
A “Band of Brothers”: The Very Young, Very Male Face of Boston’s Church Planting Movement

by Emily Nielsen Jones, writer, philanthropist, global human rights advocate, mother of three who has been living in the Boston area and attending evangelical churches here since the early 90’s



The first in a 5-part series: The Impact of the Hidden Men’s Movement Within Boston Church Planting

Church Planting Team

It is truly amazing what God has done here over the last 10 years. He has called men and families from afar and from New England to be a part of a new Gospel wave. We are glad you are here to check it out.

Our whole aim in these videos is just to make our planters available to you. We pray you will hear their calling and their challenges and their victories for the Lord and maybe see yourself doing the same thing – if not here then somewhere.

Just mouse over one of the thumbnails below to get started.



“In the last 15 years, we have also seen a lot of young guys coming and planting churches in the city.” ~ Stephen Um,

President, [The Center for Gospel Culture](#), Senior Pastor of [Citylife Church](#), adjunct professor Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in *The Gospel Coalition (TGC) Report from New England* “[Seeking Gospel Renewal in Boston and Beyond](#)”

Did you know? that since 2000 over one hundred church plants have been started in the Boston area by at least ten networks, most of which recruit young men from other states?

Did you know? that the majority of these church plants are part of a growing men’s movement which defines leadership as exclusively male and sees the discipleship of men as the center of its church growth strategy?

Did you know? that the leadership table for women in evangelical churches here in Boston and New England had for a long time been *slowly expanding*? But due to the enlarging presence of church plants from other states, *the tide has palpably shifted*?

Pictures Speak a Thousand Words...

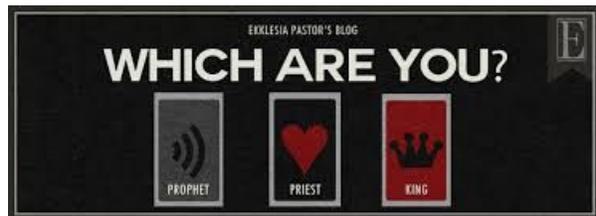
In this article, we will be exploring the why behind this picture and what implications this has for the evangelical landscape here in Boston and beyond. This is a picture of just one of the nine church planting networks—the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Church which goes by the name [Boston Church Planting](#)—which has sent over 42 church young male church planters here to Boston in the past five years as part of its “Send Boston” campaign.

The very male face of this network is not an accident and is representative of the vast majority of the church planting culture which is spreading across the US with a deliberate strategy to saturate certain “strategic” cities, like Boston. As church planter Dave Olson (whose network supports women in leadership) describes this resurgent “band of brothers” masculinity that is driving this wave of church planting has changed the face of American evangelicalism and has set the needle back a century or so for women’s shared leadership in the church:

“For every 1 church plant by a mainline denomination, there are 9 church plants by an evangelical group, and most evangelical denominations were more open to women's leadership 100 years ago than they are today, for example, Evangelical Free, Baptist General Conference, Assemblies of God, various Holiness denominations, and the Wesleyan church.”

~ [Dave Olson](#), who directs church planting for [The Evangelical Covenant Church](#) (ECC) one of the few church planting networks which welcomes women in leadership in [The Final Church Barrier for Women: Church Planter](#), *Christianity Today*

To capture the particular animating mindset and shifting gender norms behind this shift, I will be relying considerably on first hand sources (images and quotes) from church planting websites and affiliate organizations themselves. Better than I might myself, these convey the primary leadership motifs – one royal/priestly, the other militaristic - driving this movement.



This article and its accompanying material is part opinion piece and part “investigative journalism” and aims to provide an easy onramp

to do your own online search and look under the hood of this movement. If you get no further than this, these two images here capture the terrain we will be covering.

Let me admit at the outset that I have become something of a church planting “watch dog” and have spent a lot of time click click clicking around from one network to another to understand *how could it be?* that all these hip millennial church plants popping up all over our city and region could have *more regressive and restrictive gender policies* than anything I have seen in my 20+ years living here in Boston and my 40+ journey through American evangelicalism. In my befuddled digging around to make sense of this, I have found an eerily similar parlance which spans many of these church planting networks and affiliate organizations which shows that at the center of this current wave of church planting is *not* the organic revivalism or immigration patterns that we’ve seen in other waves of local church growth. Rather, at the center of this contemporary wave which began around the turn of this century is a neo-patriarchalist men’s movement that emphasizes male discipleship (“get the men”) as the primary church growth strategy and takes softer versions of what evangelicals call “complementarianism” to their next logical level: women step aside, men step up!, you are a royal “band of brothers”, reclaim your rightful place as the “prophet, priest, and king” of the church and family.

GET THE MEN

Mark Driscoll » Complementarian Church Leadership



This is a series on 11 Leadership Lessons from 12 Disciples, based on the recent sermon Jesus Calls the Twelve, on Luke 6:12-16.

Get the Men

As you will see by the trail of links I am providing, this men’s movement hidden within the church planting subculture does not readily appear on church plant’s’ homepages or storefronts. But this “band of brothers” narrative has been carefully orchestrated and exported to more progressive cities, like Boston, where most people (even most evangelicals) presume a level playing field for men and women to share in decision-making and leadership and fully contribute their unique gifts at all levels of society. Maybe in other states, church planters can use “Men Wanted” placards (this one is from [Seven Mile Road](#) which is part of Acts 29) and macho pictures of men in military fatigues, but here in Boston the “rally the



men” mindset arrives more subtly within the minds of the nice guys hanging out in coffee shops who moved here to start a church plant and who likely attended an array of bootcamps and leadership conferences where they are encouraged to watch militaristic movies like *Band of Brothers*, *Braveheart*, and *Patton* and read resources like [The Resurgence Report “How to Replant a Church: Recruit Men for the Battle”](#) (affiliated with the Acts 29 network). This is worth a quick scan as it illuminates this rally-the-men mindset that many church planting networks are inculcating in the men they are recruiting and training to come here to Boston. A few excerpts:

