



# FOUR WAYS

TO DISCERN YOUR CALL TO CHURCH PLANTING



**LEN TANG** is the director of Fuller's Church Planting Program, which offers master's-level courses in church planting, a church planting certificate, and a year-long cohort. Len is a Fuller MDiv grad and is currently planting his second church, Missio Community Church, in Pasadena, California.

*Church planting is a tangible expression of God's missional heart throughout Scripture, it is a demonstrably effective form of leading people to faith in Christ, and it opens up creative new ways for God's people to engage with and impact the culture.*

*If you're reading this, you may be at an inflection point in your life. Something or Someone has put a sliver in your mind, a burr in your saddle, or a fire in your heart. You wonder if you're called to pioneer something new in God's kingdom rather than stay with what's established. You sense the culture is shifting and wonder whether the Spirit is saying "Yes. You. Now." You have friends who are far from God and might never be reached apart from a fresh expression of the gospel. So you're taking the somewhat unnerving step of admitting that God may be calling you to the daunting task of starting a new church. The following four questions are designed to help you discern just that.*

---

## 1. ARE YOU EXPERIENCING HOLY DISCONTENT?

The most helpful concept I've come across in helping potential planters discover and deepen their call is that of "holy discontent" from Pastor Bill Hybels. The "discontent" or frustration in this phrase refers to the planter's conviction that an absolutely crucial aspect of the gospel of Jesus Christ is missing in the church. The potential planter feels indignant that a dimension of Christ's mission in the world is absent from people's lives and it breaks their heart. They ask themselves, why isn't there a group of Christ followers that presents the gospel in the heart language of this people? Or cares for the disenfranchised in our city? Or connects with young adults? Or shares Christ's love in this neighborhood? Or is concerned with racial reconciliation? They wonder why a foundational element of biblical faith appears so neglected in the ministry of God's people. This deep sense of frustration may be causing them to question their current ministry context and yearn to spearhead a new work of God. Could this be you?

Spoiler alert: Men and women who bring only frustration without refinement will remain angry malcontents who never articulate a clear, compelling, and God-honoring vision. The call to church planting means allowing God to harness and redeem that discontent so that it becomes holy, godly, and sustainable. It cannot simply be deconstructing our understanding of the church without allowing it to be reconstructed under the Spirit's tutelage. This process of submitting to Christ is what allows our frustrations to be made into holy discontent.

Have you mined the holy discontent that God has placed in your life? Have you gone beyond the surface frustration and complaining (often boiling down to a bad experience with a particular church or ministry leader) and done the difficult, contemplative, prayerful work of drilling down to your bedrock calling? Have you been undone by biblical passages that drive you to greater faithfulness? When the seeds of discontent are refined and purified by God's Spirit, they become the raw ingredients for a new mission outpost. So holy discontent can become a way to clarify your calling and to release the vision that God is birthing in you.

**REFLECTION QUESTION:** Read about the holy discontent that led Nehemiah to build the wall (Neh. 1:1–4), that motivated Jesus to teach and heal (Matt. 9:35–38), and that spurred Paul to preach in Athens (Acts 17:16). What is the discontent that is motivating you to pursue church planting, and what might be some ways that God wants to purify it to make it holy? Take a few minutes to write out as many descriptions and phrases as you can about your vision for a new church.

## 2. ARE YOU WIRED AND GIFTED AS A CHURCH PLANTER?

Holy discontent is a necessary but not sufficient condition to be called to church planting. Some leaders may discern their holy discontent yet still lack clarity on whether God has given them the specific gifting and wiring to start a new church. The basic premise is: know thyself. As Paul writes, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment” (Rom. 12:3). Some ministry leaders may be gifted as pastors but not as planters, and knowing the difference is crucial.

