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**Better Together**  
Senior Pastors' Engagement with Church Planting Networks

By  
Blake A. Altman

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2024

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## **Abstract**

Church planting networks (CPNs) play a vital role in equipping and supporting pastors engaged in church planting efforts. However, little research has examined senior pastors' experiences within and aspirations for CPNs. This study explored how senior pastors engage with CPNs.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six senior pastors in the Presbyterian Church in America who have been actively involved in the Southwest Church Planting Network for over a decade. Four research questions guided this research: (1) What benefits do senior pastors experience when they engage with church-planting networks? (2) What challenges do senior pastors face when they engage with church-planting networks? (3) How do senior pastors navigate the challenges they face when they engage with church-planting networks? (4) What are senior pastors' hopes for engagement with church-planting networks?

The literature review examined lessons from the Book of Acts for contemporary CPN development, and research on network dynamics and organizational hierarchies.

The key benefits identified included camaraderie, compelling vision, and access to funding. Primary challenges included diminished relational connections over time, loss of aspirational leadership, and complacency. Pastors navigated challenges through singular loyalty to the CPN. Hopes for the future centered around prayer, compelling rationale for planting, unified philosophy, clear metrics, new models, sustainable funding, dedicated leadership, training and coaching.

These findings provide valuable insights for CPN leaders seeking to enhance senior pastor involvement. To address these challenges, eleven practical

recommendations are offered, focusing on network partnership, collaboration and missional engagement.

To Lauren, Andrew, Annie, Bennett, and Augie,  
we wait in hope for the Lord.

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

— Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:31-32

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

— Luke, Acts 9:31

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## **Abbreviations**

CPN	church planting network
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
SWCPN	Southwest Church Planting Network
COHMCE-OPC	The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The United States is currently experiencing the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of the country. Some forty million Americans who in the past twenty-five years used to regularly attend church at least once a month have decided they no longer desire to attend church at all.<sup>1</sup> This accounts for nearly sixteen percent of the national adult population. For the first time since Gallup began tracking American religious membership eighty years ago, more adults in the United States do not attend church than attend church.<sup>2</sup>

Projections by the PEW Research Center and Simon Brauer at Duke University indicate that the U.S. might be following countries in Western Europe that had overwhelming Christian majorities in the middle of the twentieth century and no longer

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>; and Gregory Smith, Anna Schiller, and Haley Nolan, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

do.<sup>3</sup> If these recent trends in religious practice continue, less than half of the United States population will describe themselves as Christian within a few decades.<sup>4</sup>

The impact on religious communities is evident as churches are shutting their doors at a faster rate than new ones are starting.<sup>5</sup> Pastors are leaving the ministry at alarming rates. Exact numbers of clergy leaving ministry are hard to come by. However, it is clear that conditions of ministry have changed in the past few decades and that many local church ministers leave as a result.<sup>6</sup>

Starting new churches to reach the U.S. demographic landscape has been one part of an evangelistic and renewal strategy to reverse the trend of declining church involvement.<sup>7</sup> The urban church-planting pioneer Timothy J. Keller suggests that the way to grow the number of Christians in a city is not mainly through church renewal programs

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<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Kramer and Conrad Hackett, “Modeling the Future of Religion in America” (Pew Research Center, September 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>; Pew Research Center, “Being Christian in Western Europe,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), May 29, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>; Travis Mitchell, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>; Simon G Brauer, “The Surprising Predictable Decline of Religion in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 4 (December 2018): 654–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12551>.

<sup>4</sup> Kramer and Hackett, “Modeling the Future.”

