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abstract

This study seeks to understand how Korean church planters perceive the church planting education that they received. This study employ sthe qualitative approach, which uses words and open-ended questions and explores and understands the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To collect data, I interviewed nine church planters. I analyzed, interpreted, and wrote data as soon as possible. In addition, I collected other data. I also compared different data with each other to generate categories, and it was done consistently. The followings are the findings. While their passion for church planting was great and their assumptions and lack of infrastructure inhibited their preparation for church planting, they learned through their various experiences and social networks.

i. introduction

A Korean pastor planted a church in a city in Korea. Despite his effort and prayer, his church did not seem to grow the way that he had thought it would. A few

months later, Chusok (Thanksgiving Day) came, and many people, including the pastor, left the city to go home to celebrate with their families and old friends the biggest holiday in Korea. The pastor's home village prepared a special game for the residents and their visiting children.

The village chief said, "Anyone who can make a cow cry will be awarded one thousand dollars." Since the prize was considerable and the rule of the game seemed to be easy or at least harmless, a lot of people tried. However, no one could make the cow cry. As time passed, people wondered if they were ever going to see tears in the cow's eyes. As the pastor was watching, he thought he could never make a cow cry. He then remembered that he needed a thousand dollars when he would go back to the city. So, he decided to give it a try. He walked to the cow and whispered in the cow's ear. To everyone's surprise, the cow began to drop tears and cry. The pastor got the prize and used it for the church.

The following year, the pastor went home for Chusok again, and the village had a similar contest. This time, anyone who could make a cow run without touching it physically would be awarded two thousand dollars. With the prize doubled and the rule seemingly easy, everyone took turns and tried for the prize. Again, no one succeeded. Now it was the pastor's turn. People watched him with great interest. Some said he could not do it, and others said he could do it. The pastor was not sure. He approached the cow and talked to the cow. The cow jumped up and ran!

When the chief of the village gave him two thousand dollars, he asked the pastor what he had said to the cow. The pastor said, "Well, last year, I did not know what to say to him. So, before praying for the cow, I said, 'I am a church planter,' and he just started to cry. Reflecting on it this time, I thought he had understood the hardships which church planters faced, and that was why he cried. So today I said, 'Thank you for your tears last year. I never knew you would understand what I was going through. Would you consider working with me at my church?' As soon as I finished, he jumped and ran away from me," said he.

Although it is a fictional story that I heard from a Korean church planter, it shows how difficult church planting is. This seems to be well known. On the other hand, how Korean church planters perceive their church planting education is still largely unknown. The following questions will guide this study. What training did church planters receive? When did they receive the training? Who trained them? What training has helped church planting? What training would have helped their ministry?

ii. the method of this study

I chose the qualitative approach for this study. Qualitative approaches, which use words and open-ended questions, explore and understand “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009: 4). Qualitative methods treat the subject contextually and holistically since the methods assume a dynamic reality, which is appreciated through a continuous interaction between the researcher and the subject (Padgett, 1998: 2). Qualitative research methods are used widely. They were first utilized in anthropology and sociology (Padgett, 1998: 4; Creswell, 2005: 41). The methods are also used in education, nursing, psychology, management, and social welfare (Padgett, 1998: 4).

76 Padgett suggests that qualitative approaches prove effective when the researcher conducts an explorative study on an unknown or untapped subject, studies a sensitive subject, seeks the emic view of the experience of the subject, desires to put the research into action, has difficulty in explaining the findings of his/her quantitative research, and/or attempts to understand the process of the phenomenon (1998: 4–6). Considering his suggestion, it is not only natural but also necessary to approach the subject of this study with qualitative methods.

There are at least five well-established types of qualitative research strategies: Ethnography, Grounded theory, Case studies, Phenomenological research, and Narrative research (Creswell, 2009: 13). While the five types share common characteristics such as natural setting, multiple sources of data, emergent design, researcher as key instrument, inductive data analysis, participants’ meanings, theoretical lens, interpretive, and holistic account (Creswell, 2009: 175–176), a grounded theory seeks “a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell, 2009: 13). A grounded theory is a tool as well as a work, and it is often called a “process theory” (Creswell, 2005: 396).

