Building a Launch Team

by Dr. Tom Wood

CMM exists to empower thousands of leaders for health and sustainability so they will multiply the Gospel, primarily through church planting.
As we think about building a Launch Team for your Church Plant, we’ll consider 3 basic ways to gather people.

Generally, we discourage the term “Core Groups” and encourage “Launch Teams” because we want to see God forming Gospel-centered teams committed to the proclamation and practice of the Word, living out mission and living in community. It is our experience that this rarely happens in pre-existing core groups of Christians looking for a pastor.

Church Planters are entrusted with many resources, but the greatest resource you have are the hard-earned wisdom of fathers and brothers who have already made mistakes that have real consequences. Learn from them.

According to Ted Powers, the Director of Church Planting for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the number one killer for Church Plants is launching too early.

Leadership Journal did a survey and found that the average Church Plant in the USA started with only 43 people. The average size of a Church Plant in the USA after three years is 98 people, total. Critical mass is context specific. One Church Planter did a survey in his context and found that the average size of a protestant church was 30 people. Your church’s birth will be contextual, but also should be determined by viability.

You are granted the freedom to fail. But try not to fail because you were impatient. If you are going to risk so much on Church Planting, go make bold, new mistakes! Don’t make the mistakes we made a decade ago. That’s just plain dumb. When you make mistakes, make sure they are ones that bring more glory to Jesus!
I. Gathering and Building from Scratch

A. Church Members (from area churches)

If you do, require them to:

- Seek permission from their current church/pastor/authority structure to be released from their membership. Don’t just hear their story about the faults of their previous church.

- If possible, ask their church to “commission them” as missionaries in joining a mission church in the community.

One Church Planter related: “This step was among the most important I took. Why? Simply because the reason that most Christians want to leave their current church is not because they have a mission mindset, but because they were somehow disappointed with their current church or pastor.

My rationale in asking them was that if they were not willing to honor their vows at another church, they would probably not honor their vows with me. This policy deterred a number of unhappy churched people from joining and potentially slowing our mission to the lost.”

B. Disconnected Believers

The Christian un-churched. In our transient world, many people move and look for new churches. If they are new to the area, keep in mind they are bringing their presuppositions about how church should be done.
C. **New Followers**

The people that you personally lead to Christ will be your most teachable, least experienced and possibly your most loyal Launch Team (or Core Group) members. Often they will bring the least Christian “baggage” (e.g. Church should be done this way). They also have access into and connections with lots of yet-to-be-followers.

D. **Yet-to-be-Followers**

The people that are still wrestling through the truth claims of Christianity but connected to you and the vision make gatherings safer for others in the various places of their own spiritual journey.
2. Building with an Established Core Group

In this gathering method, the core group exists prior to the Planter’s arrival. Leadership is already established. Sometimes there is already a facility. For existing churches in decline, be sure you know yourself and your context well.

Advantages in working with an existing core group of people who want to launch a new church:

• You have a variety of gifts.
• People already know their community.
• You are not alone, as you have a group.
• You can shape a team from the start.
• You have a financial stream.
• You have prayer support.
• You have potential leadership ready to serve.

Disadvantages of launching with an established core (discuss with the core members):

• You have the potential for power conflict and vision clash.
• You have potential of a group that knows “what they don't want to be”—they are a reactionary group from an existing church split.
• Pressure to launch too early.
• If they have already been having public worship services, the DNA is set.
• The group wants to be a church for Believers only: their own safe home.
• The Core is seeking a shepherd-pastor, not a missionary-Planter.
3. Gathering and Hive Off

“Hive Off is the most common way of planting a daughter church. It simply means that the members of a local congregation are challenged to form a nucleus and, at a pre determined time, these people will move out under the leadership of a Church Planter and become charter members of a new congregation. This usually assumes that the new church will be in the same general geographical area so that the nucleus members will not be expected to make a residential move” (Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*).

In the “Hive Off” model, a Church Planting Pastor is often brought on the staff team for some period of time (often one to two years) and given a “fishing license” to develop leadership, ministries, and build relationships with those who will launch the church.

During this time of preparation, the Church Plant is under the authority of the parent church’s Board of Elders or a commission from the church. At least one Elder often goes with the Church Planter during its start up period.

The Hive Off model begins with usually two staff (usually a Church Planting pastor and worship/youth pastor). During the first year, the Church Plant becomes independent and the two pastors no longer come to the parent church staff meetings, though some remain connected to the mother church for a longer season. The North American Mission Board (SBC) has done research which shows that Church Plants which start with under 50 people have three times the rate of failure as those that start with more than 50 people. The “Hive Off” models typically start with one hundred or more people. In the USA, critical mass is above 150 (the rule of 150).
Keep a watch for these things as you launch with a Hive Off or an established core:

1. The bigger the core group, the more you are “candidating” to be their pastor. DNA may already be set.

2. They may want you to “shepherd them”—and since you spend a lot of time with them they may get hurt when you start to move past the “core” stage and have more people.

3. You will have stronger personalities—key leaders who might have held the group together or led them during the waiting period.

4. You have to work hard on developing their trust. Love will cover a multitude of sins.

5. It’s not their money vs. the money you raised. Money has a way of corrupting a lot of fine people. Be careful about how money is managed, especially if they have had an account before you came.

6. Make sure you work hard on getting all to see the GREAT calling of God to be missionaries in your community, even if they have lived there for years. They may have a jaded understanding of their community.

7. Work hard on your vision/mission becoming “our vision and mission.” If you don’t, the people won’t stick.

8. Keep in mind that the DNA of the mother church will affect the DNA of the potential Launch Team members.
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