

Brian Jones is the founding and senior pastor of Christ's Church of the Valley, a new church in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Brian and his wife Lisa also started a new church outside of Dayton, Ohio. Brian has a B.A. from Cincinnati Bible College and a M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary. Brian and Lisa have three daughters.

Thinking Strategically

Anyone who has ever started a new church will chuckle at seeing the word “strategic” placed next to the phrase “new church.” Of all kingdom workers they know there are very few strategic things that ever happen in a new church. Usually, if we church planters dare to tell the truth, the new churches we start succeed in spite of our well-crafted strategies, not because of them.

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Besides, who would claim to be *strategic* about any activity that involves moving to a community in which you’ve never lived to organize a church that doesn’t exist with people who aren’t yet Christians led by a God you can’t see? To make matters worse, we attempt this with limited knowledge of our target community, minimal oversight, an uprooted family, unresolved sins, unrealistic time constraints, staggering expectations, declining finances—not to mention our own lack of experience and confidence! If a new church succeeds, it truly is a modern day miracle.

This is why, after being a part of a few new ventures, I’ve now come to the conclusion that there are only two truly strategic decisions a church planter has any control over. First, immediately after unloading your moving truck, buy burial plots. Next, after you’ve

committed yourself to being there for the long haul, drop to your knees and don't get up.

That's it. Buy burial plots and stay on your knees. That's about all I can share with any measure of certainty.

Yet I'm betting that, since you parted with a few dollars for this book, you expect a little more than that. You may be contemplating whether or not to start a church. You may be a leader charged with overseeing this strange breed of spiritual entrepreneurs. You may be part-way into a church plant and are seeking a little refinement or encouragement or both. Or, you may be where I was in 1986—a freshman in college with maps taped all over your dorm walls dreaming of where God might send you to make a difference for His kingdom. Wherever you are and whatever your reason for thumbing through this chapter, I feel obligated to give you a front row seat and let you learn from my fumbling attempts to lead and think strategically.

What Is Strategic Planning?

If God has called you to move to a new community and start a new church, then coupled with that call is an invitation to become the primary ear to which God will whisper His desires for that new church. As the Lead Planter, this will be your primary role. It will be more important than preaching, vision casting, evangelism, and team building put together. Why? When all the elaborate definitions, flowcharts, arrows, and terms are stripped away, *strategic planning in the new church is nothing more than finding out what God wants your church to do next and doing it*. That's strategic planning in a nutshell, and that's your primary task as the point person.

Take an informal survey with me of new churches across the country. Tally up the ones you are aware of that have launched, are growing, and continue to be fruitful for the kingdom. Now, make a list of all the church plants that have burst out of the gates with tremendous fanfare only to fizzle after a few years. What's the difference? Money isn't the difference. I can point you to dozens of rapidly growing and effective churches across the country that started on a shoestring. Location isn't the difference. I can think of dozens of churches that have failed in booming metropolitan areas. Neither the size of the staff nor the sponsoring organization is the deciding

factor. In my mind there is one key difference between new churches that flourish and ones that don't: the Lead Planter always seems to know what to do next.

Fortunately, like most other leadership skills, I believe strategic thinking is something you can learn and develop with time and practice. So in the following pages let me share five suggestions for becoming a strategic leader in the new church context. All five of these suggestions are things I've learned and applied while serving in three separate church plants.

Gain Altitude

A while ago I was going through one of the most difficult times I've ever experienced in church planting. I was dealing with a difficult staff relationship, an emerging land deal, financial stresses, vision clarification, and a dozen or so other issues that never seem to leave a church planter's desk. I felt like a deer caught in the headlights. I had major decisions to make and couldn't find the direction I felt I needed from God. In the midst of it all, I decided to hop on a plane to California to attend a church conference. As it turned out, the plane ride itself was a divine appointment. While jetting somewhere over Oklahoma, I felt God impress on my heart, "Brian, the problems you are facing are too close to you. Look out the window and notice how you can see to the horizon. When you spend time with me, I'll help you gain altitude and clarity."

You wouldn't think you would have to suggest to church planters that they need to spend time with God. Quite the contrary! Spiritual entrepreneurs are doers by nature. I hear planters complain all the time about working too much. But honestly, I can't remember a single time I heard a planter say they pray too much. You would think it would be the other way around. As planters we need to remember that our primary role, first and foremost, is to be a divine listener. How can we expect to know what to do next if we don't take long, leisurely walks with the Father?