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Earls, “Protestant Church Closures Outpace Openings in U.S.,” May 25, 2021, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2021/05/25/protestant-church-closures-outpace-openings-in-u-s/>. This trend is greater in the United Kingdom where one in every 150 churches die each year. Before the pandemic reports indicated The Church of England closes one church every ten days on average. Cf. Peter Brierley, *UK Church Statistics No. 3: 2018* (Tonbridge, UK: ADBC Publishers, 2017), 16.1, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald J. Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 355–65; Timothy Keller, *Serving a Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 216–33.



but through church planting.<sup>8</sup> Professor of missiology and intercultural studies at Vrije University Amsterdam, Stephen Paas, agrees that church planting is an important instrument to reach the secular West.<sup>9</sup>

The formation of new churches is an ancient process known as *plantatio ecclesiae* (“church planting”), an intentional initiation of a faith community around shared values based upon Scripture for the purpose of worship and ritual. One effective means of planting churches in the U.S. has been through church-planting networks, organizations of collaborative churches who plant churches in partnership.<sup>10</sup> Networks may form through denominational affiliation, shared values, geography, or structure.<sup>11</sup> Keller suggests that church planting networks (CPN) provide pastors theological vision to direct church-planting efforts.<sup>12</sup> Paas argues that CPNs leads to innovation to reach those outside of the church.<sup>13</sup> Professor at Wheaton College and one of the leading church-health theorists in the U.S., Ed Stetzer agrees with Paas but notes that most established churches are unwilling, or at least unable, to overcome the challenge of being missionally

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<sup>8</sup> Keller, *Serving a Movement*, 222.

<sup>9</sup> Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning From the European Experience*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 181.

<sup>10</sup> Neil Powell and John James, *Together for the City: How Collaborative Church Planting Leads to Citywide Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 51; Dave Ferguson and Patrick O’Connell, *Together: The Great Collaboration* (Exponential, 2019), 39.

<sup>11</sup> One recent study identified ten models of church-planting networks in the U.S. Ferguson and O’Connell, *Together*, 118–30.

<sup>12</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 374.

<sup>13</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 224.

minded and therefore find it difficult to reach those outside the church.<sup>14</sup> Keller is more enthusiastic, arguing that CPNs help established churches meet this challenge by fostering a church-wide self-examination.<sup>15</sup> Stetzer says the evidence is encouraging that “new churches can indigenize in ways that established churches rarely can accomplish.”<sup>16</sup> Keller further notes that CPNs increase leadership pipelines for future faith communities to develop in areas where none exist today.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the examination of church-planting networks in the U.S. is of relevance because the U.S.—following Europe—may be a laboratory for new forms of faith, new structures of organization and collaboration that can accommodate secular environments.<sup>18</sup> However, the oft-cited data that church planting (and by extension CPNs) are an effective way to reach more Americans according to Paas remains tenuous. He suggests that the research behind the claim that more Americans are engrafted into churches through church planting is “virtually worthless.”<sup>19</sup> Paas argues that the New Testament was written in a missionary context. He believes that the decision to plant a new church in the United States or in other nations with a long history of Christianization must find additional, contextual reasons to justify doing so.<sup>20</sup> He goes on to argue that the

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<sup>14</sup> Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches That Multiply* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 361.

<sup>16</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Keller, *Serving a Movement*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 154.

<sup>20</sup> Paas, 265.

current crisis in U.S. Christianity has created urgent demand for renewal in almost every major theological study that has been published in the last half-century. Rather than rebuilding the witness of the gospel in a secularized context, today's CPNs are often vehicles for denominational expansion, securing a piece of the diminishing pie in declining American Christendom.<sup>21</sup>

Warrick Farrah, a researcher at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, argues that the present era offers an exceptional opportunity for research on CPNs. This is attributed to three significant factors: the significant increase in the number of believers among least-reached peoples, the growing number of missionaries with access to missiological research, and the ease of virtual networking and collaboration facilitated by technology. These converging phenomena create a unique environment for exploring and studying the dynamics of church planting movements in ways that are unprecedented in church history.<sup>22</sup>

This study will explore CPNs. More specifically, it will examine the senior pastor's involvement with CPNs. What do senior pastors say about being involved in a CPN? How do senior pastors benefit from involvement in CPNs? What challenges do they encounter? When do those challenges arise? What hopes do senior pastors have for CPNs? To pursue these questions one must see that pastors involved in CPNs face ecclesiological, economic, and institutional challenges.

