

WORKING WITH CORE GROUPS

Mission to North America ***Ted Powers, Church Planting Coordinator***

Purpose

The purpose of this manual is to provide a resource for the Presbytery MNA Chairmen, Network Directors, Church Planters, and other key leaders in the PCA in working with core groups across North America so that many more biblically healthy churches are planted to the glory of God. It is the result of the experiences, ideas, and input of many different church planting leaders throughout the PCA.

Core Groups Defined

Core groups, defined simply as a group of people who want a new church started in their community, are often an excellent catalyst for the launching of new churches. A high percentage of new church plants begin with a new contact or an existing core group in a certain community. Indeed, it can be argued that the proliferation of core groups across the North American landscape is the key to seeing the emergence of a real grassroots church planting movement. However, some core groups can also be a hindrance in the planting of a biblically healthy church for a variety of reasons, including the inherent nature of the group and/or how a planter or denominational leadership handles the group.

The Pros and Cons of Core Groups vs. Scratch Starts

On the one hand, a core group can provide:

1. Teamwork. The church planter does not have to try to carry the load himself.
2. A variety of gifts. A church planter cannot be all things to all people.
3. Community contacts. The networks of relationships the members already have in the community can put the church planter years ahead in penetrating the area.
4. Companionship. The church planter and his family don't have to go it alone.
5. Financial resources. It may significantly reduce how much the planter must raise himself and can provide much of the start-up costs as well as potentially provide a more stable support base sooner.
6. Potential accountability and leadership. There are often people who are ready to step into leadership with faith and competence enabling the planter to make greater strides towards a mature ministry.
7. Prayer support. Even before the planter arrives the work is bathed in prayer and all the foundations of the church plant can be rooted in prayer.
8. Celebration. As a core group and planter work together and see God at work the group will rejoice together.

On the other hand, a core group may lead to:

1. Power conflicts. Various members and especially an existing leader may vie for control of the group.

2. Hidden or competing agendas. Various members and especially an existing leader may have a different vision, core values, goals, or philosophy of ministry than the planter that results in conflict and ineffective ministry.
3. Disgruntled members. Instead of coming with a missional mindset, some members may come to the group due to a bad experience, because they don't like the pastor or church they've been at, or be exceptionally needy and demanding of the pastor's time and energy.

On the one hand, starting a church from scratch offers these benefits:

1. No power conflicts or competing agendas. At least at first! However, there is a better chance that those who join are in harmony with the planter and his vision, goals, and values.
2. A focus on evangelism. The planter is more likely to grow the group by reaching the unchurched.
3. Training. The planter is able to train people in the philosophy of ministry that his presbytery has endorsed from the ground up. The people usually don't have to be untrained first. There is less old baggage to deal with.

On the other hand, starting a church from scratch means:

1. Isolation. The pastor and his family, at least for a while, must go it alone and do everything himself.
2. Training takes longer. When there is a predominance of unchurched people and new believers it can take longer to develop mature leadership.
3. A lack of initial financial resources. It may take unchurched people and unbelievers longer to develop healthy giving patterns and more funds must be raised up front.
4. A lack of community contacts. The planter must truly begin from scratch.
5. Blind spots. There is no one on site to help protect the planter from his areas of weakness or compensate for them.

The Big Picture in Working With Core Groups

The key in working with an existing core group before a church planter is identified and moves to the field is to keep the people excited and meeting together while, at the same time, keep them from becoming too defined or cohesive. It is even possible for a leader who is working with a core group to plainly tell them, "Look, my job until the church planter gets here is to keep you together and keep things moving forward but, at the same time, to keep you as disorganized as possible!" This extreme statement, while not precisely true, of course, usually amuses the group, definitely gets their attention, and sets the stage for the things they really do need to understand.

Who's in Charge? Finding the Planter and the Role of Presbytery

The core group needs to understand that the most important thing is to find the right church planter who needs to have a formative role in shaping the vision, strategy, and character of the church. Clearly, he must and will do this with the input of the group and any others who come on board. They are truly a vital part of the process. Their

participation and support are crucial to the eventual emergence of a vital Reformed, Presbyterian Church that will have a significant Kingdom impact in their community, town, or city. But the vision, strategy, and character of the church must be shaped not only by them but also by the gifts, passions, and convictions of the planter himself and must also include a careful analysis of the community or mission field by him. He is the one who then puts all three elements (i.e. core group, context, and planter) together into a vision and plan that is evaluated and eventually endorsed by the MNA Committee and Presbytery who provide the oversight and accountability for the work.

