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5 Common Mistakes of Big City Church Planters



I do not claim to be an expert in urban church planting, but I have planted in Indianapolis and coached a team in New York City. We learned a lot. I've also talked with dozens of planter friends in other cities—and read the blogs of others. We have learned, sometimes the hard way, that the following mistakes are common for city planters.

In a previous Project Jerusalem e-newsletter, we've highlighted common mistakes all church planters make, such as not taking care of family, underestimating spiritual warfare, not praying enough, prematurely starting public services and so forth. Contact us for a list of [16 commonly made mistakes](#). This list intentionally focuses on common mistakes of city church planters, from our perspective.

1. **Wrongly thinking, "It worked in my last church plant—or in another region of the nation—so it should work here too."**

Big cities are challenging and humbling contexts for ministry. They are very diverse ethnically, economically, culturally and religiously. People come from lots of backgrounds and beliefs. Each neighborhood is often unique in its demographics and life rhythms.

To overcome these urban challenges, planters must learn from seasoned planters in the city. They will need to be cultural exegetes, learn their neighborhood, learn from their mistakes and adjust on the fly. Instead of coming in with preconceived agendas, blueprints, or models that "worked" elsewhere, urban planters need flexibility, humility and perseverance. They will need to contextualize their ministries.

2. **Wrongly thinking: "If we open our doors and market well, they will come."**

Another variation: "If we build it, they will come." The fallacy of this is that in the city, there are too many competing and compelling attractions that vie for the attention of the unchurched and lost people. Cities are centers for music, fashion, media, sports, art and more. You might have a great worship band, first rate kids ministries, guest welcoming, and be a strong communicator of biblical truth, but these are not enough to draw people in an urban setting.

I'm an advocate of the attractional church model and a strong believer in creating a welcoming, friendly atmosphere to which we invite our family, neighbors and friends so they can experience the presence of God and understand the grace of God. You know "no perfect people allowed." However, in city settings it's increasingly not enough to have an excellent attractive Sunday service to get people in the doors.

The solution: In city settings, we must think and act like a missionary—"Go and tell" while also inviting people to "come and see." We must be both attractional and missional incarnational. This means getting highly involved in the community and training your launch team and later your congregation to be "on mission" with Jesus in their daily lives. That is more important than putting on a quality Sunday worship service.

3. Underestimating the cost of living in the city.

Tim Keller, successful Manhattan church planter, says that cities are just like anywhere else—except a bit “more.” There are more people, more noise, more residences, more entertainment options, and more restaurants. This makes the challenge of urban planting unique and expensive.

Cities cost more money to live, get around, play, work, and raise a family—far more we have found in NYC than most suburbanites imagine. Research shows the number one stressor for most city planters is financial worries.



There are also other inconveniences that suburbanites aren't accustomed to—like not having a car but using public transportation, walking to the laundromat or supermarket, long lines, fewer and smaller parking spaces, etc. Wise planters will need to count the cost and factor in all this before deciding to plant a city church.

4. Measuring success by how many attend your church on Sundays.

In places like NYC, there are very few assembly halls available to accommodate large weekend crowds. Few megachurches exist proportionate to the population. The total evangelical church attendance runs 3 to 5 percent in many cities like NYC, while overall population continues to grow. Most churches in the big cities are smaller and often must share facilities with another congregation. Property is expensive and the prospect of buying and building is very small. Renting is costly.

If you plant in the city and think the metric of success is Sunday church attendance, you'll be frustrated and doomed to fail. This is not the southern "Bible Belt."

I'd encourage urban planters to think in terms of indigenous mission church planting: churches need to be self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. We learned that in places like NYC, a church can be all three of these in lots of ways, whether it's with bi-vocational launch pastors and teams, or churches of all sizes—small, medium or large. You'll probably be leasing a meeting space for a long time.

The reality is that in big cities we'll need many kinds of churches, meeting places, worship forms and working models. There will be no one church model reaching everyone in the city.

5. Not understanding how cities take a toll on families.

I know planters that love the city, but their spouses do not. Sometimes their kids can't adjust. When one person in your family is struggling in the city, it's a very difficult burden to bear. I know of many big city planters or pastors who burn out after a few years. They have not learned to pace themselves, take a weekly Sabbath rest, and/or mini-retreats.

To make it, you and your spouse have to be on the same page about planting a church in the city. You'll need to be in agreement on how to wisely serve as a family and love one another. Take into account how the city affects each family member differently and make adjustments. The ages of your kids and family dynamics matter. Family stresses are inevitable in any church plant, but especially in big cities. Count the cost before (and while) diving in. Ask the Lord for wisdom, sustaining grace, and long-term perseverance. You will need them!

Despite these challenges, the Lord of Harvest is still calling and enabling church planters in our day to successfully plant in big cities. He has promised to build His church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against us—and that includes in big cities!

Contact [Ken Davis](#), the author and Project Jerusalem Director, for more information on urban church planting.