“Let me start by saying (and for some, this will be controversial) that according to the Bible, the role of elder or pastor is given to men ([1 Tim 3:1-7](#)). This in no way denigrates women or lessens their calling to make disciples and contribute to the mission of God. In fact, the ladies are often better than the guys at stepping up and serving—thank you ladies! But that is not the topic of this post. In this post, I’m talking to pastors about men in their churches, and here’s the bottom line: If you cannot rally and lead men to mission with you, you should not be a pastor... Pastors must be **qualified men** who can lead other men to follow Jesus and **fight the good fight**. If men will not follow you into battle, you will never be able to lead the mission of God to replant your church and then plant more churches.

WIN MEN TO WIN THE BATTLE

If we want to see healthy churches, men must lead the way. If men don’t step up to the challenge to replant and lead your church, everyone suffers, especially women and children. Godly legacies and godly churches are built by the power of the Holy Spirit through the hands of humble men who selflessly care for God’s church through sacrifice and perseverance. Inevitably, some pastors will read this list and still have no idea how to do this. If you have never seen this modeled, I recommend watching a couple of movies to give you an idea of what I’m talking about. Watch the opening scene of *Patton* with George C. Scott or the war speech in *Braveheart* with Mel Gibson. Both movies are about men who lead other men to battle and call them up.

Their examples are not perfect, but they will give you an idea of what I’m talking about.”

~ by Bubba Jennings, in the [Resurgence Report](#)

“Men who lead other men into battle”... What in God’s name? Given that this is Boston, you likely won’t hear this from the pulpit of a church plant but if you are curious if this mindset is in the DNA of a church plant you attend or one that has arrived in your town, check and see what network they are apart of and google “band of brothers” “church planting” “battle” and see what images and resources you find. You could also directly ask the church planter himself where he got his training and if he considers himself part of a “band of brothers” and whether men are more central to their growth strategy than women. As someone who has been working to promote and invest in gender health and mutuality around the world, I cannot help but feel an acute soul pain as I scan the church planting literature. As D.H. Lawrence, 19th c. British author, journalist, and poet, so timelessly mused, the peace and harmony of our planet has its roots in how we relate as male and female:

“ The future of humanity will be decided not by relations between nations, but by relations between men and women.
– D.H. Lawrence

From an “insider’s view”

as Christians who have been living here for some time, as human beings whose hearts long for peace and reconciliation across the gender line, we will share from four different vantage points how we have been seen unfortunate gender ripple effects here in our city and region as a result of this recent wave of highly preeminent Christian masculinity which is being popularized across the country by a vast network of networks like these two above used by which are quite literally recruiting young men to cities like Boston as their “battlefield”. We aren’t lobbing stones at glass houses, we ourselves are living in this glass house where there is much gender pain and much from our religious past which so many are working to clean up and restore to fully tap into the deeper power and timeless wisdom of the path of Christ which has been distorted over the centuries by patriarchal, imperial, and militaristic social norms which have normalized and sanctioned a chain-of-command relatedness across the gender line which has ruptured the intimate connection we are made for as human beings and has led to great suffering which just now in recent years is coming out into the light of awareness. As Will Keepin, Founder of [Gender Reconciliation International](#) describes:

“ The crisis in relations between women and men is of massive proportions and is creating profound misery for literally billions of people across the planet.
- Will Keepin

We are so grateful for this [invitation to dialogue by the Missio Alliance to](#)

[share different lenses on the church planting movement](#) that is rapidly spreading across the country. We are acutely aware of how vigilant we need to be as people of faith to guard against blindspots within our own minds and traditions which privilege one group over another and sanction injustice instead of challenging it. Whether you live in the Boston area or not, we think Boston is a particularly interesting “case study” of this larger movement because our city has become one of the top church planting “destination cities” in the U.S. because of a narrative among church planting networks that Boston is the latest “[1040 window](#)”, a spiritual “wasteland” with no real churches or Gospel witness here.

“**Boston has been called a church planter’s graveyard because of the difficulty of the work, but the need and the potential for gospel renewal compel us to go and make Jesus known.”**

“For us, Boston is a perfect blend of need, influence, and personal connection. The city is a decidedly secular, exclusively humanist, post-Christian society in need of churches. Multiple generations have passed since the culture was predominantly Christian, leaving no semblance of cultural Christianity.”
“BOSTON IS VIRTUALLY AN UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUP IN ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CITIES IN THE WORLD.”
~ [Boston Church Plant Why Boston?](#)



Huh?

Join me now in looking under the hood of Boston's new surge of church planting

Why are "a lot of young guys coming and planting churches in the city"? What particular gender norms are they bringing with them and what implications does this have for the larger evangelical ethos here in Boston and surrounding region of New England? These are the questions we will be exploring in this forthcoming series and we invite anyone else who has been noticing this shift in your own city to join us in this dialogue.

As you may be gathering, I am not too keen on this new leadership construct and am saddened greatly by what it is doing to millennial Christianity here in Boston. But judge for yourself. Take your time if this topic interests you to meander around from link to link to hear in your own ears the particular patriarchal tenor infusing many of these new church plants. As a mother of a fourteen year old daughter and two adolescent boys, and as someone working globally in the uplift and empowerment of girls and women in highly patriarchal places where male is still very much king (and it ain't pretty) and where women's basic human rights are still so tenuous and experiencing massive backlash in the name of religion, just reading these links feels denigrating and makes me feel a sense of maternal protectiveness for young women getting involved in these churches who may not fully understanding the larger implications for their own human development and the directional current and for our city and region.

