

CHOOSING A NAME FOR THE NEW CHURCH

The name for a new church will often be in the heart of a church planter from the very inception of the vision. As passionate as he may be about the name, he should be very careful not to finalize the name without reflection on some vital considerations. At least three questions should be asked and answered before solidifying the new church's name.

1. How important is a name?

I have known many church planters who worked until just a few weeks before launch and had not yet decided on a name. The catalyst for choosing a name came when they were designing a direct mail piece. It's pretty hard to introduce your new church to the community without a name. In this scenario, panic usually sets in and the church planter begins to sample the names of other new churches. When he finds one that is appealing and accepted by the core group, the name is adopted. This approach reminds me of attempting to fly the airplane while it is still being constructed!

I believe that choosing a name for a new church is vitally important. Aubrey Malphurs agrees when he says, "Using one of his characters, Shakespeare once asked, 'What's in a name?' The answer in church planting is, 'Everything!' Enough research has been done to indicate that people, even unchurched people, pay attention to church names."¹

2. What factors should be considered?

- **Denominations**—It is always a mistake to assume that using your denominational title in the new church name is automatically negative or positive. In Florida, for example, we have discovered both to be true depending on where the new church is located. Malphurs confirms this stating that denominational labels have not attracted people in an urban setting. He observes, on the other hand, that this trend may be reversed in the rural settings. "One of my students wrote a master's thesis on planting churches in rural east Texas. He discovered that people there viewed churches without denominational affiliation as either charismatic or a cult."² Get out in your target community and try to discover the feelings toward your denomination before either including or excluding it in the name of your new church.

¹Aubrey Malphurs, Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 322.

²Ibid., 322-23.

- **Identity**—You may want to consider incorporating your anticipated ministry focus in the name. David Starkey planted a unique new church in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. He named the church Servants' Quarters Fellowship. Even though this name is rather unusual, it clearly describes his vision and values. Every member is expected to have a place of service. Hence the name "Servants". Their vision involves probably never having church-owned facilities. They now meet in a school and plan to continue in some kind of leased "Quarters". A top priority is to encourage and nurture meaningful, biblical "fellowship" at every level of body life. It has taken some time but his new church is becoming known in the community as being a true Servants' Quarters Fellowship.
- **Ministry area**—David Jones planted a new church in Fanning Springs, Florida. After being on the field and discerning some of the dynamics of this rural area, he named the church Fanning Springs Community Church. It wasn't long before he discovered that this area was in the center of a tri-county demographic. Each county has a different government structure and political environment. The Suwannee River, a natural barrier, runs right through the middle of his target area. He soon found that his ministry area had absolutely no sense of community. As a result he named his new work a community church and began designing ministries to try to bring the people together as a true community.
- **Limitations**—It is hard for the church planter who doesn't even have a core group to envision the future possibilities of numerical growth. If he does not, however, he may make serious mistakes that can severely impede his future development. One of these mistakes can be in the choice of a name. Wagner comments on this point. "Rick Warren wisely did not attach 'Laguna Hills' to his church name even though that was their first location. Since then they have changed locations to Mission Viejo, and now they have purchased property in El Toro. All of those communities are in the Saddleback Valley."³ If your church has the potential for becoming a regional church, do not make the mistake of identifying it with a smaller community in the name. It could possibly limit your growth potential.
- **Research**—Before deciding on a name for the new church, it is imperative that the church planter does adequate research. He can do much of this himself as the church planter. He should meet people in the target community and network with professionals in the area. He can share his vision for the new church and ask them questions about the community. He should attempt to discover the distinctives of the community and other factors that may affect the choice of name. When planting in Florida, he may request Turner Research through the local association and the Florida Baptist Convention. An extensive, professional opinion poll survey will be conducted to help discover

³C. Peter Wagner, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest (Ventura: Regal, 1990), 119.

important information. Questions can be designed to help determine the thinking of the people toward using or not using the denominational title in the name.

3. What suggestions can be offered in the choice of a name?

- **Ask the target audience**—Every new church should have a passion to reach lost, unchurched, or previously churched people. The focus should never be on swapping sheep with existing congregations. This being the case, Malphurs states, “You might want to consult with them (lost people and unchurched lost in particular) regarding a church name. Initially, put yourself in their shoes and create names that would appeal to them. Once you and your people have decided on several, ask some unchurched lost people which names they would choose and why. This should prove most illuminating.”⁴
- **Keep it short and memorable**—The new name should be short, memorable, easy to spell and pronounce. Obvious exceptions would be if the name included an area or street name that was unusual but well known by people in the community.⁵
- **Don’t alienate people**—Be careful in selecting a name that you do not use one that carries overtones of prejudice. Some place names could polarize people simply because people do not associate from different parts of town. It is important to discover these things and not make this mistake.
- **Avoid doctrinal names**—The church planter should not be afraid to share what he believes, but it is not wise to use doctrinally charged words in the church name. Some of these may be “independent,” “landmark,” “reformed,” “Pentecostal,” “holiness,” etc. Again, if your target is unchurched people, they will not care what you believe. You can attract them more easily if your name identifies who you are.⁶
- **Don’t leave a negative impression**—The classic example of this would be the use of the name “memorial.” This implies a memorial service or a funeral to most people. My reaction to a church sign I saw in a rural part of Florida was interesting. A nice new sign had been constructed pointing the way to “Decoy Baptist Church.” My first thought was of duck hunting. The hunters purchase the most life-like “decoys” of the type of ducks they are trying to attract and place them in the water in front of their blinds. The “decoys” serve the purpose of looking like the real thing in order to trick the real ducks into flying within shooting range. Even

⁴Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 323.

⁵Ibid., 323.

⁶Ibid., 324.

though this is probably a wonderful church in a community called "Decoy," my first impression was negative. My thought was, "This church must be an imitation of the real thing!" Rick Lawrence, a friend and church planting colleague of mine had an even stronger negative impression. "A decoy is something that is dead but it looks alive. Its purpose is to attract things that are alive so they can be killed!"

- **Don't be afraid to use the name "church"**—Wagner warns that church planters should not shy away from the name "church." There was a time in the 1960s and 1970s when churches called themselves fellowships, chapels, centers, or communities because so many were speaking out against the church. Regularly Gallup polls ask for the public's opinions about their confidence in American institutions. The church is usually near the top of the list. The name "church" attracts rather than repelling.⁷
- **Be aware of other churches around you**—The church planter should identify the other existing churches in his target community as well as in the broader area around it. It would be a mistake to either use the same name as another nearby church or even to approximate another name. This could only bring about confusion.

⁷C. Peter Wagner, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest (Ventura: Regal, 1990), 119.