

Episode 192 Wise Church Planting With Dan Steel

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Dan Steel

Hello, my name is Dan Steel. I am the ministry Program Director at Yarnton Manor in the UK.

David Capes

Dan Steel. Dan, good to see you. Welcome to *The Stone Chapel Podcast*.

Dan Steel

Thank you for having me, David.

David Capes

Oh, it's a delight to see you again. You were here in Houston not long ago. And we got a chance to get acquainted. And I've heard about you from David Fleming and others. And it's just a delight to see you. And you've written a terrific book we'll talk about in a minute. But before we get started talking about that, what's going to be your role at Yarnton Manor?

Dan Steel

Thank you. I'm the ministry program director, which I think is evolving and we're making it up. But it essentially means I have the privilege of looking after those who are currently in ministry within the south-central region of the UK. For some conferences, for retreats, for mentoring, coaching, that kind of thing. We're trying to help them perhaps plod a little more healthily as pastors and ministry workers.

David Capes

They all need encouragement; because as you say in your book, ministry is hard. Family is hard. This is not easy stuff at all. For those who don't know, who is Dan Steel, let's start with that.

Dan Steel

That's a deep question. I was actually born in Oxford in 1977. So that puts me in my mid 40s. I can't quite believe that. I am married to Zoe. We've been married for 26 years this summer. We've got four children. God's been very kind to us. We've got Ellie and Barney who are both at university. And then Josh and Abby who are at home with us. Zoe's a doctor, part time doctor working in the hospital in Oxford.

Before being the ministry program director at Yarnton Manor, I worked in pastoral work in a church. So a local church pastor here in Oxford. We planted a couple of churches. And then before that I was a church planter in Birmingham in the UK, which is about an hour north of where we are in Oxford. I've

been in ministry now for somewhere around 22 years, I think, maybe 23 years full time paid ministry of some capacity.

David Capes

Have you moved to Yarnton Manor? Are you living at the Manor yet?

Dan Steel

At this point no, I'm still living over in East Oxford. I have a 40 minute bike ride across Oxford every day, 40 minutes there and 40 minutes back, which is good. I have a chance to listen to podcasts like this one. We're staying in East Oxford while my kids are finishing secondary school. And then we'll have a conversation in maybe four or five years talking about moving over to Yarnton.

David Capes

Yeah. Well, we're excited that you're there. And I look forward to seeing it in a few weeks when I'll be there. Cathy, my wife, and I will be there.

You've written a terrific book called *Wise Church Planting*. And the subtitle is *12 Pitfalls to Avoid in Starting New Churches*. This comes out of your experience. It comes out of your background in market research, and a variety of things about you that are unique. That uniquely set you up to write this kind of book and to offer this kind of advice. There's a lot of church planting going on in North America. There's a lot of church planting going on around the world, quite frankly. And I guess in the UK, it's going on as well. Even as we hear that some churches are dwindling, other churches seem to be flourishing. What was it about church planting that interested you?

Dan Steel

Well, the planting thing started in the late 90s, when we were living in Birmingham. Zoe and I just got married, and some friends of ours planted a church, started a new church. And just by providence, I guess we were in the right place at the right time. They asked whether we would be interested in joining. There were 17 of us in someone's front room with a green carpet; I remember it well, with fold out chairs. And so ever since then, really, I've been in one way or another involved in church planting to some extent. So that was how I got into it, reluctant in one sense. But the Lord just seems to have nudged us along into it.

And the study itself came from the fact that I worked in market research for a number of years after university. I did a year for InterVarsity Fellowship and then found I love the job in market research with various clients, and helping them design studies, helping them understand how people understood them. Lots of big numbers. Numbers tell stories, and so that plus being a church planter myself a little later and then a church pastor that planted churches, one of which thrived and one didn't. And so, I guess what do you get if you cross a church planter and a pastor and a market researcher? I'm not sure whether I'm a joke or not. But anyway, that's kind of where it came from.

The other answer to that question of where the book came from was, I genuinely felt the Lord pressing it upon me. I can tell you exactly where I was. I was on a run listening to a podcast, and I just had this thing appear in my brain. And I tried to ignore it for about a year thinking surely somebody else has

spoken to struggling church planters. I looked around, I found one study that the Vineyard Church movement did in Anaheim in the mid 80s. But aside from that, I couldn't find anything really. So various friends started to say, well hang on, maybe this is due then. And here we are now with a book at the end of it. I'm bemused, David, I'll be honest with you. The fact that it's here, and the fact that it seems to be useful is all the Lord's kindness.

David Capes

It's well written and it's concise. It's the kind of book I think a church planter can pick up and benefit from. There are 12 chapters. They're not long chapters, and they're very focused. I love the picture on the outside of it, which depicts a fellow who's apparently the leader, sitting in a chair in an empty hall, and lots of chairs in front of them. And it's beautifully, beautifully done. But it portrays, in a sense in a picture of what your book is about, because there's church plants that do flourish. And then those that do not flourish and those that seem like they just go nowhere.