Hopefully you’ve begun the journey of discovering your basic wiring—whether you’re an extrovert or introvert, what your strengths and spiritual gifts are, etc. The better you know and understand yourself, the more you will be able to lean into those strengths as a planter and to recruit a team that shores up your weaknesses. Missiologist and author Alan Hirsch views Ephesians 4:11–13 as a description of the primary leadership gifts needed in the church using the acronym **APEST**: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers. Planters often have a strong apostolic gifting in the sense of continually gathering people to form new ministries and churches, and then prayerfully recruiting people who possess the other leadership gifts.

Charles Ridley, a former Fuller faculty member, developed the Church Planter Profile, which identified 13 characteristics associated with fruitful planters. Each network or denomination uses its own prioritized list of characteristics, but nearly all church planting leaders would agree that the following characteristics are typical in fruitful church planters:

- **Spiritual life:** vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ, passion to make the gospel known
- **Relational life:** healthy friendships and family life, track record of mobilizing people to start new things, strong in vision casting
- **Personal life:** self-motivated and self-starter, emotionally healthy and resilient

Having said that, thankfully there’s no one-size-fits-all model of a church planter. For too long, the dominant image of a church planter has been a young white male with an extroverted, life-of-the-party personality, skinny jeans, facial hair, and a modest tattoo or body piercing. Yet how could it be that all of North America could be reached through just one type of person? In order for the full kaleidoscope of people groups to be reached, God’s mission requires that there be women and men church planters of many different ethnicities, geographic callings, ages, and personality types. We need a huge variety of planters to reach the plethora of ethnic groups that fill our cities and towns!

In fact, now more than ever before, context matters. Planters are not called simply to plant a generic church in AnyTown, USA, but to cultivate a God-given burden to plant in a particular city and people group so that God’s kingdom reflects every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7:9).

**REFLECTION ACTIVITY:** Ask a couple of the people closest to you what they think of the possibility of you planting a church.

## 3. ARE YOU EQUIPPED?

In his article “[Formed, not Found](#),” Tod Bolsinger, vice president and chief of Fuller’s leadership formation platform, writes that “one’s calling in life is not so much found as formed . . . our vocation is not truly found until we are fit for it.” We do not simply wake up one day and decide to plant a church. In response to the call that God has been forming in us over many years before we ever considered starting a new church, we then train—much like athletes train—to live into that call.

This equipping can come through a multitude of avenues: life experience (particularly suffering), friendships with unbelievers, Holy Spirit leadings, opportunities for evangelism, internships, church staff experience, short term missions, seminary, etc. The point is that there is a process by which we cooperate with God's Spirit to grow into the call of church planting. In fact, Fuller recently retooled its entire curriculum to enable students to be formed for the sake of their vocation.

In Fuller's church planting program, we are convinced that there are at least three essential ingredients for a church planter to flourish: spiritual formation, theological reflection, and missional competencies. This is not a comprehensive list, but simply a starting point for the formation of a planter who will thrive in an increasingly post-Christendom era:

- **Spiritual formation:** Because the call is difficult, we need God's Spirit to deepen our life in Christ, to allow ministry to flow out of freedom and not performance, to reveal our brokenness, and to strengthen the emotional foundations of our lives. We seek to form people personally, spiritually, academically, and globally so that they can live out their calling in a changing context. As part of this commitment, Fuller offers year-long cohorts called [Fuller Formation Groups for Church Planters](#).
- **Theological reflection:** Planting without reflecting biblically and theologically can devolve into an unholy alliance of mere marketing and sociology. Rather, faithful church plants must reflect God's character and nature as revealed in Scripture, and not simply what "works." While seminary is not required to plant a church in a theologically reflective manner, it sure helps. At Fuller, our courses are team-taught by a faculty member and a church planting veteran to ground our teaching in real-world experience.
- **Missional competencies:** The skills to think like a missionary to the West and to contextualize the gospel to a specific city and people group are crucial in determining how relationships are built, outreach is structured, and sermons are prepared. In addition, there are many current models of church planting (house church, missional/incarnational, multi-site, launch large) and each deserves theological and missional reflection and consideration. Each city must be studied and reached in a different manner, as evidenced by the variety of ways that Paul approached each city in Acts. Church planting courses in Fuller's School of Intercultural Studies are well suited to help you think and act like a missionary in your context.