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<sup>21</sup> Paas, 181.

<sup>22</sup> Warrick Farrah, "Identifying Current Gaps in Church Planting Movements Research: Integrating First- and Second-Order Perspectives," *Great Commission Research Journal* 13, no. 2 (2021): 21–36, Academic Search Premier.

## **Ecclesiological Challenges**

In little more than ten years Paul established the Church in four provinces of the Roman Empire: Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia. As people responded to Paul's preaching, believers gathered regularly for worship. Once indigenous leaders were trained to lead the church with proper structure and direction, Paul traveled to a new city that had yet received the good news of the gospel. There he began preaching again to establish another church. Paul's ministry is an example for CPNs.

### *Different Approaches to Church Planting Among Pastors*

Following Paul's example, the early twentieth century Anglican missionary to North China, Ronald Allen, proposed Paul's church planting practices as "missionary methods" that were not only biblical but worked across time, class, and place.<sup>23</sup> Allen argued that if when one begins with missions, one might get a new church, but when one starts a new church, a missionary outpost will result.<sup>24</sup> Stetzer and Im believe that Paul's example of church planting develops a missional mindset to reach North Americans.<sup>25</sup>

Yet Paas disagrees with Stetzer and Im, and Allen on the universality of Paul's example. He states that church planting is not a biblical mandate for all times and places. Paul planted in areas that were previously unreached by the gospel. So, as mentioned earlier, the decision to plant a new church in the United States or in other nations with a

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<sup>23</sup> Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 146.

<sup>24</sup> Allen, 141.

<sup>25</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 12.

long history of Christianization must find additional, contextual reasons to justify doing so.<sup>26</sup>

Missiologist Peter Wagner, however, sides with Stetzer and Allen by writing, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.... It applies monoculturally and cross culturally.”<sup>27</sup> Keller agrees with Allen, Stetzer and Im, and Wagner in writing,

The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for (1) the numerical growth of the body of Christ in any city, and (2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else--not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal process--will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting.<sup>28</sup>

Keller’s synthesis of Allen and Wagner’s argument that church planting is the most effective strategy to reach the secular West has given purpose for the establishment of many modern CPNs across the U.S. Keller’s Redeemer City to City Network, for example, has started nearly 1000 churches in 150 global cities across the world and trained nearly 80,000 church leaders.<sup>29</sup>

While Allen, Stetzer, Wagner, and Keller champion church planting as a means of renewal, Pass argues that church planting in areas saturated with churches requires

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<sup>26</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 265.

<sup>27</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest: A Comprehensive Guide* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy Keller, “Why Plant Churches?,” *Redeemer City to City* (blog), January 1, 2002, <https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/why-plant-churches>.

<sup>29</sup> City to City reports their impact this way: “Today we are engaged in more than 150 cities, and in partnership with our regional affiliates, have helped start 978 churches and trained and impacted 79,149 leaders.” Redeemer City to City, “The Impact,” accessed August 31, 2023, <https://redeemercitytocity.com/impact-1>.

additional rationale to justify doing so. In addition to ecclesiological conflicts over approaches to church planting, the challenges of local pastors' ministry demands are important to consider.

### *Overworked Pastors*

In 1875 the famous Baptist pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, said to his ministerial students, "A policeman or soldier may be off duty, but a minister never is."<sup>30</sup> Studies today show that pastors remain overworked.<sup>31</sup> Involvement in CPNs may require additional energy they may not have to give. On a given week a pastor's job may entail studying Scripture, preaching at least one sermon, counseling congregants, leading staff, developing theological vision, training leaders, representing the church at community events, church administration, conducting a wedding or funeral, and visiting the sick.

