



HOW WE PARTNER TO ASSESS CHURCH PLANTERS

*A paper on the importance
of clarifying roles in assessments*

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Introduction

Roles are the blood of partnerships. Where they are present and clear, a union pulses with life. If a marriage endures, it's typically because the words 'husband' and 'wife' have clear meaning to the couple. The British Invasion would have stalled on the beach if the Beatles had all played the same instrument. The Temptations, the Stones, the Chili Peppers—there's just no rock without roles. Think business or entertainment: Hewlett and Packard, Ben and Jerry, Penn and Teller; the Batman, and his lamentably-named sidekick Robin. Each alliance flourishes, not only because of a partnership but due to specific roles within the partnership.

Scratch a fruitful partnership anywhere and it bleeds clear roles.

Harbor Network partners with local church pastors to plant churches. Vital to this mission is the assessment of church planters. Both the network and the local church play vital roles in this glorious endeavor; both must comprehend and gladly affirm those roles. Meaningful service to the man and mission effectiveness for the network demand it. This paper, therefore, is offered to clarify our respective roles as we seek to assess church planters.

Understanding the Partnership

Leadership assessment begins with the local church. Elders are commanded to assess or 'watch' themselves (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 4:16), to examine each other (1 Tim. 5:19-20), and to assess future elders also (Titus 1:5-9, 22). Paul tells pastor Timothy, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will

be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Here, we find that *evaluating* men for faithfulness, *entrusting* gospel truth to them, and then *ensuring* they repeat the process is vital to the church’s mission. We see this also illustrated in 1 Timothy 3:1-15, where Paul exhorts Timothy and the Ephesian church on how to identify elders and deacons. Even a cursory study makes it pretty clear: local church leadership and local church assessment are inextricably bound to each other.

When it comes to assessing leaders for mission, the local church represents the first and most circumspect eyes for assessment.

Still, the New Testament clearly teaches that local churches partner with gifted leaders to identify and deploy workers for the church and the field. In Titus 1, Paul exhorts an extra-local worker named Titus to “appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1: 5). He then arms him to discern how to identify the leaders God is raising up (Titus 1:6-9). The result of this local and extra-local collaboration was an expanding pool of leaders for the church and the mission field (Acts 19: 22).¹

The point? Like mission, assessment flows through partnerships. To illustrate, becoming a lawyer requires passing the bar exam. No law student, however, sits for the bar exam without years of preparation, training and testing in a law school where professors

¹ ESV translation in Acts 19: 22. The word for ‘helper,’ designated for Timothy and Erastus here is very close to the word for deacon. The sense in this context seems to be more of a ‘rendering of assistance’ to an apostle (in this case Paul), rather than fulfilling the office of apostle. The emergence of mission workers, including the workers supporting Paul and accompanying him on ministry trips, included: Mark (Acts 12:25; Acts 15:39; Col.4:10,12; Philemon 24); Aristarchus (Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:2; Col. 4:10; Philemon 24); Epaphras (Col. 4:12, Philemon 23, Col. 1:7); Luke, seemingly always with Paul, recording the events (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24); Sosthenes (1 Cor. 1:1); Sopater of Berea (Acts 20:4). Indeed, we see more than 35 helpers to Paul who were assessed and then released to serve the mission in other places. recording the events (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24); Sosthenes (1 Cor. 1:1); Sopater of Berea (Acts 20:4). Indeed, we see more than 35 helpers to Paul who were assessed and then released to serve the mission in other places.

nurture their development. The exam does not replace the role of the law school; it merely reveals the preparedness of the student. Likewise, the network can't replace the role of the local church in assessment; it simply reveals the preparation and training of the candidate, beginning with his foundational involvement in the local church.

To ensure the right people get to the right places, the partnership must operate with each entity understanding their role. Assessment then, becomes an effective expression and joyful function of this partnership.

The Role of the Local Church in Assessments

When assessing church planters, nothing should be assumed. "It is a fearful calamity to a man," says Spurgeon, "to miss his calling,... and to the church upon whom he imposes himself. His mistake involves an affliction of the most grievous kind."²

Church planters and church planting are too important to miss the calling. We therefore begin with the obvious:

1) The local church models missional community.

One of the most tragic disservices to a church planter is to send him out to reproduce what he has not experienced. In the New Testament, church planting began not through outside agencies rolling the dice on unproven leaders, but through the spontaneous expansion of churches replicating themselves. The New Testament mission strategy was fundamentally church-based.³

² C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (reprint of 1875 ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 22.

³ Malphurs states the same conclusion in the following way, "Acts is a church-planting book because much of what takes place does so in the context of starting new churches." Malphurs, *Planting Churches*, 25.

