

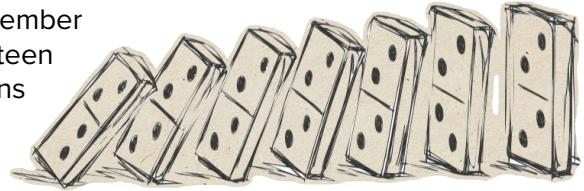
FALLING DOMINOES

How the Plentiful Harvest Disrupts the Seven Assumptions of Church Planting

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The Push

I'm not against church planting. After all, Cast Member Church is still considered a church plant after fifteen years. Even though our Kingdom influence now spans six continents, it probably always will be. In truth, I would rather we be called a Kingdom Expression.



Fifteen years in the harvest has changed the way I think about church planting. I've become increasingly uncomfortable with many of the conversations surrounding it, not because I believe we need a better church planting model, but because I believe we may be starting in the wrong place.

Most church planting conversations begin with some version of the question, "What do we want to build?" Long before we have interacted with one person in the harvest, we are talking about vision, values, fundraising, staffing, worship, preaching, programs, processes, pathways, launch strategies, gathering spaces, branding, and what success will eventually look like. Think about that. We can design an entire church for people we haven't met yet.

Because we largely created the template within the Church, we inevitably design something that makes the most sense to people who already understand the Church. The language is familiar. The worship is familiar. The programs are familiar. The expectations are familiar. Even when we make it contemporary, creative, or culturally relevant, we are still designing a church. Then we enter the harvest and begin looking for people to bring into what we have already created.

And we wonder why we attract people looking for a church.

If you plant a church first, you will inevitably attract people looking for a church. Many will already be followers of Jesus searching for one that better fits their preferences. We have even developed language for the behavior: church shoppers and church hoppers.

But what happens if we change where we start?

A row of dominoes can stand perfectly upright for years. Each piece belongs to an arrangement that appears stable, logical, and predictable. Nothing changes until pressure is applied to the first one.

Starting in the plentiful harvest applies that pressure.

Instead of beginning with "*What do we want to build?*" we begin among people, attentive to Jesus, asking, "*Jesus, what are You already doing here?*" We enter without knowing what needs to emerge. We become curious. We form relationships. We notice clues, patterns, tensions,

questions, pain, hopes, and possibilities. We allow the reality of the harvest to challenge assumptions formed before we ever arrived.

That may sound like a small change in sequence. It isn't. Change where you start and assumptions that once seemed permanent begin falling one after another.

The template.

The system.

The planter.

The Sunday.

The funding.

The scorecard.

The outcome.

Seven dominoes.

We don't have to knock each one over individually. Change the starting point, and they begin falling on their own.

Assumption #1: The TEMPLATE Domino

Church planting usually begins with some idea of the eventual outcome. The details may remain flexible, but the category has already been determined. We are planting a church. Once that decision has been made, we can begin imagining what the church should look like and developing the template necessary to build it.

Starting in the harvest removes that certainty. We enter without deciding beforehand what needs to emerge. We become curious about people. We form relationships. We listen. We notice what matters to them, what they fear, what they hope for, where trust already exists, and where Jesus may already be moving among people who do not yet recognize Him. Then we allow what we discover to awaken our Kingdom imagination.

Maybe what emerges eventually becomes something people immediately recognize as a church. Maybe it doesn't. That's precisely the point. If the outcome has already been determined, discovery can only influence the details. It cannot fundamentally alter the destination.

This is why starting in the harvest matters. Starting with the harvest can still become a strategy. We can study people, identify their needs, understand the culture, and then use what we learn to create a more relevant version of what we already intended to build. Starting in the harvest requires something more costly. It requires presence before answers and discovery before design.

We don't need a better template. We need the courage to enter without one.

And once the template falls, the system designed to reproduce it begins to wobble.

Assumption #2: The SYSTEM Domino

Templates require systems. Once we know what we are trying to build, we can determine the programs, processes, pathways, structures, staffing, and strategies necessary to build and sustain it. The system exists because the destination has already been established.

