

When is the right time to graduate your church plant?

Graduation

I think a lot about graduation these days. I have 4 children - one who is a senior in college and three young ladies in high school. Graduations are coming soon for me. Graduations are a signature of academic accomplishment and usually lead to autonomy in an individual's life.

I suspect that after my son graduates from college there will be autonomy (self-governance) for him. No more financial aid from mom and dad. He will live by his own rules and will be solely responsible for all affairs of his life. We can only pray that he has captured the meaning and purpose of his life as he moves forward as an adult.

Autonomy ([Ancient Greek](#): αὐτονομία *autonomia* from αὐτόνομος *autonomos* from αὐτο- *auto-* "self" + νόμος *nomos*, "law", hence when combined understood to mean "one who gives oneself their own [law](#)") is a [concept](#) found in [moral](#), [political](#), and [bioethical philosophy](#). Within these contexts, it is the capacity of a [rational individual](#) to make an informed, un-coerced decision. In moral and political [philosophy](#), autonomy is often used as the basis for determining moral responsibility for one's actions. One of the best known philosophical theories of [deontology](#), though it can conflict with a competing ethical principle, namely [beneficence](#). Autonomy is also used to refer to the self-government of the [people](#).

I find some striking similarities between raising adults (children) and raising up new churches. It is important to measure throughout the church planting process the thresholds for autonomy. Developing key elements for success is critical for long term viability. There are short term objectives that must be met before graduation should even be considered.

It is a natural tendency for people to think they are ready before they are ready. Independence is a great thing but it comes with a lot of responsibility. In our home we have given responsibility out slowly and methodically. As a particular child demonstrates the ability to be responsible, more responsibility is given to him or her. Readiness could be argued until the cows come home. I have found that laying out some fundamental markers or thresholds provides a framework for effective evaluation for autonomy.

Before we discuss those thresholds, I want to speak to the reasons we become impatient in the parenting process. Here are a few reasons we become impatient.

Impatience

- We are tired. Parenting is exhausting and as time goes on it can seem simpler to allow freedom rather than continue training and monitoring.
- We receive pressure from the children to give them freedom. Children believe they are ready and that we should "allow" them more freedom.
- We receive pressure from other parents to give up control. People tend to be followers, therefore following the crowd is what we do.
- We don't have all the facts. We may think they are ready but we haven't truly measured it.

A perfect example of this happened this past week. My daughters received phones. On the fourth day of ownership, the phones were back in my possession.... They were not ready.

As we wrap up this article, I want to give you five markers to serve as a guideline for graduating a church plant. It is important that we do not respond as impatient parents but rather nurturing, mentoring, and encouraging models.

Markers for Autonomy

There are five areas that should be developed and evaluated before a church plant should move toward autonomy.

- 1) Finance – The congregation needs to demonstrate significant financial viability. This needs to be spread out over many giving units not to be lopsided by a few. The ability to maintain the physical plant as well as the ability to fully support the pastor are key requirements. Often times the planter is one of the biggest givers.
- 2) Leadership – Leadership needs to be developed from within the congregation to serve in the capacity of deacon, teacher, and worker. Ownership and membership is needed to fully develop these areas.
- 3) Polity – The core members need to shape and form polity, practices, and governance with the church planter's direction. This will require time and attention.
- 4) Ministry – A full range of ministries need to be developed to supply growth for the people. The local attenders need to provide support to sustain these ministries. This is different for every church. Ministry is determined by need and Biblical admonition.
- 5) Evangelism – Evangelism needs to be core to the values of a church plant. Seeing people come to Christ is the primary reason and rationale for starting a church plant in the first place. Church plants often are collecting pools for dissatisfied church attenders who are looking for something new or different. It is crucial that you are certain that the vision for evangelism has not been changed.

Monitoring these five areas will make it easier to determine when a new church is ready for autonomy and will reduce the risk of giving too much freedom too soon. After all, we would not want to send our children out into the world at an age when they are unprepared and we would not want our church plant to flounder because we did not give it time to fully develop.