URC congregations, not to mention all the minutia that goes along with the ministry, it is astounding that you have time to prepare weekly sermons to feed the sheep. Your sacrifice for this work has not gone unnoticed. All that being said, know that you and your family are being brought before the throne of grace daily. May Jehovah Jireh grant each of you a substantial refreshing of your spirits this week as you serve him in his name and for his glory. With love, in Christ, Michelle.”

This is what I call the romance of the ministry. Such sentiments are like showers from above that quench parched souls and revive the weary church planter. They remind us that God never gives us more than what we can bear and certainly more than what we deserve. The psalmist puts it well, “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good. How blessed are those who take refuge in him!”

Blessings on your studies, brothers, as you prepare for the ministry. May the Lord of the church make clear His paths for you. And if that path should lead to church planting, praise God!