

Gene Appel began serving as the Associate Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in S. Barrington, Illinois in June of 2003. Prior to that, he spent 17 years as the Senior Pastor of Central Christian Church in Las Vegas, Nevada. In addition to being instrumental in church planting in the Las Vegas valley, Central grew during that era from 400 attendees to over 7,000. Gene and his wife, Barbara, have three children and reside in the northwest suburbs of Chicago.

“Do It Again, God! Do It Again!”

Planned Pregnancies: Churches Planting Churches

Sometimes I wear contact lenses. One spring several years ago, I'd put my contact lenses in my eyes before preaching, and everything would be fuzzy and blurry. I'd get up to speak and then have trouble focusing on my message notes. It was really bothersome. This trend of seeing the world blurred and unfocused continued until one weekend before a Saturday night service. I don't know what prompted me to think of it (in fact, I'm embarrassed to admit it), but the thought hit me: maybe somehow along the way I've gotten my lenses switched. Maybe I'm putting the lens that goes in my left eye into my right eye, and the lens that goes into my right eye into my left eye. Out of curiosity, I switched lenses, and it was just amazing how much better I could see. I saw things with new clarity and precision.

What I just described unfortunately happens to many Christ-followers, churches, and even many church leaders. We get our lenses switched, and we become fuzzy about our purpose. We focus inward instead of outward. We become exclusive instead of inclusive. We serve ourselves rather than serving others. Why the confusion? Unfortunately, the gravitational pull in me, the gravitational pull in you, the gravitational pull of the 99 sheep already in the pen is always

toward *selfishness*. If you don't believe that, ask a pastor of a large and prosperous church what his or her knee-jerk reaction is to the thought of releasing a portion of the Christ-followers in his or her church to start a daughter church. Ask this pastor to be completely transparent about his or her anxiety in releasing these people—people who have been won to Christ and discipled in that church, who worship in that church, who serve and tithe in that church, who pray in that church, who sacrifice for that church, and who lead ministries in that church. I'll tell you what his or her honest answer most likely is, because as embarrassed as I am to admit it, I've had to wrestle with this sin myself over the years. It's selfishness.

Pastors of churches that are considering starting daughter churches are left asking, "How is this going to affect me? What will this do to our attendance and giving that's been increasing every year? How will this new daughter church affect our building project?" We get our lenses switched, and we lose sight of the fact that we are called to be in the Kingdom-expansion business. We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses in Jerusalem *and* Judea *and* Samaria *and* to the ends of the earth.

One of the best ways to expand the Kingdom involves existing churches mothering baby churches. That's what our church in Las Vegas, Nevada, did several years ago.¹ We made the decision to become indefinitely pregnant. In the process of learning about planned pregnancies and mother-daughter church planting we found four phases: conception, pregnancy, birth, and long-term family planning.

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Conception: Moving beyond the Comfort of the Way Things Are

From an outward glance, it didn't make any sense; the timing seemed wrong. The church was thriving, growing, and healthy. There was spontaneity and dynamism that was magnetic. They were full to running over each week during worship. Everything was so comfortable.

You may think the church I’m describing is Central Christian Church, but the one I have in mind is the church in Antioch mentioned in Acts 13. Although Jesus told the disciples they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, I’m convinced they easily forgot. They were first witnesses in Jerusalem, and after the Holy Spirit came, the church was born and grew. People began putting down spiritual roots. As you know, once you do that, it’s hard to move. I truly believe that if the decision to stay or leave had been left to these Christ-followers, they would have stayed in Jerusalem forever. God, however, allowed persecution to come to the church. It served as a catalyst to push these Christ-followers out into the areas of Judea and Samaria, areas to which they never would have gone because they were so comfortable with life in Jerusalem. In this way, the church came to Antioch.

Listen to how Acts 13 describes the leadership team in Antioch,

Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called “the black man”), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul (Acts 13:1).²

Just think about these five guys. Barnabas was a great encourager, a man who took Saul of Tarsus under his wing and believed in him when nobody else would. Simeon (according to Scripture) was a black man, and Lucius of Cyrene, a Gentile. Both represented unique segments of the population. There’s Manaen, the childhood friend of King Herod, a man with aristocratic and government connections. He was apparently from a wealthy background and had been raised among the power brokers of his day. Finally, Saul was a lawyer with brilliant, razor-sharp intellect.

Amazingly, these men were the staff of the church in Antioch. Talk about a dream team of leaders! You’ve got a world-class encourager, a black man, a Gentile, a man with powerful connections, and another with a razor-sharp mind. This was an exciting church. Who in the world would want to leave a church like this and go do something new?

The Question of Timing

I believe that the greatest challenge of conception when it comes to mothering a new church is the challenge of moving beyond

the comfort of the way things are. This was certainly a challenge for our church as we began seriously contemplating giving birth to a new church back in the early '90s. We were first-time parents, and in many ways, the timing didn't make sense. It seemed wrong.

At the time, we were taking our first steps toward a multimillion-dollar relocation project. The church was thriving and reaching people. Why would we consider giving away hundreds of people and thousands of dollars to give birth to a new church when we needed people and dollars for our own dream?

