

The Development of Church Planter Competencies – Dr. Charles Ridley

Summary by Gene Wilson

Thirteen different denominations came together in the mid-1980's because they were confronted with the common problem of church planter misplacement. The problem in their past was that good and godly persons had been placed by them in church planting assignments for which these people were neither gifted nor suited. The result of those misplacements over the years had cost these denominations in the United States and Canada literally millions of dollars. In some places districts had bought land, built a building and fully supported the church planter financially. But the church planter themselves, the most important key in new church development, was not assessed correctly for this unique calling and role.

Out of their discussions, these 13 different denominations hired a psychologist from Fuller Theological Seminary, Dr. Charles Ridley.¹ He was charged with the responsibility of studying one hundred church planters from these denominations to determine the common characteristics that effective church planting leaders have. He conducted an extensive ministry analysis that identified the critical qualities a church planter needed in order to be successful.²

Using the thirteen qualities the research identified he then developed a behavioral assessment tool that allows interviewers to identify the strength of those qualities in an interviewee based on past behavior. Out of Dr. Ridley's work came the thirteen characteristics that became "the standard" for what numerous denominations began looking for in church planters. After concluding his study, Dr. Ridley made the observation, "The job you are asking these people to do, the job of a church planter, is awesome!"³ According to Dr. Ridley, although all qualities list below are important, the first five are essential and several of the others should also be strengths of the potential church planter.

1. **Visionizing Capacity:** Ability to project a vision into the future, persuasively sell it to other people, and bring the vision into reality.

2. **Intrinsically Motivated:** Approaches ministry as a self-starter and commits to excellence through long and hard work.

3. **Creates Ownership of Ministry:** Instills in the people a sense of personal responsibility for the growth and success of ministry and trains leaders to reproduce leaders.

4. **Reaches the Unchurched and Lost:** Ability to develop rapport, break through barriers, and encourage unchurched people to examine themselves and commit to a walk with God and lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

¹ Dr. Ridley later became professor and director of training in the Doctoral program in Counseling Psychology at Indiana University.

² Ridley, Charles, 1998 *Facilitator's Manual of Training for Selection Interview*.

³ Web Report: www.newchurchspecialties.org/printable/8-01-202.shtml

5. **Spousal Cooperation:** Creating a workable partnership that agrees on ministry priorities, each partner's role and involvement in ministry, and the integration of ministry with family life.

6. **Effectively Builds Relationships:** Takes the initiative in getting to know people and deepening relationships as a basis for more effective ministry.

7. **Committed to Church Growth:** Values church growth as a method for building more and better disciples; strives to achieve numerical growth within the context of spiritual and relational growth.

8. **Responsiveness to the Community:** Adapts the ministry to the culture and needs of the local residents.

9. **Utilizes Giftedness of Others:** Equips and releases people to do ministry according to their spiritual gifts.

10. **Flexible and Adaptable:** Ability to adjust to change and ambiguity, shift priorities when necessary, and handle multiple tasks at once.

11. **Builds Group Cohesiveness:** Enables the group to work collaboratively toward a common goal and skillfully handles divisiveness and disunifying elements.

12. **Demonstrates Resilience:** Ability to sustain oneself emotionally and physically through setbacks, losses, disappointments and failures.

13. **Exercises Faith:** Demonstrates how one's convictions are translated into personal and ministry decisions.⁴

Later five Christian organizations worked together to test the church planter assessment in an effort called the Southern California Project.⁵ In the initial study, fifty-four percent were recommended as planters and forty-six were not. Those planters that were recommended had a very high success ratio (80 percent) in planting a new church.⁶

These core characteristics were communicated to numerous people through "The Church Planter's Toolkit" and "How To Select Church Planters," a guide to behavioral interviewing that Dr. Ridley wrote. They were also used by the Center for Organizational Development and the Presbyterian Church as they developed 3-day Assessment Centers. Today most assessment activities for church planters also use some variation of these thirteen original characteristics in their behavioral interview process.⁷ The Evangelical Free Church of America found that after using behavioral assessment for ten years the success rate of their church planters has gone up from 50% to 83%.⁸

⁴ Ridley, Charles R. *How To Select Church Planters*. Pasadena, Fuller Evangelistic Association, 1988.

⁵They were: Church Resource Ministries, The Friends Church Southwest, The Grace Brethren, The Missionary Church Western District and the Free Methodist Church of Southern California.

⁶ Tweed Moore, *EFCA Church planter Assessment Notebook*, MissionUSA: Minneapolis, MN, p. 8

⁷ A group of assessors asks about specific past behavior rather than opinions and future aspirations, knowing that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. "You will know them by their fruit" (Matt 7: 16-20). They evaluate the respondent in each category and, after the interview, compare their results to come up with a common evaluation.

⁸ The EFCA has changed the qualities somewhat to fit the church planter profile they are looking for.

Although the criteria apply primarily to North American church planters, Ridley's work has been adapted and used with great benefit in other contexts. The methods will vary, but prayerful assessment and selection of church planters and team members is critical. In other context a trial period is used and a prospective church planter does a church-planting internship. In one movement in Latin America, candidates were asked to make disciples and start a discipleship small group before being sent out to plant a church. Scripture tells us that a deacon should be tested first (1 Tim. 3:6), why not a church planter as well?