A grounded theory has many strengths. First, it is grounded in the data. A grounded theory is a theory emerging from the data, and therefore it “provides a better explanation than a theory borrowed ‘off-the-shelf’ because it fits the situation” (Creswell, 2005: 396). Secondly, it generates a theory. When there is no theory that explains a problem or when existing theories do not appropriately address a phenomenon, there is a need for a new theory. This type of approach to the problem creates a theory. It comes in handy when a process, an action, or an interaction is the focus of the study because grounded theories are emergent, using inductive data analysis through a theoretical lens. Considering the nature of the problem of this study and all the characteristics and strengths of grounded

theories, a grounded theory approach would best serve this study as the research method.

I interviewed nine church planters in this study, using theoretical sampling. The key to theoretical sampling is selecting informative participants (Patton, 1990: 169). The purpose of this type of sampling is “to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 1990: 169). The nine participants were all Korean church planters. I chose those whose churches were less than five years old with an assumption that the education and/or training for church planting available before their church planting ministry were equally accessible for all of them. Their denominational background was varied: six Presbyterian, one Baptist, one Holiness church, and one Full Gospel church. They all had at least a Master of Divinity, and some of them had a second master’s degree in counseling or social welfare. After study, they also worked at already existing churches as assistant pastors for five to eleven years, except one who worked for two years as an assistant pastor. They were in their forties or early fifties. Eight were male, and one was female. I used pseudonyms for the privacy of the interviewees.

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Through interviewing, my primary method of collecting data, I sought to gain the perceptive meanings of individuals. Interviewing reveals things we cannot directly observe (Patton, 1990: 278). Interviewing effectively reflects and reveals “the experiences of individuals in their own words” (Creswell, 2005: 412). Interviewing is one way of going into the world of participants if invited and properly done. I conducted semistructured interviews. This type of interviewing is open ended, yet follows a list of topics (Bernard, 2002: 203). I, however, let participants speak at their own pace and in their own expressions. The modes of interviewing were in-person interviews and telephone interviews.

Qualitative studies have their own validation strategies. Primarily, as Creswell points out, “validation of findings occurs throughout the steps in the process of research” (2009: 190). There are, however, other strategies that achieve the validity of qualitative researches. I will also use triangulation, provision of rich, thick description, and provision of negative, discrepant information to secure the validity of this study.

iii. the perceptions of the participants

Based on the information gathered in the interviews, a number of key features appeared to characterize how Korean church planters prepare for their church

planting ministry. The following features reveal the perceptions of the interviewees' experience of their education for church planting.

Vision for church planting. Some participants reported that they did not have a vision for church planting, and church planting was rather a sudden development. Phoebe said, "I was preparing for a cross-cultural ministry in Burma when God showed me a vision of a place where I would start a church." Andrew, who worked at an existing church for seven years as an assistant pastor and was thirty-nine at that time, was praying for his future when he was approached by a pastor whose church would financially sponsor him if he would plant a church. While he was willing to obey God's guidance, planting a church was not his first choice. Thomas did not want to plant a church and would not get involved in it if possible. Toward the end of his assistant pastor years, though, he became open to the idea of church planting. Philip, who was a nonresidential missionary for ten years, started a church with a long-term goal—that his church would finance his nonresidential foreign mission work.

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Others expressed that they had a vision for church planting. Luke wanted to do something different and knew that meant church planting. He said, "My parents dedicated me to God when I was young, and I knew I would become a minister. But I did not like that my denomination was conservative and traditional, and the younger generation did not appreciate that. I saw the conflict between new pastors and church members. I did not like that. I thought I might be able to avoid it if I had started from scratch." Mark envisioned planting a church for two years before starting his own church. Peter thought about church planting for a long time. John knew he would start a church in the future when he was an M.Div. student. When he was in seminary, Steven, also, wanted to start his own church.