Ideas matter.

Ideas laced with the sanctioning power of religion matter all the more.

They have societal and humanitarian implications. We are all interconnected.

What we think and say and do in one corner of the world has echoes elsewhere. But please judge for yourself... What do you think? Is this "band of brothers" leadership motif a positive development for our city? Is this a relevant and responsible use of Scripture in the 21st c.? Is this the face of Christ we want to offer our city and our world?

Our task really is to step inside the mindset of the young male church planters coming here to understand what

Triperspectivalism
Prophet, Priest, King
Leadership Teams Built Around Jesus

is driving the more patriarchal gender ethos of most of the churches they are starting. Here is just one of many diagrams (this one from a leadership journal called [Resurgence](#)) that appear across the church planting ecosystem to help male church planters type their particular leadership style as a

“prophet”, “priest” or a “king”. This leadership typology is called “[Triperspectivalism](#)” and deserves its own blog post to drill down into this very distinctive theological framework that is being popularized across church planting networks and resources. This is not readily seen on the church plant’s websites but is found as a cross-cutting core theme across many of the organizations and networks that make up the vast church planting ecosystem. I like this one because it is pretty clear and practical and gives a quick snapshot into the grandiose self-perception many church planters are bringing with them from various bootcamps and leadership conferences and resources which, as you see from this ad from [Seven Mile Road Church Plants](#) (part of Acts 29), are literally recruiting young guys to come to Boston to plant churches.



(Trigger alert for anyone who has suffered under authoritarian gender norms: Needless to say the flip side of this more imperial male discipleship leadership framework is hardly empowering to women... A quick peek at three popular church planting resources/affiliates--The Gospel Coalition (TGC), the Council for Biblical Manhood & Womanhood (CBMW), and Desiring God--shows a highly unilateral, one-sided model of submission which tosses any notion of “mutual submission” out the window and at least in my book is a human rights violation waiting to happen and a flagrant denial of the basic suppositions of equality and shared human agency that is presumed in our civil and legal code and, at least here in Boston, most people take for granted as a basic social norm governing human relationship.



Desiring God: A picture speaks a thousand words... This picture here on Desiring God

[Submission Is A Mark of Maturity](#) the wife willingly following behind her husband captures wordlessly the troves of advice (often written by women) to women on many church planting sites which in very heavy language describe the essence of being female as submission.

TGC: [3 Ways Women in Ministry Can Humbly Submit to Church Leaders](#): “Women in various ministry paths can express their humble submission to church leaders in concrete ways, including when they ask questions about growth and change”. But ladies, [Submission is Harder Than You Think](#) so lots of helpful advice is given on how to rewire your expectation of mutuality (“[I’ve also had disturbing conversations with egalitarian women who think that submission is mutual in marriage: husbands and wives equally submitting to one another.](#)”) and learn instead to defer and “respect your husband” and defer to his wishes/authority even in the smallest of details...

CBMW: like how one washes dishes! Even a soap bubble can be a training ground for wifely submission: [Soap Bubbles Submission](#)

Lots of advice like this from 9Marks which spell out what women can and cannot do in the church: [“Complementarianism” in the Gray Areas](#)”. For women reading this who were or are trying to live out the

“complementarian” way of being female and have suffered under it, there can be a painful cognitive dissonance and an incremental loss of agency as one tries to be a good Christian and accepts this role as “dying to self”. As a formerly “complementarian” woman describes in her blog I Prefer Captain (which highlights what I am saying about the more authoritarian bent complementarianism has been taking) [“On a daily basis, a Complementarian Christian woman will submit to, agree with, and devote herself to her husband, as an act of worship... Submission is framed as suffering for Christ.”](#))

Is this what we want for our daughters? And our daughter’s daughters? For ourselves? For our city?

“Send Boston”: A Lay of the Land

The more you start looking, the more church planting networks you find, some of which are still in the small exploratory stage, others which have larger, more substantial churches. I have been in conversation with others who have been tracking with this movement and the latest estimate I have is that there are about nine networks which have started *over 100 churches¹ in the past ten to fifteen years* in the Boston area (and more throughout New England) include:



- [Acts 29](#), a non-denominational church planting network rooted in a Reformed theology, founded in 1998 by Mark Driscoll and now has 503 church plants on six continents and approximately **16 in the Boston area** including 7 which are part of a sub-network called [Seven Mile Road Churches](#).
- The [Southern Baptist Church \(SBC\) which uses the name Boston Church Planting](#) and has started **42 church plants** in the Boston area,
- The [Presbyterian Church of America \(PCA\) which uses the name Boston Christ the King](#) which has **8 church plants in the Boston area** and thousands around the world
- [Sovereign Grace](#), which has over 70 church plants around the world and so far only two in the Boston Area
- [9Marks](#), a non-denominational, Baptist leaning church planting network started in 1997 by Mark Devers in 1997 with approximately 40 churches in the Boston area (it is hard to tell which ones are new churches and which ones are existing churches which recently affiliated with 9Marks)
- [Every Nation Church Planting](#), more charismatic leaning, started in 1994 to plant both churches and college ministries around the world, so far only has four church plants in the Boston area
- [New Frontiers USA](#), theologically reformed and charismatic, part of “a global movement of over 900 churches in over 60 nations around the world. In the US we are planting into many regions, including the nation’s top 100 cities” and is trying to start churches here in Boston, one of which was featured in the recently released film [Frozen Chosen](#)
- [Liberty Church Network](#) which has made Boston one of their 12 target ‘local centers’ with a strategy “to make 1,000,000 new disciples by 2025 through a network of 10,000 local churches.”
- [Evangelical Covenant Church \(ECC\)](#) is a rapidly growing multi-ethnic denomination with **5 church plants in the Boston area** under the umbrella name [High Rock Church](#), which started locally (not initiated by external planters) and with **a model of shared leadership between men and women**

¹ This is a rough estimate of a continually changing landscape with many church plants affiliating with more than one network and some new ones starting and some closing shop.