Consider Antioch. Though only one congregation, the church at Antioch became a staging ground for Paul's invasion of the Gentile world. From this one local church, he launched all three of his missionary journeys and returned upon completion of the first two; only death prevented him from returning after his third trip. Remember, what is historically referred to as "Paul's missionary journeys" were, in fact, church planting adventures.

In commenting on Paul's travels, Alexander Hay says, "Their purpose was to get local churches established in every region throughout the world as soon as possible so that these congregations, under the Elders, should complete the evangelization of their surrounding territories."⁴

Single local churches penetrating strategic centers and reproducing other churches... this was Paul's approach. Given his effectiveness, I daresay it should be ours as well.

2) The local church incubates and supplies church planters.

For church planters to be qualified and effective, they must come from the local church. The best planters are 'churchmen,' possessing a vision to spend their lives on people (2 Cor. 12:15). This does not suggest that we dismiss recent seminary graduates or other pastor-preacher-leaders who may be in transition or between churches. It's simply to say that if a man believes God is calling him to plant a church, then his life should reveal robust affections for the local church. "He needs to delight in its beauty," says Puritan sage Richard Baxter, "long for its happiness, seek for its good, and rejoice in its welfare. He must be willing to spend and to be spent for the sake of the Church."⁵

⁴ Alexander Hay, *New Testament Order for Church and Missionary*, 106

⁵ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 69.

Whether it's the next wave of possible church planters, or the next generation of potential pastors, the responsibility begins with the local church.

3) The local church starts assessing potential planters in vital areas.

Again, Paul tells Timothy, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Local church elders are called upon by God to transfer gospel truth to faithful men. Only those who live with us, observe our weaknesses, and see how we respond to a broken world will know how well we truly apply the gospel; only local church leaders can truly determine who is ‘faithful.’ This can't be outsourced—it is first the work of local church pastors.

This local church analysis extends to the overwhelming amount of character requirements in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Let's face it: character is not something that can be easily assessed in a church planting assessment. Behavioral or gift assessments can prove helpful but character requires context in order to be truly evaluated. The most circumspect context can only be found within the local church under the watchful, loving evaluation of church's elders.

From a place where they are known and nurtured, a planting candidate's marriage can be properly examined to discover whether it is strong enough to bear the strains of church planting. Discussion with the candidate's wife will help surface her level of faith for the claims that a church plant may make upon her and the children. Only the local church supplies the pastoral context and the strategic vantage point to begin an accurate assessment of these areas. Pastors should never view this as something that can be blithely tossed to assessment specialists. Certainly there is a place for outside help, and

Harbor Network exists for that end. But the network can never replace the local church as the first line of defense in assessment.

Almost from inception, church planters are preachers. The church they plant will be established and built through their gifts for communicating God's Word in an effective manner. The local church must therefore begin the analysis of the candidate's public skills. Has he led a small group with pastoral effectiveness? Has he displayed the ability to convey the Bible in a clear and compelling manner? Are there samples of his public ministry that have been assessed by his local leaders? If a man is untested locally, a network assessment may be a premature and frustrating experience.

A circumspect assessment starts with elders who have the clarity and courage to provide honest feedback to a candidate. Absent this vital step, men will continue to circulate between churches and kingdom opportunities because their elders, more zealous than honest, were too timid to serve them. When the results of a network assessment don't surprise the candidate, it's typically because local church leaders were serving the candidate with helpful feedback along the way. A wise assessment process not only respects the role of the local church, but depends upon it.

Local church involvement does not imply a formal structured setting, but more often fluid relationships established between a pastoral team and a church planting candidate. A man is best developed in the shadow of those farther along in their journey who are willing to open both his books and his life. When you hear local church assessment, think more immersion into a culture rather than instruction in a classroom.⁶

⁶ Daniel Montgomery, "The Story of Sojourn Network," *9Marks*, May 8, 2012, <https://9marks.org/article/journalstory-sojourn-network/>

The Role of the Network in Assessments

The church has a unique role in recommending qualified candidates for assessments. The network, likewise, must be clear on its unique role to serve the local church by marshalling proven ministry experience and unique expertise. So in what specific ways does the network serve in church planting assessments?

1) By requiring sponsorship

One of the first ways we are trying to recognize our partnership is by requiring the sponsorship, or the affirmation, of some Harbor Network church for any candidate interested in church planting through the network. If we are offered a candidate outside of our network, he is connected to a Harbor church to allow for relational development, local church evaluation and eldership affirmation. After a period of time, they have the freedom to support him as a church planting candidate to the network, or to defer his church planting pursuit. This process cannot be forced or expedited in the name of breathless expansion. Our goal as a network is, after all, not simply plant churches, but to see them thrive. This requires a different kind of bar; one we must support and protect together.