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This is why, no matter how grueling my schedule becomes, I always try to make time for three things. First, I try to keep a daily

time with God for 30 minutes of Bible study and 30 minutes of prayer—apart from sermon prep. Second, I try to take three to four hours a week to get out of the office with nothing but a Bible and a blank pad of paper to simply reflect. Third, I try to keep an all-day prayer retreat once a month at a local monastery or a state park. I find that these times are more essential to knowing what to do next than everything else I do combined. In fact, sometimes someone will ask me where I'm going as I'm walking out the door and I'll quip, "Going to gain altitude."

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Make Decisions with Great Deliberation

The perception most people have of church planters is that they are risk-taking nuts that throw caution to the wind and forge ahead. While that may be true of some, that's not necessarily the case for the really good ones. To the contrary, the truly great church planters are not great because of their personality or intelligence but because they are great decision makers. After mulling over every aspect of a decision, thinking through every possible scenario and outcome, and beating a decision to death, they'll table it and approach it again another day just to be sure. Why? They know that the margin for error is much smaller in a new church than in an established church. For the most part, in an established church the organization is strong enough to handle bad leadership decisions. And, quite honestly, most nongrowing established churches are used to bad decisions on the part of their leaders anyway. In a new church, a wrong decision can be lethal. What makes matters worse is that sometimes you don't find out how bad a decision is until it's too late.

One new church I started was going gangbusters until we received word we were getting kicked out of the school we were renting. We quickly scanned potential sites and found a storefront that we could renovate. Churches were doing this across the country with success, so I assumed we would follow suit. Two years of slumped attendance and low morale just about killed our church, and me. It was the right decision for the wrong church. I learned then and there

that if I had spent just a little more time thinking through that decision, we could have avoided a near-fatal leadership collision. The same will be true for you. Church planters charged with discerning the direction of a new church must approach critical leadership decisions with great trepidation and deliberation.

Resist the Desire to Fill in All the Blanks

I'll never forget sitting down with a seasoned church planter from another denomination who received my direct mail and offered to take me out to lunch for extra encouragement. I proudly laid before him my mission, vision, values, strategy, and a host of other things people told me I needed at church planting conferences. Midway through lunch he smiled and said, "Please don't be offended, but you remind me a lot of my four-year-old when she plays 'dress up' with my wife's clothing." I wasn't too thrilled with that statement at the time, but now I recognize the wisdom in what he was saying.

Most church planting books and tapes recommend you craft a well-defined philosophy of ministry *before* you launch. This may sound counterintuitive, but my suggestion is that you don't do this. Filling in all the blanks before you launch ought to sound as strange to us as an expectant mother saying, "It's going to be a boy and he'll be six feet five, love soccer, enjoy horseback riding, marry a girl from Texas, and work in a bank." Who would presume to know anything about a baby that hasn't been born yet? Why would a new church be any different?

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The issue is contextualization. Too often we assume we know what God wants this church to become before it is even launched. Don't make that mistake. You don't want to create the right church for the wrong area. My suggestion is that all you start with is a very simple mission statement. That's it. Then as you observe what really works in your context, you identify and give vocabulary to what God is doing as it emerges. Yes, you are called to be the person who finds out what God wants the team to do next. However, in my expe-

rience, it has been helpful to discover that God only shares one leg of the journey with you at a time.

Get a Financial Crash Course

Early in my church planting calling I came to the startling realization that I couldn't tell the difference between a balance sheet and a bed sheet. Potential donors, office landlords, loan officers, and others began requesting things I had never worked with—quarterly projections, income statements, and other things they forgot to include in my M.Div. program. I knew then and there that if I didn't get a refresher course in basic accounting and business planning I was dead in the water. So over the next two years I gathered around me a few sharp business guys to teach me the ropes. By the end of my self-arranged M.B.A. program, I still wasn't ready to become CEO at GE or Microsoft, but I knew enough to keep our church from getting into trouble. More importantly, when I conversed with sharp business people whom I was trying to lead to Christ, I didn't embarrass myself or our church.

It's my conviction that the Lead Planter must have an accurate and comprehensive understanding of where the church is at all times—spiritually, numerically, and financially. Without that data, and a basic understanding of the processes for analyzing that data, strategic planning is impossible. You can't be strategic if you don't have a handle on current reality. In my current church plant, I always have on my desk, first thing Monday, a complete "Stat Sheet" which outlines weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual statistics for offering, attendance, and baptisms. On top of that I receive a weekly Budget Report, Balance Sheet, and Income Statement. We review all four of those documents in staff meeting every single week without fail. Based on that data and a ton of prayer, we strategically create goals and projections for where we will be next quarter, next year, and beyond.

A wise church planter told me one time, "Brian, there are three things that never leave the plate of a Senior Pastor—money, facilities, and staff. Whether you are 100 or 100,000 you will always deal with the presence or absence of those three things." He wasn't lying. Whatever you do, learn from my mistakes and get a financial crash course *before* you launch.