-
- [International Church of the Foursquare Gospel](#) (aka Foursquare) is a denomination which began in the mid 1920's in Los Angeles, California birthed out of the ministry of Rev. Aimee Semple McPherson, a female evangelist who began her ministry here in Boston, which has grown to over 2,000 churches throughout the United States and over 30,000 in the world. Like EEC above, Foursquare is rooted in a **model of shared leadership between men and women.**

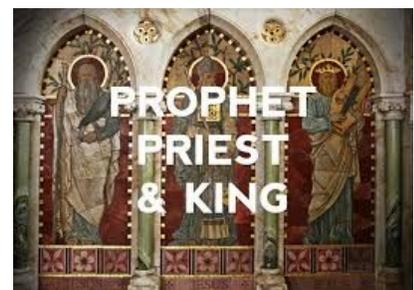
Most of these networks have a presence in other cities across the country as well. Each has its own unique ethos. Some rely more heavily on recruiting men from other states than others do. Some also are working to convert “unhealthy” existing churches to “healthy” churches which meet their distinctives. Thankfully not all these networks buy into this “rally the men” strategy of church growth and replication. Interestingly but not surprising, the two egalitarian church planting networks here in Boston which embrace women in leadership as central to church growth--ECC and Foursquare--have been here for a longer time than the others so in many ways feel like an existing denomination. I also find their evangelistic posture to have a less of an aggressive, “we are here to save you Boston” messiah complex.

The best way to understand the “band of brothers” narrative that is animating and shaping the church planting movement is to zigzag back and forth from the networks themselves and the supporting organizations that weave in and around all of these networks, many of which I will be citing here. Two are worth underlining here: [The Gospel Coalition New England](#) (which also goes by the name [The Center for Gospel Culture](#)) which holds an [annual conference](#) that draws male church planters from across our city and region and [NETS](#) Center for Church Planting. By looking at the church membership of these networks, you can see which church plants are part of the “band of brothers” mindset so central to the “gospel culture” that so many networks are seeking to create here in Boston and throughout New England. Because it is New England, you won't see military fatigues on these sites, but you will right away feel right the “rally the men” flavor of their messaging and conferences.

A few highlights from the lips of church planters themselves to get us started....

“Is there a test that will tell me if I'm more of a prophet, a priest, or a king? I've gotten this question a lot lately, and to my knowledge, no such assessment exists. Most leaders, however, will recognize themselves quite readily in one of the three general profiles...” ~ James Munson, with Acts 29 and author of many Prophet/Priest/King church planting leadership materials including [“Triperspectivalism: Prophet, Priest, King - Leadership Teams Built Around Jesus](#)

“If you're a leader in the church, here's [a helpful chart](#) to think through strengths and inclinations using the grid of prophet-priest-king.” ~ Justin Taylor, [“Triperspectival Leadership: Prophets, Priests, Kings / TGC](#)



“Many leaders today categorize giftings in terms of “prophet,” “priest,” and “king” roles.” ~ Trevin Wax in [Is Your Church A Creature of the Word?](#) By Trevin Wax, managing editor of [The Gospel Project](#) at LifeWay Christian Resources and contributing writer, TGC

“We like to talk about basically three categories of gifts or abilities or ways that people are hardwired. We talk about prophets, priests, and kings...” ~ Mark Driscoll, [Acts 29 Church Planting Network](#) (he uses “people” here but from all of [his writing it is clear he means “men”](#))

“[What Kind of Pastor Are You? Prophet, priest, or king?](#) I've heard several guys talk about this perspective before, Mark Driscoll most often, and while I'm sure limiting pastoral personalities to three types is simplistic, I think there's a lotta truth here.” ~ Jared C. Wilson, the [Gospel-driven Church at TGC](#)

“Over the last ten years Acts 29 has emerged from a small band of brothers to nearly 500 churches around the world.” ~ [Acts 29 Church Planting Network](#)

“**BROTHERHOOD.** Our Send North America strategy prioritizes planting churches to see disciples made throughout our world. Part of that strategy is fostered through the work of the Send Network. This network seeks to create a band of brothers who are united in shared mission throughout North America. For this to happen, our three core values for the Send Network are brotherhood, multiplication and the kingdom of God. Why do most men love movies like Platoon, Full Metal Jacket, Glory, Gettysburg, Saving Private Ryan, The Thin Red Line, Black Hawk Down and We Were Soldiers? Because they scratch an itch that we all have—the desire to accomplish the impossible, to struggle for the win when the odds are stacked against us; all the while with like-minded brothers by our side. Brotherhood is what we long for. The same goes for church planters who serve on the front lines of ministry. Not only do church planters long for brotherhood, but truth be told, when it comes to planting in the Send Cities, they simply can't live without it. So where is it found, how is it experienced and what is the end result?”
~ [Send Network Brotherhood](#) of the North American Mission Board



Explore this new language for yourself and follow its trail from one church planting network to another. You will notice that TGC is at the hub of the popularization of this new P/P/K leadership rubric are some well known church planting “kings” like Mark Driscoll who show us in vivid form the dangers of this mindset young male church planters are bringing with them to places across the country but, as we will be exploring, Boston has particular allure as a “host” city...

