

“If in the early 1800s you wanted to go from Pittsburgh to the Pacific Ocean, you would have wanted Lewis and Clark as guides. If you want to plant a church—or you coach people who do—you’ll want to follow the sage and mega-experienced guidance from Griffith and Easum. I’ve planted churches and coached hundreds of planters and I can tell you Jim and Bill know what they are talking about. The chapters on money and leadership development are alone worth the price of the book. The *Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by New Church Starts* will lead you intelligently around the most dangerous bends in the river called church planting.”

TODD HUNTER, president, Alpha USA

“Griffith and Easum tell it like it is: if the only plan you’ve got in your back pocket reads, ‘reach the lost,’ you’re the one who’s lost. *Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by New Church Starts* is the *essential trail-guide* to starting a church. I only wish they’d written it sooner. Brilliant!”

SALLY MORGENTHALER, Shapevine.com, contributor to
Emergent Manifesto of Hope

“When it comes to church planting, Griffith & Easum ‘get it.’ Every year, Jim Griffith is featured as a faculty member in our church planting major as he inspires church planters to think biblically and act missionally like no one else. Their personal experience and knowledge provide comfort and courage to our church planters to make it through the tough days because they have been there.”

DOUG FAGERSTROM, president, Grand Rapids Theological
Seminary

“Griffith and Easum have provided pivotal insights in the planting of Epicenter Church in Washington, D.C. Anyone considering planting a new church—both pastors and judicatory leaders—needs to read this book first. It is one of a very few *must-reads* in the field.”

PAUL NIXON, author of *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church* and
pastor, EpicenterDC

“Jim Griffith and Bill Easum have put together their combined wisdom in church planting and congregation development to produce this extremely helpful book for everyone interested or involved in new church starts. By guiding us through the land mines of mistakes, they have offered a clear and comprehensive view of the work before planters.”

KEVIN E. MARTIN, dean, Cathedral Church of St. Matthew

“Jim is not afraid to tell the truth about how the best intentions of good church people can go awry when it comes to new church starts. His advice is practical, positive, and real. And although it is directed at new church development, those who are trying to grow an established church will also find it to be of tremendous help. More than just a treasure trove of practical help, the book also offers a perspective on the missional position of the church today that can support and encourage those hoping, praying, and working hard for the church’s renewal and growth.”

JOANNE THOMSON, associate conference minister, Wisconsin Conference, United Church of Christ

“If you are not making mistakes in church planting, you are not taking any risks. Without risks you will not successfully plant. Griffith and Easum have one intent, pure and simple: to help new starts avoid hitting every pothole in the road. Reading *Ten Most Common Mistakes* will save you a lot of bruises.”

BILL MALICK, National Church Multiplication Director, Christian & Missionary Alliance

“*Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by New Church Starts* is a down-to-earth guide that challenges not only church planters but also church members to focus on those who are not in church yet. It is this focus that makes churches grow healthily and expands the message of the Gospel. This book outlines clear principles that transcend issues of culture, race, and class, and that can be applied in different situations. Biblically grounded and filled with practical suggestions, realistic benchmarks, and even samples of letters and case studies, this book can be the close companion of any church planter and his/her supervisor.”

NORA COLMENARES MARTINEZ, Office of Church Development, North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church

“I laughed and cried as I read each of the ten mistakes: laughed because I made most of them (often worse than described in the book) and cried because of the pain each caused me and those around me. The sections I found most insightful were the helps given to supervisors and coaches of planters. I seriously pray that every church planting supervisor, coach, and planter will read this and saves millions of dollars and thousands of ruined lives.”

GREG WIENS, Florida state pastor, Florida Church of God Ministries, Inc.

Ten Most
COMMON
MISTAKES
Made by
NEW
CHURCH STARTS

Jim Griffith / Bill Easum



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INTRODUCTION

Our Story

“Our wisdom comes from our experience, and our experience comes from our foolishness.”

PLAYWRIGHT AND ACTOR SACHA GUITRY

During the first twenty-two years of my ministry, my wife (Jan) and I planted five churches. They were all “parachute drops,” in which, basically, it’s as if you are told, “God bless you,” and thrown out of a plane, on your own with no support. Twenty-two years and five church plants later, we knelt in the living room of our home and decided we didn’t want to do that anymore.

That night we prayed a desperate prayer. We asked God to redeem the pain we had experienced in those five church plants—from the sins I committed, to the mistakes I made, to the experiences we had, and to the “cul-de-sacs” of effort we got lost in—in such a way that would serve new start pastors and new start congregations and organizations around the country and bring glory to God.

It’s a great and humbling experience to participate in an answer to prayer. So much so, that for the last thirteen years my ministry has been to assess, train, and coach new starts and

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new start pastors around the country. I've assessed more than 1,500 clergy new start candidates from dozens of agencies, trained people in more than 8,000 English-speaking projects, and coached hundreds of church plants, including working with African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian new start pastors. It's been a great ride so far.