Seminary education. All participants expressed that seminary education did not help church planting. Steven said, "The seminary education deepened my faith and was a part of the requirement for ordination, but other than these, it did not benefit church planting." Luke thought the seminary education was a basic training for the pastoral ministry in general. John pointed out that the education that he received in seminary was too theory oriented, not practical enough, and that there was a big gap between classroom and church planting. Some reported that some practical theology courses were helpful. Yet, they saw that these were either more for ministry in general at existing churches or emotionally challenging. John, however, appreciated the lectures of guest speakers who shared their pastoral or church planting experiences at the retreat every semester. Phoebe also recalled that she was challenged and benefited from guest speakers at chapel. Both of them

said, “It was more for ministry in general.” Steven, however, said, “The guest speakers did not share the problems and solutions that they faced, which would have been more helpful.”

The experience of assistant pastors. All interviewees except one reported that they worked as assistant pastors for some time. Luke had the longest experience of ten years. Philip was the one who did not serve a church as a full-time assistant pastor. Due to his nonresidential missionary work in Asia and Africa, he served churches only in the part-time capacity. Thomas reported that his experience did not help him prepare for church planting. He spent many hours driving the church’s vehicle and learning how to deal with people, not how to pastor them. Steven shared that his job as an assistant pastor was focused on visitation and care. His experience did not help his church planting effort because these were the ministries that a new church would need five to ten years after its start, when it had grown numerically in membership. He, however, said, “The experience of an assistant pastor may benefit church planters if his/her responsibility was evangelism or teaching new-comers.”

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John said that his work as an assistant pastor helped him prepare for church planting “directly and indirectly.” Mark, who worked at a church which utilized the G12 program, expressed that his experience helped his church planting. Luke felt that his experience as a full-time pastor at a young and growing church helped him. Peter said, “The church that I worked in emphasized the cell church approach, and the senior pastor let me pastor the college group as if I had been the senior pastor of the group. And the group grew spiritually and numerically. I think this experience helped me a lot.” Andrew said, “My experience as an assistant pastor helped me with preaching and church administration.”

Church planting seminar. Only one said he had been to a church planting seminar. John reported that he had attended a seminar which was geared toward church planting. Some expressed that they wanted to attend but could not for various reasons. Luke said he wanted to go to the seminar and thought it would be helpful but could not do it because of the busy schedule. Philip looked for a church planting seminar but could not find it.

Mark did not think such seminars would be necessary, yet he attended a discipleship training seminar for his future church planting work. Thomas did not feel the need for a seminar like that, though he was thirsty for spiritual discipline. He wanted to go to a discipleship training school at Youth With A Mission, but he could not because of his work at church. Steven did not consider going to the seminar. Phoebe never thought about it and did not have time for it. Peter was rather negative about it because it seemed too technique-based and

result-driven. Andrew did not have time for it before church planting, but he wanted to do it.

Books. Interviewees' perceptions on church planting books were various. Andrew said, "Books did not really help because they were about how so-and-so were successful, without paying attention to the details." Phoebe read some testimonial books on ministry. Philip looked for books that would contain church planting cases and strategies but did not find them. Steven shared that the books were outdated and did not help provide a good picture of church planting today. Mark said that he read books on the future of the Korean church and society. Luke appreciated the books in which pastors revealed their pastoral philosophies, principles, and struggles. John consulted several books and dissertations on church planting.

Mentors and peers. Luke was very positive about his mentors and peers. His mentors, who were supportive in many ways, were the senior pastors of the churches where he worked. They provided him with encouragement, insight, finances, and practical advice. He also found comfort and security in the relationship with his peers. He said, "They are the ones with whom I can come out of my shell and share my struggles. I pray with them, and I can ask for help." His mentors and peers talked to him about his shortcomings, and he did not feel hurt or offended. Andrew reported that he spent time with the pastors of the church that initiated and financed his church planting for two months, from the time that he decided to start a new church to the time when he started one. He attended the sponsor church's staff meetings and was advised on the location of the new church. Mark appreciated his mentor's prayer and financial support, and he was challenged and encouraged by his peers' evangelistic zeal. He understood the benefit of having peers before planting a church, yet he did not take a concrete step toward creating a network of peers. John recalled that his peers, who were also church planters, were a source of encouragement and insight for their ministry. He did not think he had mentors and peers when he was in preparation, though. Steven also said that he did not have mentors and peers during the preparation period. He, however, said, "As there is a saying, 'it takes a widow to know a widow's difficulties,' the encouragement from other church planters was good, and I was reminded [of] the simple truth that God is at work, not me." Phoebe did not have mentors in terms of church planting, and she was challenged to start a church by one of her classmates. She said, "I go before God when I have problems, and I pray to and obey God." Thomas regretted that he did not have mentors in relation to church planting, but he felt having fellowship with other church planters gave him rest and a sense of belonging.