Jackson Carroll, a scholar who has spent a lifetime studying American clergy, concludes that pastors averaged more work hours per week than other managers and professionals.<sup>32</sup> *Resilient Ministry*, a revealing study on pastoral health by researchers Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, records a successful real-estate developer who became a pastor exclaiming that the business world was much easier to

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<sup>30</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 167.

<sup>31</sup> Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 98, 106; Gary W Kuhne and Joe F Donaldson, "Balancing Ministry and Management: An Exploratory Study of Pastoral Work Activities," *Review of Religious Research* 37, no. 2 (December 1995): 160.

<sup>32</sup> Carroll, *God's Potters*, 103.

navigate than church work.<sup>33</sup> While many professionals have the support of a “three-legged stool”—family, colleagues, and friends—the minister’s stool has one leg. Family, colleagues, and friends are comingled in church leadership. Home life and work life are less distinct for pastors. Expecting pastors to be involved in CPNs adds one more responsibility to their list.

### *Pastors’ Social Networks*

Pastors may find certain kinds of CPNs facilitate their need for social networks. Clinical psychologists and experts in clergy burnout Candace Coppinger Pickett, Oustin Barrett, Cynthia Eriksson, and Christina Kabiri, suggest that pastors’ regular interaction in peer-to-peer relationships strengthen their ministry longevity.<sup>34</sup> Stetzer and megachurch researcher Warren Byrd agree, “The likelihood of church survivability increased by 135 percent when the church planter meets regularly at least monthly with a group of church planting peers.”<sup>35</sup> Business writer Patrick Lencioni notes, “Peer-to-peer accountability is the primary and most effective source of accountability on the leadership team of a healthy organization.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Candace C. Pickett et al., “Social Networks among Ministry Relationships: Relational Capacity, Burnout, & Ministry Effectiveness,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 45, no. 2 (2017): 92–105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164711704500202>.

<sup>35</sup> Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 108.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 54.

Despite their need for a social network many pastors find participation in denominational agencies evaluative rather than lifegiving.<sup>37</sup> This causes many to seek a third space—not personal or professional—but a collection of likeminded colleagues outside their immediate authority structure who share common goals. For example, if help were available, senior pastors would be most interested in advice or guidance from other pastors who have been through what they experience.<sup>38</sup> Pastors are also interested in advice or guidance from those who understand churches like their own.<sup>39</sup> The research indicates that when a context has been created where pastors encourage, support, and equip one another, longevity in ministry follows. Do CPNs help meet these needs for pastors? If so, in what ways?

Diverse strategies of church planting, overburdened schedules, and the pastors' need for like-minded social networks are ecclesiological challenges that affect senior pastors' involvement in CPNs. Further, economic challenges prevent involvement, which will be explored next.

## **Economic Challenges**

If the church closing and planting trends from 2019 continue, the number of Protestant churches in America will continue to decline. As the overall number of members in a denomination declines, a drop in financial giving toward the denomination

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<sup>37</sup> Joas Adiprasetya, "Pastor as Friend: Reinterpreting Christian Leadership," *Dialog* 57, no. 1 (March 2018): 49, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

<sup>38</sup> Adiprasetya, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Lifeway Research, "The Greatest Needs of Pastors: A Survey of American Protestant Pastors," 2, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-Greatest-Needs-of-Pastors-Phase-2-Quantitative-Report-Release-1.pdf>.



and networks with which these churches belong is expected to follow. This will put strain on CPNs, denominations, and academic and theological institutions.

The 40 million Americans who have left houses of worship represent a total annual income of \$1.4 trillion dollars.<sup>40</sup> According to Nonprofits Source, the average American Christian gives about \$17 per week or 2.5 percent of their income, down from an average of 3.3 percent during the Great Depression.<sup>41</sup> With church budgets stretched to support basic religious services, pastors may face pressure to reduce financial support for CPN involvement. Given these economic realities pastors may find CPNs too expensive. Additionally, institutional challenges may cause many pastors to hesitate about becoming involved in church-planting networks.