Let's talk about those 12 things. Give me just a one or two sentence summary. I'm going to name the title of the chapter. The book, it's divided into two parts. The first part are internal pitfalls, what's happening inside the person who was planting and inside the church itself. And the second part is about externals, external things, what's happening outside the church plant? The first thing inside the church plant is Character. What's that about?

Dan Steel

Yeah, I think it can happen often in ministry, but maybe particularly in planting that we have over emphasized competence, sometimes at the expense of character. We've looked for people who are gifted and able, and maybe not quite done enough due diligence in terms of their godliness, to be frank.

David Capes

Their own spiritual formation. Then chapter two, Pitfalls is about character, people in place.

Dan Steel

That means sometimes you don't see the issues of character until a little later on, which means they have side effects. So it may be that you can look the part until two or three years down the line. Then suddenly you realize whatever it is, perhaps as a blow up, perhaps there's a burnout because you've been going too fast, and you've not rested. Perhaps you've thought it's all about you. Perhaps you're a little bit of an isolationist and not great at delegating or bringing others into it. So, this kind of the side effects down the line from character issues at the beginning.

David Capes

Disunity.

Dan Steel

Yeah, unity in church really matters. But particularly when you're a small, new church. Disunity there can mean real fragility. And actually, that was almost two thirds of the study. Two thirds of the examples of the 80 plants that we looked at had issues of disunity as part of the reason they were limping and struggling.

David Capes

And unity has been a perennial problem for churches since the first century, hasn't it? Next, Gifting.

Dan Steel

Again, often we look for an individual or a small team that have all kinds of gifts. But we don't necessarily think sometimes we have a wider team. We're looking for a particular, I call it, a kind of Swiss army knife. This is the church planter who's good at all kinds of things. He's a generalist. And yet, sometimes that can mean there's not an honesty about, well, actually, I struggle in these areas, and I need people around me who can complement my gifts. We focus on one person or a couple, rather than a kind of wider team. No one is fully rounded when it comes to gifting. And we expect too much from an individual.

David Capes

I've advised churches who are looking for a pastor. And what they'll do is give me a list of things. And I said, you're never going to find all these things in a single person. You'll find these items here in one person and these items in another. So sometimes it's the expectation too that goes into it. Family Issues.

Dan Steel

Ministry is costly, in all kinds of ways. But it can particularly be costly for your family. For spouses and children. And I think potentially planting would be a particular issue for that, because it can be all encompassing, all consuming. And it's just busy, it's intense. And maybe the family didn't realize the cost that it would have. And so, things start to fragment or tempers get frayed, and the cost to the family can be too much at times.

David Capes

Priority.

Dan Steel

This is an interesting one. This is the fact that sometimes I think the planter can begin to trust in the wrong things. As I read the scriptures, I see the Lord has given us various means of grace to help us we as we minister, and yet sometimes planters can think, well, what I need is—and I'm caricaturing—but what I need is a really posh website, and really nice coffee. And really good signage, and some sort of marketing campaign, and that is going to grow the church. And those things might be important. And you might need them to some extent, but actually, where our confidence must lie is not in those things. But actually in, I'd say, the power of the word of God, the gospel being preached, prayer, and patience.

And so there can be a sense, maybe not at the start, but sometimes a little way in, we think, things aren't growing as I wanted them to. What do I need? I need a better website and better coffee. And as I say, these things might be good. But they're not going to build a church. In one sense, they might gather a crowd, but they won't necessarily build a church.

David Capes

Interesting. Now we're going to turn to the external pitfalls, things outside the church. Planting Culture.

Dan Steel

I think this could be a naivety for planters who look down the street and see this church started five years ago. It's already up to 600 people, and they've planted three other churches off the back of them. And then they look at their own church and think, wow, I've been here for eight years, and things are slow. There's been maybe steady growth, but it's not been the growth that I expected or wanted. Or maybe they go to a conference. And they hear this superstar planter on the stage who the Lord seems to use unusually. And we have wrong expectations, we have a naivety in terms of how fast things grow. And every setting can be very different.

David Capes Strategy. You really need to study the area well.

Dan Steel

This is an interesting one. A fifth of the respondents mentioned this. Maybe they were planting in a particular area, because the denomination, their network, their tribe, had an idea of wanting to plant into this center, for example. And it may be that there were churches already there, but they just wanted to put their flag in the soil. You know, I've got my brand here in this city. Or it may be that the kind of church that the denomination or tribal network wanted, wasn't actually the kind of church that was needed for that context in that area. And there wasn't the local knowledge that was needed. And particularly, I think something we're not necessarily great at is the kind of collaboration between some of the networks and tribes. It may be that we've got differences on some secondary issues. You think, I could plant there, but there's already three church plants trying to do that similar thing. Why don't I go down the road or to a different suburb where there's very little going on. It may not be quite so, I'm using scare quotes here, but may not be as strategic as we sometimes defined strategic. But actually, it may be more useful for the Gospel.

David Capes

Chapter 9 I was really interested in. Parent-Church Relationship.