A New Wave of Church Planting In Boston Led By Young Men from Other States



Church planting in Boston and throughout New England is actually nothing new. In many ways it goes back to the Puritans who came here to set up their “City on a Hill” based on their version of true Christianity. Other groups followed them and up their own churches. So too wave after wave of immigrants have come to Boston and have set up their own churches. In fact, there was a large wave of church planting here in Boston, beginning in the

1970's, as various ethnic groups set up their own churches, many of which have a highly evangelical flavor, which rapidly subdivided and proliferated in neighborhood across the city. In [Understanding Boston's Quiet Revival](#), the Emmanuel Gospel Center describes this sort of under-the-radar church planting movement in ethnic communities across Boston:

“Nearly 50 years ago, a wave of church planting quietly started in Boston and continues today. As a result of this unprecedented move of God, the number of churches within the city limits of Boston has nearly doubled since 1965.”

It is hard to make sweeping statements about church planting in Boston as there have been so many different streams and flavors within this, corresponding with different waves of revivalism and natural patterns of immigration and church growth. Most church plants in the area have an *evangelical* quality that seeks to awaken revival and expand the gospel here in Boston and surrounding region. However, this more recent wave of church planting began here around the turn of this century has a distinctly different feel not only with respect to a more clearly delineated prohibition against women in church leadership but also, more generally, with respect to both *how* and *why* they are here in the first place and their posture toward their “host” culture. All of the networks above, with the exception of the bottom two, the ECC and Foursquare, (both which embrace the shared leadership of women and men) have expanded their presence in Boston mostly through *the recruitment of young men from other states to come here and plant churches*. Many of the networks in fact overlap and some church plants in fact are affiliated with more than one network.

Virtually all of the church plants in this region which have a clear all-male leadership policy have some association with a church planting support network called [NETS](#), whose images and founding statements are

scattered through this article, which most clearly illuminates what evangelicals now call a “complementarianism” which as you will see on the NETS website translates into a church planting subculture centered on training and sending men to start churches. As you will see if you peruse their website, they don't make any

attempt to use gender neutral language. The only mention of women's involvement is



OUR BELIEFS

NETS is an interdenominational organization within the Reformed tradition. We are in general agreement with the [First London Confession of Faith 1646](#), the [Westminster Confession of Faith](#), and the [Baptist Faith and Message](#). While we hold fast to complementarianism and a Reformed orientation to the gospel, we work with various church polities, liturgies, and hermeneutics.

NETS IS THE NEW ENGLAND TRAINING AND SENDING CENTER FOR CHURCH PLANTING AND REVITALIZATION.

We train and send qualified men to plant and replant gospel-driven churches in New England and beyond, and equip others to do the same. We want to see gospel-proclaiming churches filled with real gospel life throughout the least churching regions of our nation and world. Our desire is that every NETS church succeed and reproduce, bearing gospel fruit for generations to come.

WE'RE FOR THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH.

We train men for the life of the church by training them to proclaim the real gospel message, which truly converts, transforms, and gives life.

We support men for the life of the church by supporting them until, and long after, a church is established.

We send men out for the life of Christ's church, that her gospel lamp might continue to shine and increase in brightness until He comes.

OUR METHOD

NETS provides the final link in the chain of preparation for pastoral ministry: real-life experience. Our apprenticeships take place in a healthy New England church plant and emphasize preaching, shepherding, leadership, and family, with wives as active participants.

as wives of church planters. If you watch *Frozen Chosen* or are familiar with any church plants, you know that starting a church is not a solo endeavor and that both spouses are typically very involved in church planting. But nonetheless in most of the church planting networks and in NETS, you see beautiful family pictures but the wife is not considered a "church planter" in her own right. Again, not all church plants here belong to NETS or TGC and not all are into this "band of brothers" leadership motif. For example, I attend a church plant called [Redeemer Community Church](#) which was started by a few families living in the Western suburbs

of Boston who wanted to start a church with a distinctive blend of evangelical and liturgical worship that they weren't finding in the existing church options nearby.

There are a number of church plants in this area which may on the outside look like the the externally-sent "church plants" but are actually spin offs of established churches here, like [Grace Chapel](#) in Lexington which now has three sister churches and the [Vineyard Churches](#), which began in Boston in the early 90's, and has subdivided into a number of smaller sister churches. Both of these local, homegrown pods of church plants interestingly have a model of shared leadership for men and women and are representative of a larger movement that had been taking place in this region for a number of decades of evangelical churches (and the leading evangelical seminary here Gordon Conwell Theological School) gradually expanding the leadership table to mainstream and include women's spiritual gifting.

When the Table Was Expanding For Women's Leadership in Evangelical Boston...

But something has palpably shifted in the air here. No one would have imagined that Boston would become a "host city"

Many now describe a general feeling that the gender tide has shifted and feel the leadership table is now shrinking for women as this new wave of highly orchestrated church planting brings with it to our city and

region a more preeminent masculinity which defines leadership as categorically male and which sees the discipleship of men as the center of church growth strategy. While many are beginning to feel the tide shifting for women here, most people are not aware of the underlying leadership construct being used for this more categorical barring of women from leadership. Needless to that has not arisen from local soil or from a local wave



of revivalism but rather has been imported. Our focus here is understanding the particular ideas that have been baked into much of the church planting subculture that have been driving this shifting gender terrain in and around this more recent wave of church planting which, relative to prior church planting waves, has not corresponded with organic patterns of immigration or revivalism indigenous to this area, but rather is a largely exogenous campaign orchestrated by overlapping networks from other states recruiting young men and their families to move from other states to come plant churches here..²

Boston May Not the Bible Belt, But...

I've been living here for over twenty years and have gone to a few different evangelical churches here--one with a beautiful white spire that looms over the "city on a hill"--and am proud of the rich spiritual heritage and vital Christian presence we have here in our city. It may not look like and feel like the Bible Belt, but there is an authentic Christian spirituality here that sadly does not seem to register on the church planters radar screen.



Most towns here have a vibrant collection of Catholic and Protestant churches scattered on their street corners, as well as a confusing range of non-denominational churches, like my own, a homegrown church plant in the Western suburbs. As described above, there is also a rich tapestry of ethnic churches (which are highly evangelical) which add alot of heart and soul and color to the religious landscape of Boston.