That is why it is crucial for the group to understand that it is the Presbytery that will be the agency that ultimately decides who to call and not the group. While their input is indispensable, even in helping to determine if a candidate is the right one for the work and a good fit for effective ministry in that community, they don't make the final decision or issue the call. The Presbytery does. This is a significant part of what it means to function as Presbyterians and what is key in planting any biblically healthy church and helps a core group understand and, hopefully, appreciate these biblical dynamics from the beginning.

Unfortunately, in many cases, a Presbytery allows the core group to function as a de facto search committee. Certainly, the core group is a key part of the equation but they cannot be the controlling force or determining factor. Indeed, it may turn out that once the planter is chosen and the vision and plan emerge that they will be disappointed or disillusioned and just not be able to support or participate in the work. This is unfortunate but generally unavoidable to some degree. And since not all of a core group will usually agree on such things any way this is the healthiest way to proceed. The more narrowly defined and cohesive they become as a group the harder it will be to find a quality church planter and the more likely it will be that conflict, disappointment, and being ingrown characterize the plant itself.

Waiting on Worship

It is also imperative that a core group understand the strategic importance, in most situations, of waiting to begin public worship services until the church planter

- (1) Has been identified, raised any necessary support, and moved to the field
- (2) Had time to settle into the community and get to know the core group well
- (3) Networked extensively throughout the community
- (4) Trained initial leaders
- (5) Built a Launch Team
- (6) Put together a vision, philosophy of ministry, and a strategic plan.

This all takes time, focus, and prayer and the planter will find himself significantly hampered in these areas if his time and energy are siphoned off during this period with such things as the preparation of sermons and services.

Probably the strongest pressure a Presbytery oversight team and the church planter encounters is the expectation from the core group to begin worship services right away. After all, that's what most of them have been so eagerly anticipating and what, for most

people, makes it a “church”. In some cases, the beginning of worship services may be exactly what is needed to gather people. But more often than not beginning worship services prematurely, before all the other critical, foundational work has been done, will result in a stunted, ingrown community that does not function as a biblically healthy church. They will lack the critical mass to grow or appear viable and legitimate to outsiders and visitors. Often they will settle into certain relational dynamics that preclude effective outreach and inclusion of new people. And should there actually be a strong response to the initial worship services and fast growth there will more than likely not be the necessary equipped leadership, proper infrastructure, or available resources in place to adequately respond to the expectations and needs of the growing congregation resulting in frustration, missed opportunities, and, more than likely, stunted growth.

For all of these reasons, one of the most important things that a core group needs to understand is that it will be anywhere from six months to one year AFTER the planter is found and moved to the field that public worship services will likely begin. It will help them if they understand:

- (1) What is involved in the process of finding a planter and moving him to the field
- (2) What sorts of things the planter will need to be focusing on once he arrives, keeping in mind that crucial phrase, “Foundations are Forever”
- (3) How the Presbytery will work with them and provide oversight during this period.

Practical Things to do with the Core Group

So, what then does the core group do as they meet and try to keep things moving forward so that a biblically healthy church is eventually planted? Here are a few key things that a church leader can instruct them to do and, in some cases, do with them:

1. **PRAY, PRAY, PRAY!** The group should regularly come together to pray for each other, for the community, and for God to raise up and bring to the group additional interested people. For God to raise up and bring the right planter, for God to create a great church that is going to have a great Kingdom impact, for many to come to Christ and to have lives transformed. For lost friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, etc. For God to be glorified in what takes place and His Kingdom advanced. And on and on! This is THE most important thing the group needs to do as they meet together.
2. **STUDY THE COMMUNITY.** Do a community profile (see Appendix A). Contract for a Percepts study. Go to a variety of internet web sites. Have the various members of the group go to those in their network of relationships and ask such questions as:
 - Do you think our community needs another church, a really good church? Why or why not?
 - Do you yourself go to church anywhere? Why or why not?

- If you were going to start a church, or if a new church WAS to be started, what would you want it to be like or think it SHOULD be like?