This is why changing the starting point while protecting the systems created by the previous paradigm is not transformation. If we no longer know beforehand what needs to emerge, we have to be willing to question the machinery designed to produce the outcome we once assumed.

Programs, processes, and pathways are not incidental to the paradigm. They help people enter, participate, progress, belong, serve, lead, and remain within the organization we have built. Over time, these systems can become so familiar that we stop recognizing how thoroughly they are shaped by our assumptions about what church is supposed to look like.

Starting in the harvest disrupts that certainty. If we genuinely do not know what needs to emerge, we cannot arrive carrying a suitcase filled with predetermined programs, processes, and pathways and simply unpack them among the people we meet. The moment we do, we have already decided what their experience of following Jesus should look like.

This does not mean nothing will ever become organized. Relationships create rhythms. Communities develop practices. People discover ways of learning, serving, gathering, giving, praying, exploring Scripture, and following Jesus together. Structure will emerge because life together eventually requires structure.

But the order matters.

The structure serves what Jesus is forming rather than requiring what Jesus is forming to fit the structure. The expression follows the relationship.

Once the system is no longer predetermined, another question immediately surfaces: What kind of person are we looking for to lead?

Assumption #3: The PLANTER Domino

Church planter assessments do not exist in a vacuum. They measure people against the competencies required to create and lead a particular kind of system. If we already know what we are trying to build and how we expect it to operate, we can reverse-engineer the kind of leader required to make it happen.

Can this person cast vision, preach, raise money, recruit people, build teams, manage an organization, create momentum, execute strategy, and gather a crowd? Do they possess the personality, leadership capacity, strengths, gifts, talents, and abilities necessary to launch and sustain the church we have imagined?

Those are logical questions when the template and system have already been determined. But they reveal something important: we may believe we are assessing the planter when we are actually assessing their compatibility with the system.

Change the system and the qualifications begin to change. Remove the predetermined system altogether and we are forced to ask an entirely different kind of question.

What kind of person can enter the harvest without knowing what needs to emerge?

Character still matters. Maturity matters. Discernment matters. Faithfulness matters. But the defining competencies change. Instead of primarily looking for someone capable of building an organization, we begin looking for someone capable of exploration, relationship, attentiveness, and faithful experimentation.

Are they curious enough to explore what they do not understand? Are they relational enough to stay long enough for trust to form? Are they adventurous enough to follow Jesus without knowing where He might lead?

That person might never pass a conventional church planter assessment. They might also be extraordinarily fruitful in the harvest. A person can be spiritually mature, deeply relational, attentive to Jesus, trusted by people outside the Church, and remarkably fruitful among them while possessing little interest or ability in building the kind of organization our assessments assume.

That does not necessarily tell us they are incapable of Kingdom pioneering.

It may simply tell us they are not particularly suited to our system.

Starting in the harvest opens the Kingdom adventure to an entirely different group of people: teachers, baristas, nurses, accountants, Cast Members, university students, retirees, neighbors, parents, artists, mechanics, servers, and everyday followers of Jesus who would never consider themselves church planters.

They don't need permission to plant a church because we aren't asking them to plant one. We are inviting them to enter the harvest.

Harvest Forward calls these people Kingdom Éclaireurs. An éclaireur is a scout, a pathfinder, someone willing to move into unfamiliar territory and notice what others have not yet seen. The identifying postures are remarkably simple: Curious. Relational. Adventurous.

The question is no longer, *"Are you qualified to be a church planter?"*

It becomes, *"Are you willing to enter the harvest?"*

And once we stop selecting people primarily for their ability to build and operate a predetermined system, another assumption begins to fall: our picture of where all of this is supposed to gather.

Assumption #4: The SUNDAY Domino

It is worth noticing where the Sunday domino sits. It is the fourth of seven, directly in the center. That placement was not originally intentional, but it reveals something about the paradigm itself. Look at the dominoes on either side. The template anticipates Sunday. The system organizes people around Sunday. The planter is often selected for the ability to lead and grow Sunday. Funding sustains much of what makes Sunday possible. The scorecard measures much of what happens around Sunday. And the desired outcome is usually a sustainable church in which Sunday remains the most visible expression.

