

EVALUATING THE VIABILITY OF A CHURCH PLANT

ISSUE: How does church planting leadership evaluate the health and viability of a church plant? How can one determine when to shut down a given church plant? How does one distinguish between faithful perseverance and the inability or unwillingness to face reality? Are there criteria or guidelines that can be used in this process? When faced with such hard decisions are there any objective criteria or helpful processes for making these determinations?

- Along the same lines, just because funds are available or someone can raise more funds does it mean he should be given permission to do so and should the work continue? There are issues of the stewardship of God's resources and the trust of donors as well as the well-being of the planter, his family, and the congregation itself at stake.
- Just because a planter wants to continue the work, should he be allowed to do so?
- Just because there's a sizeable core group in place should the work proceed?

KEY CRITERIA for evaluating the health and viability of a given work:

1. Fruitfulness – Is there numerical growth? Are lives being impacted? Are people coming to Christ? Is there evidence of spiritual development in people's lives? Are people enthusiastic about the planter and the plant or are they feeling tired, discouraged, and even hopeless?
2. Finances – Are the people giving faithfully, generously, even sacrificially? Are others supporting the work so that there are adequate resources to support the pastor and the ministry? Are the pledges running out? Is the congregation moving beyond mere maintenance of the ministry and beginning to contribute to other church plants, missions, and mercy ministries, as well as giving back to the denomination, presbytery, or network? (This is also a part of "Mission" below).
3. Mission – Is the pastor networking in the community and is he and the plant becoming well-known in a positive way? Are the pastor and the congregation engaged with the community and are people responding? Is the church engaged in serving the community in word and deed? Are they outwardly faced or just inwardly focused?
4. Leadership – Has lay leadership emerged, people who really embrace and own the mission and vision of the church? Do they contribute to it meaningfully with their gifts, time, abilities, and resources?
5. Calling – Does the planter still believe God wants him there? Is there vision and passion for the work or is he discouraged, exhausted, and burned out? How is his marriage and family doing?

6. Teachability – Does the church planter manifest a willingness to learn and make necessary changes? Is he willing to try new approaches and strategies? Is he contacting people for mentoring and coaching? Is he still pursuing training? Is his wife teachable as well?

IMPORTANT FACTORS TO CONSIDER:

1. Convergence – No one of these criteria is sufficient by itself or will be as much in evidence at times as others. One needs to see trends and multiple factors being manifest.
2. Context – These criteria must be seen against the backdrop of different contexts. While they are relevant to all contexts they will be manifest in various degrees depending on the cultural, ethnic, or socio-economic situation. For example, financial viability might look different in a poor community. There is something of a “degree of difficulty” that can be factored in. Some situations should be treated as more of a long-term “missionary” situation vs. a shorter, classic church planting approach.
3. Chronology – Length of time is important. Has the work had sufficient or legitimate opportunity to “take”? The expected timeline can be shorter or longer depending on the context. A helpful barometer is that a typical church plant in the U.S. will average 100 in attendance after four years. 100. This also seems to be about the size generally needed to support a pastor and his family as well as basic ministry needs.

EVALUATION IS A PROCESS – There are at least three phases in the evaluation of a church plant’s viability.

1. Phase I – Ongoing coaching along with a regular monitoring or reporting system that is a part of the ongoing oversight provided for a planter/plant. There should really be no surprises because regular oversight and accountability is being provided.
2. Phase II – If the work is struggling then certain benchmarks or milestones can be laid out to measure health and viability and, at the same time, hopefully propel the work forward. The planter, his wife, and the congregation can be engaged in this process and be asked to evaluate the work taking into consideration the standard criteria (noted above). They should be asked to pray for a period of say two to three months to ask God to help them assess the situation and determine these benchmarks or milestones. They should also be asked, “What are you going to do differently in the next several months?” (as opposed to just maintaining the status quo and hoping things will change). At some point they may come to the conclusion themselves that the work is not viable.
3. Phase III – This is the point of decision where the leadership, hopefully but not necessarily, with the concurrence of the planter and the congregation, decides that the signs of viability just aren’t there and the work is terminated. Hopefully, this can be done far enough in advance so that the planter has the time and resources to transition before all the funds have been spent and he and his family are in crisis mode.

EVALUATING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

There are three methods for providing support for a church plant:

1. Mission church income is supplemented by support from donors who are not participating in the core group, until the congregation grows sufficiently to be self supporting.
2. Bivocational church planter: the mission church income is supplemented by income earned by the church planter.
3. Support by donors from outside the core group on a long term or even permanent basis.

While the first approach is most common in PCA church planting, a mission church may have a vital ministry, and may even organize as a particular church, but still require support provided by the second and third methods. The second and third methods open up major opportunities for church planting that can never be pursued using the first method. Therefore the opportunities to plant healthy churches using the second and third methods should be celebrated and utilized wherever possible, rather than viewed as second class or only as a last resort when the first method fails.

As much as possible, the determination of which method is used should be made prior to a church planter being called to the field, and in any case prior to actually beginning the work.

Whenever the first method is utilized, the progress of the work should be carefully monitored, so that any changes that should become necessary can be made as early as possible. When a work is already underway with support planned by the first method and it becomes evident that the second or third method is going to be necessary to sustain the work, the viability and health of the work should be thoroughly evaluated.

The decision to seek additional funding under the first method, or to turn to the second or third method after the work is already underway, is not a decision to be made unilaterally by the church planter. Decisions and plans to proceed are made by the presbytery upon recommendations provided by the church planter, the mission church oversight commission and the presbytery MNA committee working together to plan for the best future direction for the work.