Such questions will help foster an outreach mentality with the group, help them to pray more missionally for the community, enable them to understand their community better, and begin to engage them in the mission of the church. They might even find opportunities for witness that they had never dreamed of or expected! They thus might need some training in the basics of personal evangelism which the presbytery leadership can provide (see below).

3. **GIVE.** Begin to collect funds for the eventual planter, to help pay for the costs of bringing in candidates, to help pay for the assessment of a candidate, to pay for the Percept study or other demographic studies, and to help pay for the eventual move of the planter and start-up costs. An account could be set up with the presbytery or another local church, or with GA MNA in Atlanta.
4. **STUDY AND TRAINING.** There are innumerable things that one can do in educating a group about church planting, grounding them in the foundations of the gospel, teaching them about the characteristics of a biblically healthy church, and orienting them to what it means to be in the PCA.
 - a. Many groups are interested in just what is involved in planting a church. What's involved? What's the process? What should they expect? What is the role of the denomination? What should they be doing? How will we find the right planter? The following steps and resources can be used in addressing these natural and important questions:
 - (1) Go over the document, "What Kinds of Churches Are We Planting?" (Appendix B).
 - (2) Go over the document, "Who Are We Looking For?" (Appendix C) and help them to see the qualities of someone who will generally be an effective church planter.
 - (3) Work through this manual.
 - b. Groups need to be rooted in the foundations of the gospel.
 - c. Groups need to understand the profile or characteristics of a biblically healthy church.
 - d. Groups need to be generally oriented to what it means to be a PCA church – i.e. Reformed, Covenantal, Presbyterian.
 - e. Groups often need training in the basics of discipleship particularly evangelism and disciple making.

It always good to have a representative of Presbytery at as many of the meetings of the group as possible not only for their encouragement and for the quality of the meetings but to:

1. Keep someone else from emerging as the defacto leader of the group.
2. Keep the group from drifting in an unhealthy direction.
3. Maintain a sense of connectionalism.
4. Be available to address the vast array of questions people tend to have about how this is going to work and what this church is going to be like.

Defining the Non-Negotiables

One of the most valuable things that can be done in working with a core group is to help them define what each person or the group as a whole would consider to be the *non-negotiables* for this church plant. That is, what are the expectations, assumptions, and convictions they have that would be considered mandatory if they were going to be a part of the future church plant. This is always interesting and can take awhile because most non-negotiables that people have are unspoken and it may take hearing what some others say and a few weeks of thought and prayer to draw them out and identify them. As these non-negotiables emerge it is good to discuss them as a group and to explore the question, “How do you defend that biblically?” People are often surprised at what they regard as a non-negotiable, and surprised to find that certain non-negotiables are not necessarily shared by the others. It also helps them think through and focus on what is really important and what is really biblical. It is also valuable to the MNA Committee and prospective church planters in assessing the viability and health of the core group as well as its compatibility with the PCA. As such, this exercise can help determine where to begin with a series of Bible studies or other training for the group.

Some of the issues that should be intentionally explored with the group are:

1. Worship style
2. Expectations for children and youth ministries
3. The priority that will be given for outreach
4. Expectations regarding pastoral care from the pastor (e.g. pastoral visitation)
5. Preaching
6. Church size
7. Characteristics in a planter/pastor

See Appendix D for exercises to use in helping to determine the expectations, assumptions, and convictions that a core group has regarding the prospective church plant.

Assessing Core Groups

The issue of determining the non-negotiables of a core group lead to the broader question of assessing its overall viability. Is this group healthy from a biblical point of view? Do they represent a viable opportunity for planting a biblically healthy church in this

community? What is their vision for this church? Why do they even want to begin a church? Who do they view as the “target” of this new church? Is there compatibility with the PCA or should they be encouraged to move in another direction? Is there a willingness to work with the PCA or Presbytery representatives and to submit to their oversight and leadership? Both the MNA Committee and eventually the church planter himself will need to thoroughly explore these questions with the group. Appendix E provides a list of 17 questions that a Presbytery team or the church planter should work through with the group in addition to or including the whole matter of determining non-negotiables.