### **Institutional Challenges**

Hugh Heclo, a Professor of Public Affairs at George Mason University and an expert on social institutions, argues that the one mark of American culture today is a fundamental distrust of institutions and the authorities that lead them.<sup>42</sup> According to Ryan Burge, theologian and social scientist at Eastern Illinois University, institutions like government, unions, and religious denominations that once supported the U.S. social

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<sup>40</sup> Davis, Graham, and Burge, *The Great Dechurching*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> “Church And Religious Charitable Giving Statistics,” *Nonprofits Source* (blog), accessed August 28, 2023, <https://nonprofitssource.com/online-giving-statistics/>.

<sup>42</sup> Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 11.

fabric are no longer held in high regard by the average American.<sup>43</sup> Heclo summarizes symptoms of this perspective when he writes,

Lies, short-term thinking, self-promotion, denigration of duty, disregard for larger purposes—all these amount to one common syndrome serving to undermine social trust and institutional values.<sup>44</sup>

This is a challenge to church-planting networks because relational trust is necessary to continue collaboration toward expansion without devolving into competition for power by individual pastors or by congregations. Many pastors, politicians, and public intellectuals regret the lack of a generally accepted narrative that gives meaning to underlying values of western society.<sup>45</sup> This generally held belief may cause pastors to avoid being involved in institutions over which they do have control.

Economic historian Niall Ferguson provides reasons to overcome this challenge. He argues that networks are key for the development of individual unit. “Weak ties... are the vital bridge between disparate clusters that would otherwise not be connected at all.”<sup>46</sup> The greater number of relationships in a network, the more valuable the network to the challenge of secularization collectively. As Ferguson suggests, “This implies spectacular returns to very large, open access networks and, conversely, limited returns to secret and/or exclusive networks.”<sup>47</sup> Thought leader in the missional church movement,

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<sup>43</sup> Ryan Burge, “The Future of American Christianity Is Non-Denominational,” *Graphs About Religion* (blog), June 26, 2023, [https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/the-future-of-american-christianity?utm\\_medium=reader2](https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/the-future-of-american-christianity?utm_medium=reader2).

<sup>44</sup> Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Heclo, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power, from the Freemasons to Facebook* (London: Penguin, 2018), 30, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Ferguson, 30, 33.

Alan Hirsch, agrees with Ferguson in warning, “To remain truly missional, established organizations need to be very aware of the dangers of institutionalization.”<sup>48</sup> Jim Collins refers to this as the “bureaucratic death spiral.”<sup>49</sup> Keller speaks about this tension in *Serving a Movement*, “A strong, dynamic movement, then, occupies this difficult space in the center—the place of tension and balance between being a freewheeling organism and a disciplined organization.”<sup>50</sup> Missiologist Stuart Murray asserts institutional thinking is necessary to provide the foundations for a movement to take hold.<sup>51</sup> Yet today there is growing distrust of institutions in the West. Therefore, this challenge is significant for CPNs in the U.S.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors engage with CPNs. Three main areas of challenge, as described above, are central to their engagement: ecclesiology, economics, and anti-institutionalism. While much has been written on CPNs, little qualitative research has been done on senior pastors’ experiences as participants in church-planting networks. If CPNs create unique challenges for senior pastors, where do those challenges reside? How do pastors meet those challenges? What aspirations do senior pastors have for their involvement in CPNs?

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 194.

<sup>49</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 28.

<sup>50</sup> Keller, *Serving a Movement*, 201.

<sup>51</sup> Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 126.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What benefits do senior pastors experience when they engage with church-planting networks?
2. What challenges do senior pastors face when they engage with church-planting networks?
3. How do senior pastors navigate the challenges they face when they engage with church-planting networks?
4. What are senior pastors' hopes for engagement with church-planting networks?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study has significance for many different types of leaders who depend on networks: pastors, church planters, academic institutions, seminaries, networks, training centers, peer-to-peer cohorts, business entrepreneurs, chief executive officers, and small business owners. The dynamics of peer-to-peer relationships for those who partner with like-minded organizations will be explored. The need for CPNs has been documented, yet there remains a gap in the research of the benefits and challenges of how senior pastors engage with a CPN. Does involvement with a CPN strengthen the pastors' resilience in ministry? Does involvement in a church-planting network increase a congregation's church planting efforts? If so, in what ways? How does a CPN lead to church vitality and multiplication in unexpected ways?

