



A veteran church planter and pastor for over twenty years, **Dr. Tom Jones** is a widely sought after new church development coach, consultant, assessor, seminar leader and teacher, and mentor. He has a Doctor of Ministry Degree from United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, with an emphasis in church planting. Tom received his Master of Divinity Degree from Emmanuel School of Religion and his Bachelor of Arts Degree from Milligan College. Among other things, he now directs the Supervised Ministerial Experience (SME) Program, teaches in the Christian Ministries area at Emmanuel School of Religion in Johnson City, Tennessee, and is Director of Recruitment and Assessment for Southeast Stadia, a national church planting movement. Tom and his wife Debbie led the church planting teams at SouthBrook Christian Church in Dayton, Ohio, and Princeton Community Church in Princeton, New Jersey. They have two children, Melanie and Tom. Tom can be reached at jonest@esr.edu.

Why Plant Churches?

Recently, I've been thinking quite a bit about my home church. I have a special place in my heart for that little church, located on the corner of Penn and Neville Streets, in Follansbee, West Virginia. Do you know what a sure sign of a home church is? It's when you are 49 years old and the good folks still call you "Tommy Jones."

I have so many fond memories of my home church, like when I was eleven years old and stole communion grape juice from the church refrigerator with my best friend Randy Weaver. We drank right out of the bottle. Randy's an elder there now. I also attended Vacation Bible School there every summer. In that church, I met Jesus and was baptized on Easter Sunday in 1967. My third grade school teacher, Mrs. Stemple, sang in the choir. My Boy Scout troop met there. Al Cooper, an elder in our church, was our scout leader. I received the Boy Scout's "God and Country" award in that church. I remember going to Elkorn Valley Christian Service Camp and holding hands with a girl for the first time around a campfire. My home church sponsored me during that camp.

When my father struggled with alcoholism, the church was there for my family. I remember my dad going forward one Sunday morning and rededicating his life to Christ. He wasn't judged or condemned. Instead, he was loved and accepted.

I developed a heart for ministry at my home church. There, I

preached my first sermon when I was fifteen years old and a sophomore in high school. Two years later, I shared my faith at a high school assembly of 2200 students. My youth group days under the leadership of one of our elders, Bill Cooper, prepared me for this public testament of faith.

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Throughout the years, my home church always encouraged my move toward vocational ministry. Our preacher, John Barto, and his family took me to Milligan College's School of Ministry. I fell in love with Milligan and attended college there. My home church helped pay my way through both Milligan College and Emmanuel School of Religion. I can still remember going to my post office box at Milligan and receiving mail that included a ten-dollar bill from George and Adda Mae Heckman. George worked for the city as a trash collector. He didn't have much, but what he had, he shared with me.

My home church financially supported both churches I started. With their mission-oriented hearts, they helped the down and out, ministered to alcoholics, loved and accepted unwed mothers, and invested in their youth. All of this was just part of their DNA.

My sister was married in my home church. I was ordained there in 1977. My father's funeral was held there in 1982, and now that same group of believers are caring for my ill mother. Words cannot express the depth of gratitude I have for that church. They understand what it means to be a community of faith. Are they perfect? No. But they "get it!" That seemingly insignificant group of people, who meet every Lord's Day around the Lord's Table on the corner of Penn and Neville Streets in that small river town of three thousand people, made a huge difference in my life.

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Why am I sharing this with you? As we think about the world events of recent years, does any intelligent, thinking man or woman doubt that this planet is in trouble? Do you question the fact that a

global spiritual famine is responsible for the human disaster we daily see on the news?

How do we fix this desperate situation? Better laws? Better political leaders? Better government? Military force? These solutions have been tried before and, historically, are always lacking. That's not to say better government and laws are not needed, but spiritual and moral change cannot be legislated. Lasting change can only occur through the transformation of hearts as people and communities meet Jesus Christ.

Transformation happens through the faithful witness of "home churches," communities of faith like my home church in Follansbee, West Virginia. The Bride of Christ has more to offer than a better set of laws. What the people of God have to offer is a new and better heart that Christ gives to people when they experience Him through His church. The church does not offer the transformation of political systems; it offers personal transformation. As people are brought into God's family and involve themselves in God-honoring relationships with others, they are encouraged in the strong name of Jesus. Where else are people going to find Jesus Christ and the kind of sacramental community Christians have? No one else can offer what the church has to offer. Home churches are the best things going. We just need more of them, lots and lots that do what they do best—nothing more, nothing less.