Once the Presbytery or prospective church planter has had several meetings with the core group exploring the non-negotiables and the 17 questions some determination needs to be reached regarding the group:

1. Do they represent a good foundation for beginning a PCA church in the community? If so, then they need to understand what lies ahead for them in terms of continuing to meet with the presbytery, looking for a church planter, and beginning to reach out to the community and function as a biblically healthy body of believers.
2. Do they recognize the “long haul” nature of starting a church, especially as a core group, which might exist for some time before there is anything to “show” for their efforts?
3. If they are healthy but not compatible with the PCA do they need to be steered towards another denomination?
4. If they are not healthy then the Presbytery needs to decide whether to invest time in Bible study and training or whether to simply decline to continue working with them. In this instance, the group needs to hear, honestly and humbly, the Presbytery’s assessment and any corresponding recommendations.

Resources and Suggestions for Working with a Core Group Over the Long Haul

The steps and suggestions outlined above will more than likely consume most of the time and attention of the group in its first three to five meetings with the leaders of presbytery. But once these initial steps and suggestions are essentially completed or initiated, and if it has been determined that this is a healthy core group representing a viable opportunity for planting a biblically healthy church then the presbytery leadership might consider some of the following studies and resources to work through with the group as the search for a planter begins, a search that could take many months, even a year or two. This list is compiled from studies used by church planters and other leaders in the formative stages of a church plant or core group as well as some general suggestions.

Bible Studies

Selections from the Gospel of John (especially if new believers or non-Christians are a part of the group or there is a desire/need to ground folks in the basics of the gospel).

“Acts” (to get a profile of the early church and to study the dynamics of a church planting movement).

“Galatians” (for grounding in the doctrines and practice of grace which must characterize any group of believers and will shape the church into the future).

“Ephesians” (for a study of the nature and life of the church)

The Profile and Characteristics of a Biblically Healthy Church (what is it we’re seeking, by God’s grace, to plant in our community); choose any number of excellent passages.

The Marks of a Disciple (the three places in John where Jesus says directly or in effect, “By this you will know as or prove to be My disciples”):

- LOVE (John 13:34-35; fleshed out with additional passages such as Matt. 22:36-40; I Cor. 13, I John 4:7-12, etc.)
- TRUTH (John 8:31,32)
- FRUITFULNESS (John 15:7-8)

Book Studies

“Transforming Grace” by Jerry Bridges

“The Peacemaker” by Ken Sande

“The Prevailing Church” by Randy Pope

“The Church of Irresistible Influence” by Robert Lewis

“Living in Light of the Gospel Story” by World Harvest Mission

“Putting Amazing Back into Grace” by Michael Horton

“Embers to a Flame” by Harry Reeder

“The Purpose Driven Church” by Rick Warren

MNA Guidelines for Church Planters on Principles and Practices of Worship (may be obtained from the MNA office)

Evangelistic Studies or Training

“Living in Light of the Gospel Story” by World Harvest Mission

“The Person of Jesus” studies by Paul Miller

“3-D Evangelism” by Randy Pope/Perimeter Ministries

“The Contagious Christian” by Bill Hybels

“Evangelism Explosion” by D. James Kennedy

“Surprising Insights from the Unchurched” by Thom Rainer

“The Unchurched Next Door” by Thom Rainer

“Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God” by J.I. Packer

Studies in the Gospel of John

What’s Involved in Planting a Church?

MNA Church Planting Manual (provided through Global Church Advancement to those who take the training)

Redeemer Church Planting Manual (contact the Church Planting Center)

“Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century” by Aubrey Malphurs

These lists represent a general list of possible studies and resources. Depending on the context or make-up of the group (young postmodern urbanites, ethnic or multiethnic, wealthy suburbanites, university students, rural, etc.) other, more contextualized or relevant resources could be added. Ultimately, it will be important to custom-design a study series based on the unique features and spiritual maturity of the core group members themselves.

Conclusion

Planting a church is certainly one of the most exciting and challenging enterprises one can undertake. The presence of a healthy, committed, enthusiastic core group is of the utmost value in minimizing the challenges and creating the possibility of planting a biblically healthy church in a given community. Having such core groups developing in communities across North America is one of the key dynamics necessary for reaching this land with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The hope of this manual is that by following certain key guidelines and principles these core groups can be cultivated in such a way that their impact for Kingdom extension can be maximized to the glory of God.

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