Creating a Church Planting Network in an EPC Presbytery(s)

You may be the stated clerk of your Presbytery, the chairman or member of a Presbytery Church Development Committee or, a ruling or teaching elder interested in seeing new churches planted in your region. Let me begin with a disclaimer. Church planting networks aren’t the only way to plant churches. EPC polity correctly identifies the local church, the Presbytery, and General Assembly, all with authority to plant new churches. Even so, the past 25 years has seen a steady increase in the number of effective CP networks in both denominational and non-denominational evangelical churches both nationally and world-wide. It is important to realize that not every church planting network is organized the same in focus or governance, not even in the EPC. Some networks focus on a specific city like the Detroit Church Planting Network, others on a specific region, like the Southeastern Church Planting Network. Some networks are Presbytery specific, while others span several Presbyteries. Some have regional governance usually composed of ruling and teaching elders from the region, while others function with local Presbytery governance. Whatever the configuration of a particular CP network, EPC polity dictates that every CP network is ultimately answerable to the Presbytery(s) in which it operates.

I. Participation.

In the EPC, not every region or Presbytery has a CP network. This does not mean your church cannot participate in church planting. Indeed, the EPC would like to see every church participate in the important work of church planting-“Every church plant a church.” (Also see the article-*How to Become a Church Planting Church*). Furthermore, participation in church planting nationally, regionally, or locally whether through a CP network or not, is voluntary and structured at gradated levels of financial support (**Parent**, **Partner, Patron**) depending on 1) a church’s desired level of participation and 2) the financial capability of the church. This means every church can be involved at some level.

II. Why consider a CP Network?

Numerous studies indicate that CP networks are more effective in both the quantity and health of churches planted. According to missiologist, Ed Stetzer, a church planting network, regardless of denomination, is the most effective way to plant successful, sustainable churches that make a difference in their neighborhoods. Networks average 6 church plants a year, and typically have a success rate of 93% according to Stetzer. The reason networks are more successful is because they are structured with the specificity required to consistently plant healthy churches. Consistent church planting requires intentionality in identifying target areas, conducting demographic studies, fund-raising, communicating and reported to regional churches and Presbytery as well as recruiting, assessing, coaching, and caring for planters and their spouses. Church Development Committees, traditionally configured with busy ruling and teaching elders, often don’t have the band-with or experience necessary to execute all these activities effectively. This doesn’t mean Church Development Committees can’t plant churches effectively, it simply means the committee must organize with the personnel necessary to execute all these activities consistently. Some Presbyteries choose to do this by forming or participating in a CP Network, other’s by developing their CDC with the expertise requisite to consistently plant new healthy churches.

III. Initial Steps in Forming a CP Network.

 A. Hire a director.

Most of the time, the initial step in forming a CP network requires identifying a director with the requisite experience, availability, and calling to focus on all the activities mentioned above. Note: In the beginning this person is usually part-time. Starting a CP network is akin to starting a church. There are myriads of details that must be addressed and executed. Ideally a network director has a long track-record in church planting. This enables the director to apply personal experience to the various dynamics surrounding church planting. It also ensures that the director already possesses the leadership gifts, visioning capacity, and passion necessary to lead a network. Directors in cooperation with the governing body are responsible for the overall strategic direction and growth of the network. CP networks without a director tend to flounder. “If it ain’t somebody’s job, it ain’t nobody’s job.” The director is responsible for executing the Presbytery’s vision to plant churches. The director is responsible for developing systems for identifying target areas, recruiting planters, fund-raising, coaching, shepherding, communication with network churches, reporting to Presbytery. This is normally accomplished with the help of a CP network executive committee composed of EPC ruling and teaching elders.

 B. Craft a Biblical/Theological Position

An agreed upon and ratified Biblical/Theological approach to church planting is important. Obviously, this document must coincide with the doctrinal position of the EPC. This document serves to 1) define the kinds of churches the network intends to plant. 2) communicate clearly the same to potential planters and prospective donors. Among other things, a BTP helps to “head-off” areas of potential conflict before they begin. Here are some samples of questions your BTP should address: What is the Network’s theological/missiological vision for Kingdom expansion and how will this be addressed through church planting? Meaning-Where do we believe the motivation and power for church planting resides? (A foundational question too often over-looked!) What kind of churches do we envision planting? Where do envision planting them? Are some locations more important than others for overall missiological effectiveness? Will we have a commitment to planting churches in “under-served” areas? How will we develop potential-site strategies consistent with our answers to some of these questions? From a missiological perspective, are some potential sites more important than others? How do we develop a financial strategy consistent with our answers to these questions? How will we utilize demographics? Note: These are only a sampling of questions to help you consider the importance of a BTP. Your BTP should seek to answer these questions and many more. Again, a clear BTP helps head-off potential problems before they begin.

C. By-Laws (Standing Rules)

By-laws govern the everyday operational procedures of the Network. They define geographical boundaries, legalities related to formation[[1]](#footnote-1), relationship to Presbytery(s), terms of membership for participating churches, officers, director(s), meetings, requirements for planters (assessment, credentialing, fund-raising, coaching, reporting, etc.), financial reporting, etc. **Questions:** What’s the annual contribution expected from member churches? Will we elect an executive committee? How will elect an executive committee? Who exercises oversight of the network? What will be required of church planters (assessment, coaching, retreat, reporting, etc)?

D. Funding Model/Plan.

By this, I mean your “big-picture” funding plan. Some of the specifics especially as it relates to member churches should be addressed in your by-laws. Most church plants are funded, one third by the CP network, one third by interested churches, and one third by the personal fund-raising of the planter. Of course, the percentages in each category vary depending on context. Note: Some CP networks don’t serve as funding sources but simply provide the services needed for the Presbytery(s) to consistently plant churches. It is very important for a Network to communicate with Presbytery(s) its funding strategy. Otherwise, Presbytery(s) and her churches will quickly assume the Network is the sole funding source for church planting. “Why should we give to this or that plant when we are already giving to the Network?” The goal of any EPC CP Network is to assist the churches of Presbytery to help carry out the task of church planting. “Networks don’t plant churches, churches plant churches.” The Network is responsible for articulating and growing a vision that assists and engages the churches of Presbytery to carry out its calling. The goal is for every church to participate in the important mission of church planting. **Questions:** Given the Networks available resources, how much funding can be yearly allocated toward overall church planting? How do we develop a strategy for growing the financial base of the Network? How much will the Network contribute to individual church plants (If any)? Will this amount be the same for every church plant? What should govern the duration of the network’s financial commitment? How will the Network determine to continue or stop funding? Where will the Network allow the planter to raise funds? Are certain churches or individuals off-limits?

Conclusion: This introduction is meant to help EPC leaders begin to engage in church planting. It is not intended to be a catch-all document on church planting. Hopefully, this document has sparked your curiosity and raised more questions in your mind about church planting.

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1. Federal and State Requirements. My experience has been that most CP Networks establish their own 501-c3 status with the IRS. Prior to application and acceptance by the IRS, they operate utilizing the tax-ID# of a local church or Presbytery. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)