We also have a number of very explicitly evangelical networks--including [The Emmanuel Gospel Center](#), [Boston Faith & Justice](#), the [Black Ministerial Alliance](#), [Unite Boston](#), and [Vision New England](#)--many of which have been here for a long time, all proud to live here in Boston and seeking to live out a Gospel witness here but in a less of a we-them sort of way that embraces the pluralism of contemporary society and has learned from the sins of our Puritan past. We have a vibrant intellectual culture here with over one hundred colleges and universities

² from Acts 29 [Seven Mile Road Churches](#)

most of which have a few Christian ministry options--like Cru, InterVarsity, and Veritas--working with students to help integrate their faith and learning.

There is also a growing Christian contemplative movement here--led by organizations like [Leadership Transformation, Inc.](#) and [PAX Center for Christian Spiritual Formation](#)--which are helping evangelicals to avoid the all too common trap of an over-reliance on rational, propositionalism that misses the deeper waters of true faith. Overall, from what I have experienced anyway, evangelicalism here in Boston has made peace with the theological and cultural pluralism of our city and is not nostalgically striving to reclaim any place of hegemony as the "City on a Hill."

And guess what, we have lots of good, generous human beings here, people of many faiths and "nones"--all of whom are part of the beautiful spiritual fabric of our city.

Evangelizing the Evangelicals: Reclaiming the "City On A Hill"

With that shameless, Boston Strong plug, let me just underline that *none* of these evangelical networks above takes a view that women cannot serve in church leadership. None. Most are in fact trying to encourage women to step into leadership and change church culture which has marginalized women's spiritual gifts. The only network/organization I know in the Boston area that takes such a exclusive, categorical view of leadership as male is the [The Center for Gospel Culture](#), also functions as the regional arm of TGC (aka [The New England Gospel Coalition](#)) which started here with this more recent surge of more patriarchal-leaning church planting. Interestingly, its mission, as described on its website, takes a pretty stridently evangelical posture so much vis a vis the "unchurched" but more so vis a vis evangelicalism here:

“As a council member of the gospel coalition, I have been thinking, praying, wrestling, and having conversations with others on how we can recapture the center of evangelicalism, which is the gospel. I believe that the center exists to establish the centrality of the gospel as the basis for developing a gospel culture worldview in renewing every dimension of an individual's life –spiritual, social, theological, ecclesiological, ministerial, psychological, corporate, and professional –so that individuals would be able to think, act, and live in line with the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:14). We want to establish a gospel central worldview for people who want to live out a life that revolves around a gospel culture.” ~ [The Center for Gospel Culture](#), [The New England Gospel Coalition](#)

If you have grown up in or spend any time in the evangelical world, as I have, you know that we have a long running self-perception/narrative (going back to the Puritans) of defining ourselves as "reclaiming the true Gospel" from even others who see themselves as followers of Christ. Look at the history of Protestantism and you see is an endlessly splintering "family tree" of denominations and groups splintering off over one social or theological difference after another with this same triumphal narrative that you see on TGC New England website of *recapturing the center of evangelicalism, which is the gospel*. The more aggressive, numerical

evangelical rhetoric of “gospel saturation” many of these church planting networks are using--**“to make 1,000,000 new disciples by 2025 through a network of 10,000 local church”**-- is precisely the mindset that so many find repellant about American evangelicalism and is *not* an onramp for seekers to check out Christianity.

What I appreciate about the evangelical subculture here in New England--until quite recently with the influx of so many church planting networks and the rising influence of TGC--is that it has taken a more generous view that what unites us as Christians and can see that the gospel crosses denominational lines and is something deeper than agreeing on every social or theological shade of gray. If you peruse the church planting literature, there is a familiar strain of writing off Catholics as “not real Christians” but interestingly Protestants and evangelicals too! For sure, we have spiritual challenges here, as does everyone everywhere, but we have a vibrant, indigenous Christian spiritual landscape here which seeks to live out the best of our tradition and offer this timeless message within the pluralistic tapestry that is our beautiful city. But as you read the church

planting network websites, you cannot help but feel a tad defensive with the pity and hubris that they are entering a spiritual blank slate.

Like many of the church planting networks, the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Church (which uses the name Boston Church Planting) has adopted an official strategy called “[Send Boston](#)” of saturating Boston with new church plants motivated by the vision that they will return Boston to its “City on a Hill” Christian glory days but in this case it is not the Puritans but the Baptists who will reign. As someone who grew up in a Southern Baptist



FAST FACTS

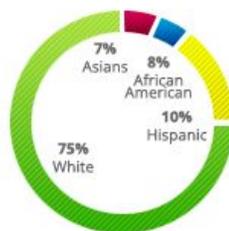


Population in Boston
4.9 million people live in the metro Boston area

1 >> 39,983



SBC Church Population Ratio
1 SBC church for every 42,900 metro Boston residents



Ethnic Diversity in Boston (city)
(75.6 percent Anglo, 9.3 percent Hispanic, 8.4 percent African American, 6.5 percent Asian/Pacificislander)

The opportunity to reach and guide a lost generation is certainly here. The majority of those living in the Boston metro area are active Catholics, while the second largest group is comprised of those who claim no religious affiliation. In fact, the city is home to only 115 SBC congregations. With a population of 4.9 million, this leaves the city with only one SBC church for every 42,919 people.

The need for gospel-centered churches is palpable in the Boston metro area. In an effort to meet this need, church planters and partner churches are invited to take part in Send North America: Boston, a church planting and evangelism strategy designed to mobilize church planters and partnering churches to reach the city of Boston for the glory of God.