Sunday doesn't simply appear among the seven assumptions. It sits at their gravitational center.

Starting in the harvest does not diminish the importance of gathering. The ekklesia is inherently communal. Followers of Jesus gather. The question is not whether we gather, but whether we must determine the form, location, scale, rhythm, and purpose of that gathering before we have even entered the harvest.

Much of our existing paradigm assumes that we already know what gathering should look like. It happens at a particular time, usually in a particular place, and often follows a recognizable structure. We build much of church life around getting people into that gathering and then moving them toward greater participation in everything surrounding it. The gathering becomes the gravitational center, and our language reflects it. We invite, attract, promote, launch, and create experiences designed to move people from the outside toward the inside.

Starting in the harvest does not eliminate gathering. It refuses to predetermine it. Instead of beginning with the question, *"How do we get people to gather with us?"* we enter the harvest and pay attention to how relationships are already forming. We allow gathering to emerge from life among people rather than designing the gathering first and then searching for people to fill it.

That gathering might happen around a dinner table, in a living room, over coffee, in a workplace, or somewhere we never would have considered sacred before entering the harvest. It might involve three people or thirty. It might happen weekly or develop an entirely different rhythm. Over time, it may grow into something people immediately recognize as a church. Or it may take a form we do not yet have language to describe.

The point is not to make gathering smaller, less organized, or less important. The point is to stop assuming that we already know what the ekklesia must look like before it emerges. We are not removing the gathering. We are removing our predetermined picture of the gathering.

This changes the direction of our thinking. Instead of asking, *"How do we get them here?"* we begin by asking, *"How do we join Jesus there?"* Once we are there, present in the harvest and attentive to Jesus, we can discover what kind of gathering might naturally emerge among the people we are learning to love.

And when the Sunday model changes, many of the financial assumptions attached to it begin changing as well.

Assumption #5: The FUNDING Domino

Traditional church planting can require significant funding because the things we have predetermined require significant funding. Staff, facilities, equipment, technology, branding, marketing, programming, and launch strategies all create financial requirements before the church has even begun. As a result, fundraising often becomes one of the essential competencies of the planter. Before entering the harvest, the planter may first need enough money to build what has already been imagined.

But when the earlier dominoes fall, something remarkably freeing happens. Funding no longer determines whether someone can begin.

Starting in the plentiful harvest requires no startup capital. You do not need a building, staff, equipment, marketing budget, launch fund, donor base, or financial runway to become curious about people, form relationships, share your table, listen deeply, notice what Jesus is doing, and step into the Kingdom opportunities already present in ordinary life.

This does not mean money can never be useful. Hospitality costs something. Generosity costs something. Travel may cost something. People may freely use whatever resources are available to them. But there is an important difference between using money and requiring funding.

The Kingdom adventure does not have to wait until someone funds it.

That changes who gets to participate. An everyday follower of Jesus does not need to convince an organization that an idea is financially viable. They do not need donors to believe in their vision. They do not need permission from a funding agency to begin. They can simply enter the harvest where Jesus has already placed them.

Starting in the plentiful harvest frees the follower of Jesus from the funding domino.

You can begin with what you already have, right where you already are.

Assumption #6: The SCORECARD Domino

Every paradigm eventually develops measurements that tell us whether it is working. Church planting has familiar ones: attendance, giving, baptisms, volunteers, membership, small-group participation, leadership development, and organizational growth. Those numbers can tell us useful things about an organization, but they cannot tell us everything about the Kingdom.

How do you measure trust? How do you measure the first time someone who has never opened a Bible becomes curious about Jesus? How do you measure a conversation around a dinner table that changes the trajectory of someone's life, a relationship that continues across an ocean for years, or someone beginning to recognize Jesus before they possess the vocabulary to explain what is happening?

How do you measure Kingdom influence that spreads relationally across cities, countries, cultures, and continents without becoming an organization that can easily count it? Starting in the

harvest requires a different imagination for fruitfulness because some of the most significant things happening may remain invisible to the measurements we have traditionally used.