Dan Steel

This is interesting. Church planting is always costly. And if you've got a parent church planting a daughter church, then it's going to be costly for the parent church. Because they may be saying goodbye to their really good people, they may be saying goodbye to funds, perhaps people who were on rotors or serving in different positions. It's kind of what I would call a gospel goodbye, which is costly.

And then the other way as well, perhaps the daughter church is a little bit like a petulant teenager thinking, well, I don't need you anymore, I'm leaving this place. And we're going to go and see how it's done properly. And there can be a friction from both sides, which then can burn bridges and cause relationship issues, somewhere down the line. I talked about the need for an M.O.U., a memorandum of understanding to say, we're going to give you this much money for this amount of time. And we're going to give you this much mentoring and coaching and just to try and keep relationships warm, and to have

the support that is needed. Church planting is hard. And sometimes we can burn our bridges in a way that's unhelpful. And having that M.O.U. makes a lot of sense it seems to me.

David Capes

Context.

Dan Steel

That's linked to the one from a couple of chapters ago. But the fact that we don't necessarily understand the area that we're planting into, as well as we thought. We thought, I will copy and I will paste this church model into this suburb, thinking I've seen it done elsewhere. And that worked. Rather than going oh, hang on, this is a different place. I'm a different person. Mine is a different church. Not being careful enough in terms of what we'd call contextualization. So, needing to understand the area well, before we firm up both the vision and the mission.

David Capes

Practical Issues.

Dan Steel

Any church planter that's listening in will know this, but we don't necessarily get what we want. We don't necessarily get the people that we want or the money that we want or the place that we want, or we have all these ideas as to how we'll do it. And sometimes in his sovereign plans and purposes, the Lord doesn't provide and maybe that is because our vision wasn't quite right. Maybe that's because we need to keep praying hard and then when the Lord is teaching us to keep trusting him and looking to him, the kind of manna in the desert. He will give us what we need for the next little step of the journey and the next step of the journey and the next step of the journey rather than getting all the stuff we wanted at the beginning. But that can be tiring, that can be hard for people as they're trying to man their rotors and sort out their worship team and the kid's groups and all that kind of thing. But sometimes the Lord doesn't provide what we want.

David Capes

Not in the way we want it. And then finally, the last chapter is Opposition.

Dan Steel

This is about a quarter of the respondents and it varied. I mean, it was a global study. We spoke to planters in 27 countries who were all limping or struggling or closed down plants from around the world. And opposition would look different in different places. Obviously, in the UK, it's often passive aggressive, because that's what Brits are good at. Or sometimes you'll get some neighbors who don't really want a church planted in that area, thank you very much. Or sometimes it will even be from within mixed denominations. I think of one example, again, in the UK, where a guy was seeking to plant a church. The bishop had given the thumbs up, but other local clergy within the diocese didn't want them there. They felt threatened, they felt judged. And so, there was unpleasant opposition. Or in India, some of the respondents from India experienced essentially, state sponsored opposition, where they will just close the doors and not let you plant your church there. About a quarter, it varied depending on the context that you're in.

David Capes

One of the things I want to say before we go any further is that this doesn't seem to me to be the kind of thing that is UK centered. In other words, the council here, the advice, the wisdom does not seem to be centered only on planning a church in the UK. It will be very portable to North America, to Australia, to South America, other places as well.

Dan Steel

Yes, a number of the examples and people I spoke to came from all of those places. I think that there is a sort of global element to it. How it works its way out into the local context will obviously be different between different regions. But essentially, we're all under the sun. There's always opposition, but it will depend on what that looks like. We're all in one sense struggling and suffering and still sinful, and the Lord is still at work in us, transforming us more into the likeness of Jesus. I think there are definitely global lessons to be learned. And friends in all three of those contexts you've mentioned are finding it helpful. You know, I was over in Houston recently visiting you guys but also went to the Houston Church Planters Network and spoke to 250 or so at a couple of the seminars, and it felt like it resonated. Actually, it felt like I was saying the kind of stuff that they wanted to be able to say and starting conversations that they wanted to be having. Because it's a global thing.

David Capes

Well, it's a great book. It's called *Wise Church Planting: 12 Pitfalls to Avoid in Starting New Churches* by Dan Steel. I've seen a number of books on church planting, but I think this gets at the heart of it. And I wish every church planter had dealt with this book, read it, understood it, was able to recycle it in their minds. To say, I see this problem on the horizon, or I see this pitfall over here, or we need to watch out for that because what usually happens is not just one but maybe a series of these pitfalls come along. We wish you well with it. Dan Steel, we were excited about it. Hope the book does well. Be sure to stand by for a nugget of wisdom from Dan Steel.

A Nugget of Wisdom from Dan Steel

This is not so much a nugget of wisdom from me. It's from John Owen, who was an English Puritan pastor and academic in the 17th century. And at one point as well, he was the Vice Chancellor of Oxford University. And he said this, he said, "if a person teach uprightly and walk crookedly, more will fall down in the night of their life than they built in the day of their doctrine."