"Our hope is to see a steady stream of churches planted in the city," says Send North America: Boston Send City missionary, Curtis Cook. "There is a tremendous lack of churches all over the Boston metro area, and we want to remedy this by raising up church planters to plant evangelical churches all over our city."

Church planters wishing to join the movement or existing churches interested in partnering with Boston area planters can start the process by visiting namb.net and clicking "Send Me."

"center" of the "gospel culture worldview" that so many church planters are seeking to reclaim is *decidedly dismissive* of evangelical churches already hear and is *contrary* to what so many evangelicals already living here have been working toward and also see as at the "center" of *gospel progress*: reclaiming the liberating, prophetic current of the Gospel from centuries of patriarchal social norms which over time became enculturated into Christianity turning it into a brotherhood.

Is the Church Really a Brotherhood? Or is this motif missing the deeper spiritual message of the Biblical story?

For sure the church planters can pull Bible verses to beat their band of brothers drum and weave together an authoritarian, top-down model of leadership which hearkens back to the highly stratified patriarchal master/subject household codes of the ancient world. *Slaves obey your masters. Wives submit to your husbands as unto the Lord.* But if you look deeper within the flow of Scripture, you see a liberating spiritual current throughout the Bible itself and throughout church history which has been on the side of the underdog

church in upstate New York, I find it fascinating that the Southern Baptists are still at this game and have been seemingly untouched by the more ecumenical spirit which many evangelicals have been touched by. I apologize for even sharing this as it hearkens back to the anti-Catholicism sins of Boston's past.

[For more on why all these young men are coming to Boston and New England region to plant churches?](#)

But, as you will see if you are brave enough to click around on these various links, this religious disdain is not reserved for just Catholics! At the



and those marginalized from the religious table.



*Your sons and your daughters will prophesy...
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.*~ Acts 2:17-18

What is the timeless core of the gospel that we as Christians want to offer our generation today in the 21st c.? A fraternal priestly class or a “priesthood of all believers” with a seat of honor for all of us at the table to live out our spiritual gifts for the good of the church and our world?

Interestingly, the times of church history where we have seen the most lived gender equality are times of revival where, like at Pentacost in the book of Acts, women have risen up to pray and prophesy and exercise their God-given shared “dominion” as image-bearer of God. A bit of a historical tangent, but pertinent to our topic at hand, the Foursquare denomination (one of the more homegrown pod of church plants in Boston) grew out of a revival that swept the country in the 1920's and was led in Boston by a *woman preacher/evangelist*, [Aimee Semple McPherson, who gathered crowds of 3000 then 5000 and then 1800 in the Boston Garden...](#)



In times of real revival, you don't need “men wanted” recruitment signs or boot camps to rally men into battle. It is something that bubbles up without regard to rank or station. Thankfully, Boston's church planting tapestry has some church plants--those with ECC/High Rock and FourSquare and some not affiliated with external networks--which are a contemporary thread back to the prophetic revivalism that has swept through Boston and New England in the past where women like Aimee Semple McPherson were essential to spiritual/church growth.

Sadly, most of the church plants hearken back to the a side of our Puritan past where prophetic women spiritual leaders were banished, marginalized, labeled as witches, and even were burned at the stakes... They claim to be restoring “true Biblical Christianity” but ironically are more restrictive to women than the Bible itself where women appear cover to cover in such spiritually authoritative roles as deacon, apostle, church planter, prophet, judge priest, and queen.³ Both arguments for and against women in leadership in fact base their case on the Bible itself. Many evangelical voices, like Scott McKnight, world-renowned scholar, author, speaker, and

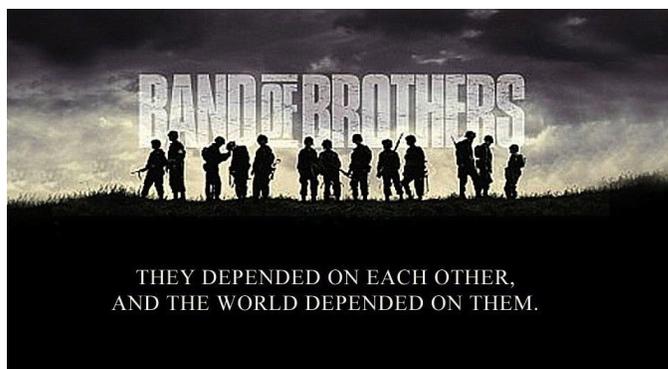
³ For more on women in leadership roles in the Bible, see [The Propriety of Bible Women With Authority](#) by Marg Mowczko and [Who's Who Among Biblical Women Leaders](#) by Rachel Held-Evans

curator of one of the most popular evangelical blogs, are turning the table around on this rising tide of patriarchal authoritarianism and claiming the Biblical mantel is on the side of women's shared spiritual authority in the church:

“if your church doesn't allow women to do what they did in the Old and New Testament, your church is not Biblical.” ~Scot McKnight, author of *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church*

The church planters coming here seem to flagrantly dismiss the fact that *many leading light, very Biblical evangelical scholars* like Dr. Hugenberger, senior pastor at Park Street Church (one of the largest evangelical churches in Boston) and longtime faculty at Gordon Conwell Theological School on the North Shore, have leant their Biblical, exegetical process to expanding the leadership table in Boston's evangelical churches to include women.

“The Scriptures . . . offer an impressive number of examples of women exercising social or political authority without raising any questions as to the propriety of that authority.”
~ Dr. Gordon Hugenberger in *Women in Church Office: Hermeneutics or Exegesis? A Survey of Approaches to 1 Timothy 2:8-15* published in the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society in September 1992



Keep Your Eyes Out for this Influx of a More Preeminent Masculine Christianity Moving To Your Town

We value religious freedom here in New England. Most people here seek to be good neighbors and make room even for all types of religious expression, even a band of brothers coming to start churches!