We still pay attention to what happens. We still learn. We still assess. We still ask whether people are moving toward Jesus and whether His Kingdom is becoming increasingly visible in and through their lives. But we refuse to confuse organizational growth with Kingdom growth.

They are not necessarily the same thing.

Once the scorecard falls, we are finally forced to confront the assumption underneath nearly everything else: What outcome are we actually trying to produce?

Assumption #7: The OUTCOME Domino

This may be the hardest domino to allow to fall because it exposes whether the others have actually fallen at all.

If the predetermined outcome remains “a church,” everything else will eventually reorganize itself around that destination. We may remove the template, loosen the systems, rethink the planter profile, experiment with gathering, reduce the financial requirements, and develop more relational measurements. But if all of that is ultimately intended to help us build a more relevant church, the paradigm never changed. It simply became more sophisticated.

This is the danger for anyone attracted to the idea of starting in the harvest. We can easily add a little “harvest focus” to the front end of the existing church planting paradigm. We can spend a few months listening, learning, building relationships, studying the culture, and identifying needs, then use everything we discovered to create a more relevant version of what we already planned to build.

That’s not a new paradigm. That’s market research.

If we enter the harvest simply so we can eventually build a better church, we haven’t escaped the old paradigm. We’ve merely developed a more relational church planting strategy.

Starting in the harvest means surrendering our right to determine the outcome before the relationships begin. We don’t enter the harvest knowing what we are going to build. We enter attentive to Jesus, curious about people, and willing to discover what expression of His Kingdom might emerge among them.

Maybe that becomes something we immediately recognize as a church. Maybe it becomes a network of dinner tables. Maybe it becomes something scattered across workplaces and neighborhoods. Maybe it becomes something we do not yet have language to describe.

We do not know. And not knowing is not a flaw in the strategy. Not knowing is part of the posture.

Don't Stand the Dominoes Back Up

There is one final danger. We are remarkably good at turning new paradigms into new programs. Give us a fresh idea and we will turn it into a conference, then a curriculum, then an assessment, then a certification, then a pathway, then a five-step process for implementing it in our churches. Before long, all seven dominoes are standing again. Only the labels have changed.

Harvest Forward cannot become another program for helping churches become better at reaching people. It cannot become another church planting methodology or another pathway for moving people toward participation in structures we have already built. It has to remain a paradigm.

Start in the harvest.
Enter curious.
Become relational.
Stay adventurous.
Pay attention to Jesus.

Resist the pressure to decide too quickly what needs to happen next.

There will eventually be structure. There will be decisions, leadership, experimentation, mistakes, learning, and adjustments. But those things come after discovery, not before it. We assess, adjust, and advance as we learn what faithfulness looks like among the actual people in the actual place where Jesus has sent us.

The difference sounds subtle until you live it. Starting in the harvest is not a preliminary stage of church planting. It is a fundamentally different place from which to imagine what Kingdom fruitfulness could become.

The Adventure Returns

Perhaps this is where all seven falling dominoes eventually lead. For generations, we have unintentionally convinced ordinary followers of Jesus that starting something significant for the Kingdom requires a special kind of person: a planter, pastor, visionary, gifted communicator, entrepreneur, or someone assessed, approved, funded, trained, and sent.

Starting in the plentiful harvest tells a different story. Jesus has already sent His followers into the harvest. The question is not whether you have what it takes to build a church. The question is whether you are willing to pay attention to the people Jesus has already placed around you.

Are you curious enough to explore what you do not understand? Are you relational enough to remain when nothing seems to be happening quickly? Are you adventurous enough to follow Jesus without knowing where the journey will lead? Can you resist the urge to arrive with the answer and instead become an *éclaireur*, a scout and pathfinder willing to move into unfamiliar territory and notice what others have not yet seen?

Perhaps that is the most consequential result of all seven dominoes falling. The Kingdom adventure no longer belongs primarily to a specialized group of people qualified to build churches. It belongs to ordinary followers of Jesus willing to enter the plentiful harvest and discover what He is already doing there.

This is not about making the church we already know more relevant to the harvest.

It is about starting in the harvest and allowing Jesus to challenge our assumptions about what needs to emerge there.