These three "roots" (formation, theology, mission) help form a healthy planter who can in turn lead a team that makes new disciples, establishes a healthy church plant, and even catalyzes a church planting movement. For master's degree and [certificate](#) students studying church planting at Fuller, courses and co-curricular offerings are designed to strengthen this root system.

At the same time, much of this equipping is slowly shifting to take place within a local church in the form of residential apprenticeships, where prospective planters get to integrate their theological studies with their on-the-ground training in a missional setting.

**REFLECTION QUESTION:** Where and when could I gain further training to plant a church?

## 4. WHAT'S YOUR NEXT FAITHFUL STEP?

Often there is a "gestation period" between God conceiving the idea of church planting in our hearts and God's Spirit actually birthing a new church through us. That's fine. Many of the church planting students here at Fuller may not necessarily start a new church immediately upon graduation. For me, it was seven years after finishing seminary that I started my first church. Your mileage may vary. Rather than focusing on a certain time frame, consider the following developmental steps toward planting a church:

- **Missional experimentation in the local church:** The best place to begin is right where you are. There's a saying in overseas missions that if you're not a missionary here in the States, getting on a plane won't turn you into one there. In other words, the basic God-given impulses toward the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) can be lived out right now, right where you are, not just when you become a church planter. So participate in missional experiments in the actual neighborhood, workplace, campus, and relational circles you are now part of. Start a smaller version of the kind of community you are ultimately seeking to form. Finding fruit in these experiments will give you a sense of confirmation of God's call.
- **Conversations with other planters:** Ask around and search online for church plants in your city or denomination, and ask to meet with the planter(s). Ask them about their experiences, joys, and struggles. For the cost of a cup of coffee, you'll get a great education in church planting.
- **Identifying a tribe:** Church planting is lonely enough even with the support of a denomination or church planting network. So I'd never recommend someone planting on their own. Even the Apostle Paul planted as part of a team, and every one of his 13 New Testament letters is cowritten with someone else. He did ministry in partnership. If you aren't yet connected to a denomination or network, begin exploring those to see which one may be a fit with you theologically and philosophically, as well as in terms of chemistry.
- **Online assessment and/or formal assessment:** Assessment is the process by which a sponsoring network or organization determines if they believe you are called and ready to plant. You could begin with an online assessment (e.g., Lifeway Research's research-based assessment or the PCUSA's Missional Leadership Quiz) and, if that goes well, you may decide to participate in a denomination or network's formal assessment. These in-depth experiences typically consist of two to four days of poking and prodding, and include elements such as a written application, psychological testing, interviews, preaching, evangelism skills, team exercises, personality inventories, neighborhood exegesis, and more. After completing an assessment, participants typically receive a recommendation of green light (gifted and ready to plant), yellow light (gifted to plant but needs further training or resolution of life circumstances), or red light (not recommended as a lead planter).
- **Raising financial support:** Having start-up funds is essential, and the vast majority of planters need to raise some or all of their financial support. A growing number of planters are bivocational. In fact, cultivating financial supporters and prayer partners is an important part of the maturation process for both planters and supporters.
- **Church planting:** By the grace of God, your calling, wiring, gifting, location, and other factors will coalesce such that, like the Apostle Paul, your ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known will take shape in the form of a new worshipping community, to the glory of God.

**REFLECTION QUESTION:** What are two conversations I can have to help me discern my call?

## CONCLUSION

Congratulations for taking your first steps on an amazing journey. You may be joining the crucial cadre of women and men who are planting approximately 4,000 churches in the United States each year—a tipping point where the number of churches being planted now surpasses the number of churches being closed each year. That's a good start! But not enough churches are being planted to keep up with population growth, let alone to reach the rising numbers of “nones” with no religious affiliation whatsoever. More new churches are needed, and Fuller wants to help equip hundreds of planters to plant church-planting churches. May God lead and bless you richly as you take the next faithful step.