There are many good features about these church plants and many good people within them. Yet we all owe it to ourselves and our children who we drag with us to church to be informed church shoppers and make sure we buy into what is behind the hip website and cool non-churchy names. What is the particular take on the “gospel” that this church plant here or that one over there is trying to bring here to Boston? Is it wrapped in a patriarchal veneer or does it affirm the full spiritual equality of women in the church and the home? Don't leave it to chance. Take the time to ask good questions and wow! what you can find out online with just a little bit of digging!

As I hope you have seen, at the center of the “gospel culture” The New England Gospel Coalition and most of the church planting networks that surround it are seeking to “restore” is a masculinized church ethos with a

more categorical exclusion of women from leadership than I for one have seen in a long time, one which



weaves together a militaristic “men step up for battle” with grand plans for a wave of revivalism to sweep Boston. For more on this animating “men, step up for battle” narrative which bemoans the “feminized church”... [Boston's “Small Band of Brothers”: Recruiting & Discipling Men for Battle...](#)

Admittedly, I write with a heart of lament as I watch this highly preeminent masculinity—which sacralizes exclusive male sovereignty in the church and home and idealizes a marginalized, servile role for females—continue to gain traction here in Boston, particularly among millennials.

What do you think? Is this band of brothers church culture a responsible and relevant use of the Bible today in the 21st c.? Is this really the timeless core of the Christian message—the face of

Christ—that we want to offer our world? Is this good for our city? Is this healthy for human development? Is this what you want for your daughter and her daughter's daughters? For your sister? Your mother? For yourself?

Take the time to be an educated church shopper and shop with your feet. If you are attend one of these church plants, consider speaking up. Church planters, if you are reading this, hopefully you are getting the memo that if you really want to connect with



the spiritual yearnings of this city and region, you might want to advise your networks to lose the gun/military motif. It just doesn't cut it here.

Wherever you live, keep our spiritual eyes and ears open for latent and blatant ways new branding of the gospel is being used to widen and sanction inequalities and undermine our shared "dominion" as human beings--brothers and sisters alike--made-in-the-image of God. We can do better than this.

No, church planters, "gospel culture" is not a fraternity.

No, church planters, the church is not a "band of brothers".

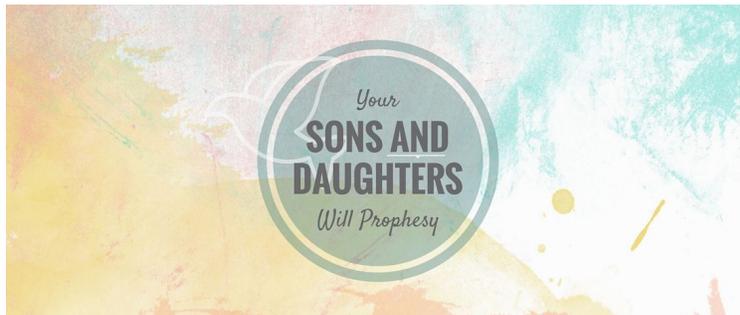
Look at the book of Acts and the gospels and you will see how central women were and are to the spread of the gospel in a humble, truly spiritual, beautiful way that is culturally winsome and speaks across the generations. As we have seen in the long legacy of wars fought in the name of Christianity, when the church becomes a "band of brothers" the gospel all too easily takes on a more militant, chain-of-command ethos than the humble, beautiful "gospel culture" we see in Scripture which--even in the midst of all of its patriarchal and slavery-accepting trappings--tells a timeless Story of human beings like us awakening to our true selves and our shared humanity as children of God. In this "kingdom" that is our world, there may be kings and submissive subjects who willingly accept their place at the margins. But with another lense, you see a more liberating, leveling gospel current running through Scripture: a misfit band of human beings so awakened by the Spirit that they could care less about ranks and stations! And guess what, if most of the characters in the Bible watched the new documentary *Frozen Chosen* or read all these zealous church planter "Why Boston?" strategies, they'd likely not recognize a word on the page! There weren't trying get people "saved" into a future "kingdom" but rather to invite people to see and hear the still small voice of God that is speaking and nudging and loving us, right here, right now.

Church planters, if you truly seek to "reach Boston" *please* take the time to listen and learn from those you are seeking to save, both the "nones" and other Christians already living here. The gospel was here before you decided to move here. It may not be as triumphal as your strategies would like and it has different, more ecumenical expressions here than it does in Texas or wherever you hail from. Although our churches look different and we all use different language and theological trappings to describe the journey of salvation we seek to offer our world, we all are on the same team. Yes, even our Catholic neighbors. And yes even those "mainliners" who scare you away with their rainbows. And yes even your evangelical peers who have left deaconess boards in the last century and are slowly but surely gender balancing their churches to unleash all the gifts and talents of women in their pews to pray and prophesy and lead. And I'd venture to say that in God's economy even the "nones" are "in" and reveal something about our shared human journey and the inability of our separate dogmas to fully capture the full mystery of how we as finite, material human beings can even begin to conceive of how we can know and experience this reality we call "God".

And please please please church planters, “get the men” with another hook, one that appeals to our common humanity and a more secure masculine identity--one which can step up without needing women to step down, one that expands the table for all of us and creates supportive church environments where our sons and daughters can develop all their spiritual gifts for the good of the whole.

And please know that it’s only a matter of time before the Aimee Semple McPherson’s in your pews will walk with their feet to either become a “none” or to a gospel culture that is singing a different tune...

*Your sons and your daughters will prophesy...
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
~ Acts 2:17-18*



Stay tuned for the two next post in this series on the gender ripples of Boston’s band-of-brothers church planting movement:

“Planting Patriarchy: Mapping the Movement Here in Boston” by Kelly Ladd Bishop