Understanding the nature of CPN involvement dynamic offers significant insight to pastors seeking to lead church-planting churches as well as to entrepreneurs looking to

partner with others for broader influence. Greater understanding and exploration of this issue will particularly allow senior pastors to navigate the complexities of involvement in CPNs.

CPN leaders will gain insight into the emotional intelligence needs of participants in CPNs. Seminaries and other pastoral training centers will observe the strategic skills and soft skills necessary to motivate pastors to lead their own congregation to be a church-planting church. Those who study peer-to-peer work relationships will identify ways to foster reconciliation when trust has been broken between co-laborers.

### **Definition of Terms**

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

Ambidexterity – refers to a network’s organizational or team capability to effectively balance and integrate two seemingly contradictory modes of operation: exploration and exploitation. By effectively managing this tension, networks can drive continuous learning, innovation, and long-term success.

Exploration – the act of seeking new opportunities, knowledge, and ideas. It involves venturing into uncharted territories, experimenting with different approaches, and embracing uncertainty. Exploration is crucial for organizations to stay competitive in dynamic and rapidly changing environments. It allows them to discover new markets, technologies, and business models, as well as adapt to emerging trends and disruptions.

Exploitation – the act of leveraging established strengths, resources, capabilities, and processes to extract the maximum value and efficiency in the present context. It involves refining and improving existing products, services, and operations to enhance performance and profitability in the short term.

Church Plant – The establishing of a new faith community where the gospel is preached, sacraments are lawfully administered, and discipline is practiced under the leadership of elders.

Church-Planting Network – is a cohesive ecosystem led by a central coordinating body with shared goals and vision that facilitates starting and nurturing new church plants.

The Descriptive Weak Ties Hypothesis – is a concept in social network theory that suggests that weak ties in a social network tend to provide more diverse and novel information compared to strong ties. It was proposed by sociologist Mark Granovetter in his influential 1973 paper titled *The Strength of Weak Ties*.

Hard trust – is confidence in the institutional environment that nurtures trust and enables effective collaboration among network members. Hard trust includes agreed-upon rules of behavior, monitoring mechanisms, sanctions for rule-breaking, and rewards for compliance.

Heterarchy – a form of management or rule in which any unit can govern or be governed by others, depending on circumstances, and, hence, no one unit dominates the rest. Authority within a heterarchy is distributed.

Network – group of different organizations, with convergent goals, which share an identity and develop trust and power to pursue repeated exchange of knowledge and action.

Network diversity – is the variety or heterogeneity of connections within a social network.

Node – an individual or entity, such as a person, organization, or group, that is part of the network.

Reflexive learning – in the context of team learning, refers to the process of self-reflection and self-assessment that teams engage in to improve their performance. It involves analyzing and evaluating their actions, decisions, and outcomes, and using this information to adjust their strategies, behaviors, and goals. Reflexive learning allows teams to continuously adapt and improve by learning from their experiences.

Senior Pastor – The spiritual leader of the church who is responsible for the teaching and preaching, pastoral care, and administrative leadership over all areas of the church.

Soft trust – confidence to collaborate and rely on a person who shares a common identity, such as being members of the same college fraternity, religion, or ethnic group.

Strong ties – are close, intimate, and enduring relationships between individuals within a social network. These ties are characterized by frequent interaction, emotional closeness, mutual trust, and a sense of mutual support. Strong ties typically provide access to redundant information as they are typically formed with individuals who share similar interests, backgrounds, and experiences.