2) By confirming theological depth and gospel grip

Theological Depth

One supreme claim upon the church planter is to “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). If elders are called to “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that you may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9), then the

church planter, as the first elder, primary teacher, and theological custodian, must exemplify this indispensable quality.

Local church elders are certainly called and qualified to evaluate church planters for doctrinal fidelity. The network, however, gathers and deploys people with specialized training in doctrinal studies. By using assessors with advanced doctrinal training, the network can take a sounding of the candidate's theological depth and evaluate whether he is doctrinally capable to steer the rudder of a local church.

Gospel Grip

Churches are planted to ensure that unbelievers are gathered through the gospel, the church is established upon the gospel, believers are built through the gospel, and God's people are scattered with the gospel. A successful church planter may be required to do many things, but his primary call proceeds from and remains connected to the prized evangelion, the gospel. Remove the gospel and the purpose for church planting evaporates.

In addition to a more general theological depth, the church planter must also, therefore, demonstrate a unique proficiency in understanding, applying, and contextualizing the gospel of Jesus Christ. D. A. Carson writes,

“The cross (gospel) stands as the test and the standard of all vital Christian ministry. The cross not only establishes what we are to preach, but how we are to preach. It prescribes what Christian leaders must be and how Christians must view Christian leaders. It tells us how to serve and draws us onward in discipleship until we understand what it means to be world Christians.”⁷

⁷ Carson, D.A. *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005. 9-10.

If, as Carson contends, “the cross is the test and standard for all vital Christian ministry,” the network must assess this area to ensure the church planter passes the test and meets the standard.

3) By assessing the candidate for Network DNA

Harbor Network came into existence with a specific genetic blueprint. The theological vision, the methodological vision, our theological distinctives and values—these represent marks of our DNA that we treasure and desire to protect.

By evaluating the candidate’s ‘fit’ for the network, the assessment process becomes a quality control measure for the local churches. Church planters are selected because they share, or wish to share, the genetic makeup of the other local churches. Unity around these distinctives deepens our fellowship and positions us to understand their compatibility with the network’s mission, vision, and values.

4) By corroborating character depth, marital health, and leadership breadth

Much has already been said on character and marriage, and there is little need to define these categories further. Suffice it to say that the network must support the local church with an additional layer of focus on character depth and marital health. Here redundancy is not the fear, it’s the goal! If any facet of assessment invites some overlap of efforts with the local church, it is those very areas which will experience the greatest testing during the church planting process.

Few roles demand leadership instincts more than a church planter. From Day One, he is organizer, pastor, cultural creator and guardian, fundraiser, coach, counselor, community activist, evangelist, and the list goes on. He must also identify and marshall the gifts of those being drawn to the work. Most importantly, he must prioritize, from the beginning, leadership multiplication.

A man cannot multiply what he is not. To lead, reproduce, and attract leaders, he must have verifiable leadership abilities.

5) By confirming public ministries skills sufficient to plant and pastor a church

If you were to assemble all of the elders' requirements from the New Testament, the list would be pretty unremarkable. Not insignificant mind you, just typical of the life all Christians are called to live. Equally intriguing, they're all about character, except for one: the man must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). This is the only non-negotiable gift listed in the eldership requirements, which becomes absolutely essential for church planters.⁸

Paul expands the point for Timothy saying:

"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching." (2 Tim. 4:1-2 ESV)

Here the charge issued to every church planter is splendidly summarized: He must be equipped and prepared to preach relentlessly, courageously, and patiently; executing a

⁸ Joel Nederhood says, "The minister today is really nothing more than an ordinary member of the church of Jesus Christ, who is called to express His nature as 'man of God' in an especially high degree." Joel Nederhood, "The Minister's Call," in *The Preacher and Preaching*, Samuel T. Logan, ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1986, 39.

charge as one who stewards the very words of God. To guarantee the potency of this call and the certainty of its fruit, God gives church planters and elders distinct gifts for communicating God's Word. All elders should possess these gifts; church planters should carry the potential to exemplify them.

To confirm a man's call to plant, the network must therefore affirm what the local church has already concluded: the man reflects high character and is called to preach!

Conclusion

When it comes to wise and fruitful partnerships, there is still so much to learn. Clarifying our roles in assessments is an important step along this path. Still, our trust is not anchored upon our assessment model, defined roles, or the size of our network. We stand confident and united because Another was assessed in our place and found condemned, that we might walk in freedom and liberty; that we might stand united for the mission; that we might bow together before 'the name that is above all names' (Phil. 2:9-10).

May we partner with churches to assess the best men for the high calling of pastoral ministry.

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, 2016

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