But I've also conducted more than 100 autopsies on failed new starts (I stopped counting when it reached 100), and I want to tell you, there's no more gut-wrenching conversation than with a fellow servant who tells you how God called him or her to plant and yet the vision unraveled right before his or her very eyes. So my purpose in this book is to spare you some of this pain and to help you give glory to God in your church plant.

Why Should You Pay Attention to What We're Writing?

Planting five churches should make me a fairly good coach of church planters. However, I am a great coach. And I am a great coach because I (Jim) have made more mistakes than any planter on the face of the planet. I've shot all my toes off, blasted off my ankles, shattered both kneecaps, and finally said, "That's enough!"

Additionally the autopsies I've done on failed church plants have given me insights into why I made so many mistakes in the five churches I planted and what I could have done to avoid them.

My (Bill's) story is a bit different from Jim's and comes from two major learning experiences. I was a restart pastor and made the same mistakes Jim made and probably more. I also have consulted on-site with more than 600 churches over the past fifteen years, many of which were either church plants or restart churches. And those consultations taught me that Jim and I are not alone in our mistakes. Most pastors are making the same mistakes we made.

So we want to alert you to the top ten mistakes church planters make and how to avoid them.

Who Should Read This Book

Those of you who supervise church planters will find this book to be a pastoral call to you, quite honestly. You need to pastor those planters in your particular group.

Those of you who are in the discernment process of thinking about church planting, my comments are designed to sober you up.

Those of you who are already church planting will recognize yourself as we go along. If the pain gets too bad, take an aspirin or two.

How You Should Use This Book

Each section contains an explanation of one of the top ten mistakes we've seen planters make over the years. Each also contains what we've learned will fix, or undo, the mistake. We will also include coaching and supervisory sidebars. Along the way you will see a few footnotes now and then. Most of these are added for the purpose of explaining terms that might not be understood by people new to church planting and to offer information about possible resources.

This book contains the combined lessons learned by Jim Griffith, from planting five successful churches and from years of coaching church planters, as well as the wisdom Bill Easum has gleaned from almost twenty years of consulting with congregations. When possible, we will refer to one another as "we," and note the difference when necessary.

All right? Let's dive in.

1

Neglecting the Great Commandment in Pursuit of the Great Commission

*“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken
your first love.”*

REVELATION 2:4

Donald Grey Barnhouse, the great Presbyterian preacher, talks about the time he was visiting out of town and a pastor friend invited him to tag along to a wedding reception. Of course, Barnhouse knew no one, but he enjoyed watching the people dance and celebrate the festive occasion. As the party progressed, he noticed an elegantly dressed woman sitting all alone, unnoticed by the partygoers. Barnhouse inquired of his friend, “Who is that woman?” His friend replied, “Why, she’s the bride.”

This story illustrates the number one mistake planters make—in their zeal to pursue the Great Commission, they ignore the One for whom they’re planting the church—God.

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We've seldom met a planter who started out to put church planting before God. Most planters quickly identify God's call as the reason for their planting a church. The problem is church planting can become so all-consuming. It seduces planters into thinking that by putting it before all else they are doing God's will, but nothing should come before our love for God. The Great Commandment is first and foremost in the heart of any person who says they are a follower of God and a disciple of Jesus Christ. Replacing the Greatest with the Great, makes "God work" an obsession of the most damaging kind.

Most church planters are zealous about evangelism and committed to helping fulfill the Great Commission.¹ Nothing wrong with that. However, we've found too many pastors are doing the right thing for the wrong reason. In their pursuit of the Great Commission many have made a fatal mistake—they have neglected the Greatest Commandment.² A subtle, but deadly shift occurs first in the minds and then in the hearts of the planters—the thrill of church planting and reaching people and building a new faith community takes precedence over the personal responsibility to grow spiritually. Church planting becomes their obsession, blinding them to the reasons God called them in the first place.

The Great Commission minus the Great Commandment reduces evangelism to a vocation, a challenge, or a duty. However, the deep motivator for people who take evangelism seriously is an overwhelming love of God. The Great Commission is the inevitable outflow of a heart filled with a love for God. The impetus for planting a church has to be a desire for people to experience this love, not simply to carry out some mandate from the past.

¹"Go into the world and make disciples" (Mt. 28:19–20, author's paraphrase).

²"Jesus said, 'The first in importance is, "Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy." And here is the second: "Love others as well as you love yourself." There is no other commandment that ranks with these'" (Mk. 12:29–31, *The Message*).

However, too many planters are seduced into trusting their own gifts and competencies. We've known many planters who could plant a good church with God no more than marginally involved. What troubles us is very few planters seem concerned about this lack of the spiritual dimension. More often their motivation is to "prove someone wrong," try a new method, dispense with some traditions, or be their own boss.