Religious optimism. Most interviewees reported that they thought they would do well somehow. Thomas knew, “Somehow my church would grow if I would work hard.” Steven said, “I was in heaven and had an illusion that, if I had done my job with the Word and prayer, somehow my church would grow.” Philip also thought if he had prepared with prayer and the Word, everything would be well. Luke shared that he thought his church would, somehow, become a mid-size church if he would work hard for ten years, and he would be happy with it. He said, “I thought everything would work out well.” Others also expressed a sense of optimism that “somehow” their church would grow, and their ministry would bear fruit. They did not provide any concrete reasons why their church would grow besides faith and hard work. Peter, however, thought the cell-church approach would help his church grow, based on his experience in the past.

iv. organizing the perceptions

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These grounded characteristics merge into several themes common in how interviewees experienced the subject of this study. Each of these themes was more or less dominant and determinative in the nature of the interviewees’ experience.

Act of faith. For everyone, planting a church was an act of faith. Whether they had thought about it for a long time, or they had made a quick and drastic decision about it, they acted upon faith. It was an act of faith both in God and in success. The interviewees sensed a divine calling into church planting through an inner voice or someone who encouraged considering the church planting ministry. They also believed that their ministry would be successful, while knowing that initially their life and ministry would struggle. While it was an act of faith, they had a practical goal that the participants would have their own ministry.

Their preparation, also, reflects that it was an act of faith. Besides finding and securing an area and a place for worship, their main concern for church planting was intimacy with God. They were devoted to the Bible and prayer, and it was a major part of the preparation. The Bible and prayer are considered the pillars of preparation for church planting. Pastors and church leaders emphasize the two as the most important elements of preparation, and the practical planning is not given as much attention and time as the two.

Formal education. No formal education was available in the area of church planting. Interviewees reported that they did not take a course on church planting at seminary. They said that, other than the general ministerial training and the fulfillment of the ordination requirement, the formal seminary training was not much help for church planting. I looked at the curriculums of nine seminaries and

found that only one small seminary offered church planting as a two credit elective course. Although the other eight seminaries offered different courses in Practical Theology, they did not even offer one course on church planting. Considering the curriculums of seminaries in Korea, they are training ministers more for existing churches than for new churches.

Experiential learning. The experience of an assistant pastor was a great asset for church planting, if some conditions were met. Everyone appreciated either their experience as an assistant pastor or the potential of it. Working as an assistant pastor was another learning curve for their future ministry. They learned what they did not learn in class. They also practiced what they learned in class but did not have a chance to practice at seminary. However, it was not a learning opportunity for everyone. Those who had a vision for church planting tended to take it as a way of learning and preparing for their future. If the church that they served had stagnated, and they had been expected to maintain status quo, they felt they were consumed and exhausted in their administrative work. As a result, they did not have the time or energy for preparing for their new work.

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Interviewees also reported that they learned as they went. They did not know what they were getting into, and they would not have understood even if they had been told about what church planting involved. For instance, Steven recalled that one day a future church planter visited him and asked him about church planting. With the hope that his visitor would not make the same mistake that he had made because he did not know, he shared his experiences, both good and bad. The visitor did not seem to understand nor pay attention to what he said, although that was what he asked for.