Sometimes God's timing doesn't make sense. For example, my mom and dad decided early in their marriage to keep their family small in order to give their kids extensive opportunities in life. . . . So, they stopped at six! I was number six. After my brother Gregg was born, the folks were all finished having children, so they got rid of the crib, high chair, and baby clothes. Five years later, when my dad was 38 and my mom was 37, little Geno Brian came bouncing into their lives—the bonus baby, or as I like to think of it, the unexpected blessing. Friends kidded dad that he was going to have to ride to PTA in a wheelchair. Mom told me later that she cried and cried when she found out she was pregnant again. Dad put his arm around her and said, "Honey, don't you worry. I'll get you some help around the house." Mom anticipated someone to help with the housekeeping responsibilities; dad bought her an electric dishwasher instead.

Sometimes the timing of a birth seems all wrong. Everything is moving along smoothly and comfortably, but then God interrupts life with a different plan. Acts 13:2 says, "One day as these believers were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said . . ." *While* they were worshipping, *while* they were fasting, *while* everything was comfortable, *while* the church was thriving, the Holy Spirit interrupted.

While the Antioch church was thriving, the Holy Spirit interrupted.

That's the best illustration I can give you for what happened to us in 1991. After years of considering planting a new church on the west side of Las Vegas and after being challenged by the fact that we lived in the fastest growing metropolitan area in the country, the Holy Spirit interrupted our plans. In 1992 we moved beyond the comfort of the way things were by planting a daughter church.

Putting Legs on a Dream

The first question we faced was, “How are we going to conceive? How will we do this?” We had never given birth to a church before. We didn’t know what we were doing. Instead of first developing a comprehensive church planting strategy, we set out to find a gifted, Holy-Spirit-called leader for the daughter church.³ Had we gone the other way, we feared developing a comprehensive strategy that didn’t reflect the personality and gifts of the eventual leader. Also, we feared that if the called leader wasn’t a dynamic communicator and teacher, people would leave the new church plant before it even had a chance to develop.

Prior to the time we called Mike Breaux⁴ to be the initial church planter, many of our people were pessimistic about a church plant, saying, “That poor new church. Who’s going to want to leave Central Christian and Gene’s preaching?” After people heard Mike preach for the first time, however, they were saying, “Poor Gene, who’s going to stay at Central?”

Finding Mike didn’t just happen overnight; it was the result of extensive prayer. We’d had a strong midweek service for a number of years, and one Wednesday night in January 1992, we asked for everybody to get on their knees, praying “Give us a name. Give us the name of the person you want to lead this work.”

Although we had some name suggestions over the next month, none of them seemed to fit the profile of the person we were seeking. Finally, we heard the Spirit’s calling. While I was in Houston and having a totally unrelated conversation with some other church leaders, Mike Breaux’s name came up. At the time, he was leading a really exciting and thriving work in the little town of Harrodsburg, Kentucky. I had known Mike casually, but not very well, for over fifteen years. When I heard his name, something jumped in my spirit and I thought, “That’s the guy. I know that’s the guy.”

A few days later, I gave him a call and shared with him our vision. He promised he’d pray over the possibility. That night he told his wife Debbie, “Hey, I got a call from Gene Appel today about coming to Las Vegas to plant a church. I told him I’d pray over the opportunity. It’s not a real consideration, but I told him I would pray over the possibility anyway.” The next morning, Mike found Debbie sitting at the dining room table crying. She asked, “We’re moving to Las

Vegas, aren't we?" Although Mike disputed her comments, Debbie replied, "Yes, we're moving to Las Vegas. This is God's call for you. You love lost people. You're wired to do this."

Within two weeks of making the phone call to Mike and Debbie Breaux, we had a new pastor of our daughter church. I've never made a new hire so quickly in my life, but I was convinced of God's heavy involvement in the decision. Shortly after Mike's acceptance, Central Christian's financial commitment increased. We moved the Breauxs, started paying Mike's salary, set aside another \$65,000 for start-up costs, and essentially conceived a church plant.

Pregnancy: Practicing Healthy Prenatal Care

Once you conceive, much has to happen before you are ready to give birth. Acts 13:2 reads, "One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work I have for them.'" Although unclear how the Holy Spirit communicated the message, God clearly selected specific people (Barnabas and Saul) to leave the church in Antioch and to move forward with God's ministry plans for them. God didn't call everyone to go and leave; three individuals of the leadership team stayed while two left.

When you're mothering a daughter church, how do you figure out who is called to go and who is to stay? Mike and I discussed the issue early on. Frankly, there were a few people I really wanted to send, as there were also people who wanted to send me. We decided early on, however, that we wouldn't recruit for these positions. Rather, we would follow the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit. As we cast the vision of the daughter church—executing "tag-team" preaching over the next seven months and working as each other's biggest cheerleader—we waited for the Holy Spirit to recruit.

We waited for the Holy Spirit to recruit.

When you're preparing to mother a new church, you must be prepared to send the very best. If you were a member of the church in Antioch, enjoying the teaching and ministry of Saul and Barnabas, would you want to give them up and send them out to another church? Of course not; you'd want them to stay forever. Acts 13:3