Church planting is a spiritual enterprise that can only be effectively accomplished by deeply spiritual people. Obsession with putting people in seats certainly has more appeal than setting aside time to cultivate one's love for God, but that must be done.

Rather than rely on the program *du jour*, effective and faithful planters lead from a heart overflowing with a love for God. They embody this love in all their conversations. Their goal is not to get people to come to church; their goal is to introduce people to the love of God. The goal is not to tell people how bad they are, but to tell how good God's love is.

Whenever we get with colleagues, we ask them if they've ever had a church recruit their services by saying, "We're concerned that our people don't seem to love God very much. Would you consider working with us, so that we can develop ways to increase their capacity to love?" In all our years of coaching, we've never received this kind of inquiry, nor have any of our colleagues. Instead the calls are always about how to get more people in the pew, or get troublemakers out of their church, or how to raise money.

**Are you a church planter trying to love God, or a lover
of God trying to plant a church?**

Don't get us wrong, without people your vision will perish. But without a tender heart for God, there's no place for the vision to reside.

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So, church planter, why are you so focused on planting a church?
Be careful how you answer.

MISTAKE NUMBER ONE: In pursuit of the Great Commission, church planters neglect the Great(est) Commandment.

So, let us ask you a question. Are you a church planter trying to love God, or a lover of God trying to plant a church? The distinction is crucial. If you are a church planter trying to love God, God will not share glory or power with you, because God must always come first. You must be a lover of God trying to plant a church because the Great Commandment always trumps the Great Commission. We plant churches because our love for God is so strong we can't do anything else.

You can't put loving God to the side while you plant a church—no matter how much you want to change the world. If your heart for God doesn't grow, your ministry will subside and you'll find yourself spiritually shriveling up, void of any spiritual power, and that spells doom for your plant.

The Fix: Avoiding the Mistake

Planter, have you forgotten your first love, the "Bride"? If so, stop in your tracks and return to your first love. Do it now! Set aside everything and get focused once again on the Greatest Commandment.

Take a moment to focus on this word from God:

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for

my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.” (Rev. 2:1–4).

It doesn’t matter how hard you work or how passionate you are about planting a church; if you forget the power behind the plant—the “Bride”—you’re doomed to shrivel up and die on the vine.

One more thing about the Greatest Commandment—it tells us to love others as God has loved us. These others include your family. Don’t make the mistake of so many planters and ruin your marriage over planting a church. No church is worth that.

So keep the Great Commandment first and foremost in your heart. Let that be the fountain from which springs all of your passion for everything in life, including church planting. Keeping this focus will serve you well in all that you attempt in life.

■■■ SUPERVISORY COMMENTS: Don’t let your planters rely on the church plant to grow their spiritual lives. It’s presumptuous for the planter to think the new church will feed the planter’s spiritual appetite. Many dechurched people find themselves spiritually confused, wasted, or lost, and rarely at the same spiritual level as the church planter. Also, the “details” of the new service can prove quite distracting to the new start pastor—signs posted strategically, parking attendants and greeters stationed appropriately, seating and staging arranged tastefully, not to mention the sound being right, the

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upfront people remembering their lines, transition points, noise from the hallways, a child crying during prayer time, ad nauseum, ad infinitum.

● ● ● **COACHING COMMENTS:** Planter, do two things. One, attend a vibrant, spiritually alive worship service eight to ten times a year (usually on a Sunday evening or weeknight). If you're married, take your spouse. Sit in the back row, and soak in the power of God without having to worry about anything but giving and receiving. Do not attend a church of like tribal affiliation, and do not take your children. This time is for you and your own spiritual development. Two, regularly visit with an associate or spiritual director not associated with the new start for reflection and camaraderie. Nothing is as valuable as a confidant from outside the plant.

A cousin to this mistake occurs in the form of “team meetings,” which involve countless hours rehearsing the vision, values, and mission statement, not to mention all the logistical discussions. The “business” of the church trumps God every time. I've (Jim) attended launch team meetings that began on high notes of worship, prayer, teaching from the Bible, all of which are centered on the church plant, not on God. Then, after a short break, the “real” discussion starts—has someone found a nursery coordinator, how's the purchase of sound equipment going, or a review of the final three logo choices. You get the picture.

This mixing of God and details around the plant models the very pattern most planters are fleeing and everything they loathed about their former churches.

What's the solution? Separate these meetings. If you're meeting for spiritual interaction with God, then do so—and retire to the kitchen for refreshments. Meet individually with those persons responsible for various tasks in the new start. You do not need to bring people

together regularly to “report” what’s happening. If you do, that group will become your first church board, although unofficially.

Moving On

The persistent failure of many church planters to understand and develop the spiritual dimension, both personal and corporate, of planting a church leads us to the second biggest mistake church planters make—failure to take seriously the various forms of opposition that inevitably accompany the work of God and God’s people. To that mistake we must now turn.