Some even proposed a couple of ways of experiential learning/training for church planting. One was working at a newly planted church for a month or so. Working and spending time with the pastor of the newly planted church would help the future church planter know what to expect when he/she would begin his/her own church. Another was working as evangelism pastor at an established church, and this would give the future church planter a chance to perform and practice the kind of work that he/she would do later.

Nonformal learning. Books were the easiest and most affordable way of learning church planting; therefore, interviewees, sought help from literature. The information that they sought was quite various. For instance, some wanted to know how others did, and others said they were not interested in knowing what others did except for in some practical aspects of church planting. Others also said they wanted to know how others handled the difficulties and problems that they faced.

Steven felt that the books were outdated and did not provide relevant information. For example, the concepts of a new suburban area or a newly formed city reflected those of the early 1990s, and those were different from the context of the early 2000s. In the 1990s when people moved to a new suburban area, they looked for a new church within the area. In the 2000s when people moved to a new suburban area, they continued to attend their same church. As books did not meet their needs and/or were outdated, they were not considered informative.

Not many books on church planting were readily available. I researched books on church planting at a seminary's library and an online Christian book store, and I only found a handful of books on the subject. Many of them were translations from English. My suspicion is either that books were not a primary source of information for church planters, so there was not a great demand for it, or that church planting was not a popular topic for scholars and/or publishers. As a result, church planters could not find books that would meet their needs.

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Another major type of nonformal education was seminars. Only one interviewee reported that he attended such a seminar. Two said they wanted to but could not find one. The rest did not think such a seminar would help them prepare for their ministry. As it stands, there were not many seminars on church planting. Yoido Full Gospel Church has offered church planting seminars twice a year for a number of years, and Sarang Community Church started a church planting seminar in 2008. The general assembly of a Presbyterian church in Korea passed a proposition, requiring future church planting pastors to take the denomination's church planting seminar. For the past two years, this denomination has held a church planting seminar. While I cannot suggest there were no church planting seminars in the over 120 years of Korean church history, there were no organized and continued church planting seminars in the past ten years other than Yoido Full Gospel Church's program and a few solitary seminars.

Words of advice. Interviewees reported a mixed perception of mentors. There were those who expressed they received advice and help from their mentors, who were mainly their senior pastors of where they worked. There were others who said they did not have mentors when they prepared for church planting. It was not the case for everyone; those who were positive about their jobs as assistant pastors and about their senior pastors had mentors, and those who had mentors received financial support. Mentors, however, did not particularly help with church planting, but they did assist with ministry in general.

None of the interviewees sought to form a peer group before church planting. However, those who were part of a group of church planters who met on a regular

basis reported their satisfaction. Most of them said that from the peer group they found spiritual and emotional encouragement, a sense of belonging and security, insight, and ideas for ministry. Luke, who was very positive about the peer group, said that his wife found great help as they met and prayed with other church planters and their wives.

v. the meta-narrative of the perception

Passion. The interviewees were all passionate about their ministry. At some point in their ministry before church planting, they all felt either they must start a new church or God wanted them to plant a new church. They all knew that they and their families would face many difficulties of ministry and finance, yet they were willing to suffer for the ministry.

84 Some of them received financial help from other churches and/or had their siblings or a few people come to their church to be available to help. However, this financial help and/or membership was not enough for their living and ministry expenses, with the exception of one interviewee who started a church with a group of about forty people in their twenties. Their passion for church planting was still strong, and they faithfully continued to work for their church. Their love for God and the lost souls was readily evident. They were interested not only in growth in numbers but also in growth in depth.

They all had problems. Some struggled with financial difficulties. Others wished that they had people who would work with them and assist them. The others regretted that those who helped them did not have the same mind and vision for the ministry. These problems, though, did not affect their passion for church planting.

Assumption. Somehow their passion for church planting met with faith in God and religious optimism and not with education that would provide principles and methods on the practical level. I was intrigued that most of the interviewees did not have formal or nonformal learning opportunities before they launched their church planting ministry. They knew that church planting was difficult, but they believed that since God was in it, somehow God would work and lead them to a successful ministry. God would entrust them with a good number of people. They had assumptions about their future ministry, as Malphurs rightly pointed out (1998: 61–74).