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In August of 1985, our family was living in Springfield, Ohio, but had recently been called by the Miami Valley Evangelizers Association (MVEA)¹ to start a new church in Centerville, Ohio. As we prepared to move, I wondered if my three-year-old daughter, Melanie, really understood why our family was being sent out by MVEA. On a warm August day, I thought I would try to help her understand. I asked her, "Melanie, why do you think we are moving to Centerville?" She looked up at me with an expression on her face that said, "Why are you asking such a stupid question?" Then she answered very simply by saying, "Well, Daddy, to tell those people about Jesus." That

little walk, which was intended to be a father-daughter teaching time, instead was a personal learning experience. Melanie already knew something about mission that was simple, but profound.

Six years later that learning event was repeated. Although we planned to spend the rest of our lives in Centerville, Ohio, God had other plans in mind. In the fall of 1991, the Go Ye Chapel Mission and the Mid-Atlantic Christian Church Evangelism—both church planting associations in the Northeast—called us to lead a church planting team in Princeton, New Jersey.

The decision was a difficult one. We loved Centerville, but felt a strong sense of call to New Jersey. Finally, one late afternoon after our kids were home from school, we sat down as a family and discussed the decision. After explaining the opportunity in Princeton, I asked our children, Melanie and Tom, “What do you think?” They thought for a few moments and then Melanie said, “Well, I would be sad to leave my friends, but if those people don’t have a church to tell them about Jesus, then I think we should go.” My son Tom chimed in, “Yeah, we can teach them how to worship.”

If we are clearly to understand the *why* of church planting, we must begin by taking a close look at the mission of the church.

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Mission

God’s nature is at the root of mission. The living God portrayed in the Bible is a sending God. He sends because of His love for the world (John 3:16). He sent Abraham from his home into the unknown, promising to bless the world through him if he obeyed (Gen 12:1-3). God sent Joseph into Egypt to help preserve God’s people during a famine (Gen 45:4-8).² When the time had fully come, God sent His Son. Later, the Father and Son sent the Spirit at Pentecost (Gal 4:4-6; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7; Acts 2:33). Finally, Christ sent His church (Matt 28:19-20). John Stott writes:

And now the son sends as he himself was sent. Already during his public ministry he sent out first the apostles and then the seventy as a kind

of extension of his own preaching, teaching, and healing ministry. Then after his death and resurrection he widened the scope of the mission to include all who call him Lord and themselves as his disciples.³

Lesslie Newbigin affirms Stott when he writes, “The Church is sent into the world to continue that which he came to do, in the power of the same Spirit, reconciling people to God (John 20:19-23).”⁴ Emil Bruner states, “The Church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning.”⁵ Wilbert Shenk expounds on Bruner’s statement, “The fire of mission is God’s passion for the world’s salvation. When the people of God live in covenantal relationship with God, they will find this fire burning within them, too.”⁶ David Bosch explains further,

... it is impossible to talk about church without at the same time talking about mission. Because God is a missionary God, God’s people are missionary people. The church’s mission is not secondary to its being; the church exists in being sent and in building up itself for its mission.⁷

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If God is a sending God, and this action culminated in the sending of His Son, and the Son sends the church, then what was Christ sent to do? What has He sent the church to do?

In Luke 19:10 Jesus emphasized the priority of evangelism in His mission when He said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”⁸ He later passes this same mission on to the church in the Great Commission. The Commission is given in the New Testament in five different places.

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you (John 20:21).

Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation (Mark 16:15).

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19).

He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47).

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and

you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The Great Commission teaches that disciple-making evangelism gets priority in the mission of the church. The early church took this Commission seriously, and effectively fulfilled it.

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As important as evangelism is to the mission of the church, it does not stand alone. God's mission, reign, and evangelistic efforts are concerned with all areas of life. Wilbert Shenk correctly asserts,

Because the church should know its own culture best, it has a special missionary vocation to that culture. Significantly, the Great Commission includes all arenas of human life and activity in the mandate of the church. . . . At no point is the church given license to stop thinking in missionary terms.⁹

If the evangelistic mandate is best summed up in the Great Commission, the cultural mandate is expressed best in the Great Commandment. In Mark 12:31 Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (see also Lev 19:18). Christ's concern for hurting people is an extension of Old Testament thinking. Amos's prophetic words are characteristic of a total biblical concern for social issues.

You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them. . . . You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts (Amos 5:11,12).

Certainly Christ came to reconcile lost people to God, but He also fulfilled other needs in His mission. In reference to Himself, Jesus said:

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor (Luke 7:22).

Jesus "gave himself in selfless service to others, and his service took a wide variety of forms according to men's needs."