A self-support group of Korean church planters asked its members a question on their website in 2004: Did you ever have education or training for church planting? (National Association of Church Planters) Out of eighty-five answers,

only four people, counting about four percent, said yes, and seventy-six percent said no. This seems to be in line with what my interviewees reported.

Lack of infrastructure. There was virtually no infrastructure for church planting education. The seminary education provided students with the basic ministerial training. Some of the courses might have been useful in the church planting context, yet they were not directly designed for church planting. Denominations did not have resources, information, or training programs for church planters; or at least they were not readily available, and church planters had to make a great effort to locate them. Philip said, “I looked for a church planting seminar on the internet, but I could not find any.” Andrew recalled, “I wanted to attend a church planting seminar, but I could not get into [it].” Until 2008, training church planters was done by one mega church in Seoul.

The Korean church is slow to fill in the gap between the demand of church planters and the supply of training. To better meet the needs of church planters, training programs may consider seeking the balance between faith and practice and between pre-church planting and post-church planting. Interviewees had zeal for God and church growth, yet they did not have practical knowledge and skills for realizing their passion and goals. They stated that the education that was available to them focused mostly on their faith, not on a practical strategy.

Information and training for pre-church planting, which was mostly about where and how to set up a church, was more sought after and available than those for post-church planting. The assumption was that once the church was functioning, church planters knew what to do. Interviewees reported that they were not aware of the need for the training for postchurch planting, and they wanted training for it.

Experiential learning. Interviewees learned and prepared for their church planting through experience. Working as an assistant pastor and interacting with their mentors and peers were the key ways of learning about church planting. It is true that not all interviewees’ experiences as an assistant pastor were positive and constructive toward church planting, yet they also reported that they did not have any other kind of significant training for church planting. In other words, anyone who received church planting education was through his or her experiences.

Senior pastors were the key to interviewees’ experiential learning. Those who worked with senior pastors who tried practical and innovative approaches to ministry learned what they might use in their church planting ministry. On the other hand, those who worked with senior pastors who “maintain their ministry status quo” felt exhausted and had no time and energy for preparation for their church planting.

Another key to experiential learning was timing. Interviewees learned best when they faced problems or at least had similar experiences. Although they were not critical about other church planters when they were preparing for church planting, they somehow thought they would not have the problems that other church planters had. They often did not see the problems that church planters face until they faced them. So, timing was the key to experiential learning, and interviewees learned what they learned if learning occurred at the right time.

Those who had mentors and peers seemed to have more ideas for their ministry. They reported that they sought advice and help when they needed it, and their mentors and peers encouraged them. They tended to have more resources and were emotionally stable and strong. The majority of the interviewees responded that they saw the benefit of having mentors and peers, and they would like to have them.

vi. conclusion

Church planting to a pastor is like childbirth to a mother. Labor pains are great, and the joy of having a baby is greater. Just as not all women have the experience of becoming a mother, not all pastors have the privilege of planting a church. Like delivery, church planting has risks. Childbirth, however, can be less painful if the mother is prepared for it. Regular exercise and balanced nutrition help the mother have a safer and easier childbirth. Likewise, church planters may effectively plant a church if they have prepared for it.

While there are many books on how to plant a church (Steffen, 1997; Hesselgrave, 1983; Schaller, 1979; Redford, 1978; Cummins, 1980; Patterson and Scoggins, 1993; Mulphurs, 1998), I did not find a study that looked at church planters' perception on the church planting education. In this study, I asked how church planters in Korea prepared for their church planting ministry. By using a qualitative method, I tried to let my interviewees speak about their perceptions of their church planting education. While their passion for church planting was great, and their assumptions and lack of infrastructure inhibited their preparation for church planting, they learned through their various experiences and social networks.

It is inappropriate to generalize these findings beyond my interviewees and their experiences. In fact, it is not the goal of this study. There is no other study on this subject, and I wonder what other church planters experienced when they prepared for church planting. More studies on church planting education need to be conducted before forming a theory on this subject. "Suppose one of you wants

to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?” (Luke 14: 28)

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