Structural holes – gaps or missing connections between individuals or groups within a social network. When someone occupies a position between two disconnected groups, they have a structural hole.

Weak ties – connections or relationships between individuals that are less frequent, intimate, or reciprocal compared to strong ties. Weak ties often connect people from different social groups or domains.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The aim of this research was to investigate senior pastors' engagement with church planting networks (CPN). The study sought to explore the perspectives of senior pastors regarding their involvement in such networks, the benefits they derive from it, the challenges they face, the way they overcome these challenges, and their hopes for the future of CPNs.

To establish a foundation for the qualitative research, the literature review begins by examining the positive contributions of the book of Acts to CPNs. This first literature review area helps to understand the benefits in developing biblical principles from the book of Acts that support the formation and operation of contemporary CPNs.

Furthermore, the review encompasses two other relevant areas of literature. The second area focuses on the challenges the book of Acts presents to developing strategy and structure for today's CPNs. The third area investigates best practices for networking, providing insights into effective strategies and approaches for establishing and maintaining fruitful connections within CPNs. By examining this literature, the study aims to shed light on the potential benefits that pastors can derive from active involvement in such networks.

By conducting this research, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of senior pastors' perspectives on CPNs, offering insights into their experiences, challenges, and aspirations.



## Benefits from Using Acts to Develop CPNs

There is a widespread consensus among evangelical scholars that the book of Acts offers significant benefits in developing a biblical foundation of contemporary strategies in catalyzing CPNs.<sup>52</sup> Aikinyemi O. Alawode, church history and missiology professor at the University South Africa at Pretoria, argues that the church planting pattern depicted in the book of Acts is fundamental to spreading the gospel in the world today.<sup>53</sup> Stuart Murray, a prominent missiologist with a focus on church planting, agrees with Alawode and further asserts that Acts is a valuable tool in church planting endeavors and stands out as the most obvious and widely utilized source for addressing various aspects of church-planting strategy, methodology, ecclesiology, and spirituality.<sup>54</sup> This aligns with the perspectives of Ed Stetzer, a respected church-planting strategist, and Daniel Im, a church planting movement researcher.<sup>55</sup> Stetzer and Im both emphasize the significance of Acts in shaping church planting strategies. They argue that Acts serves as a historical narrative of the apostles' mission to spread the good news of the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ to the farthest reaches of the earth. They further propose in relation to the

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<sup>52</sup> Allen, *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours?*, 5; Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 19; Keller, *Center Church*, 355–58; Aikinyemi O. Alawode, “Paul’s Biblical Patterns of Church Planting: An Effective Method to Achieve the Great Commission,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (April 2, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5579>.

<sup>53</sup> Aikinyemi O. Alawode, “Challenges of Church Planting in the Book of Acts, Its Implications for Contemporary Church,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (December 8, 2023): 6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i2.8317>.

<sup>54</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 74–75.

<sup>55</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 29.

narrative presented in Acts that the original recipients of New Testament letters can be understood and contextualized as participants in the first church planting movement.<sup>56</sup>

Professor of missiology and intercultural studies at Vrije University Amsterdam, Stephen Paas and Alrik Vos, a Dutch theologian and church planter, contribute to this discussion by emphasizing the connection between church planting and church growth, particularly in Western Europe. They underscore the ongoing relevance of Acts in understanding and strategizing for church expansion.<sup>57</sup> In further research Paas highlights the origins of the language of church planting in the Acts narrative.<sup>58</sup>

Craig Ott, associate professor of mission and intercultural studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, adds to the discourse by advocating for the study of principles and patterns observed in the rapidly growing movements in Acts. He believes that valuable lessons can be learned from these observations, informing modern mission strategies and efforts.<sup>59</sup> Ott also notes that the English Standard Version's translation of the Greek word πληθύνω as "multiplied" in Acts 6:7, 7:17, 9:31, and 12:24 provides exegetical grounds for further exploration of church planting movements in Acts. This implies that Acts offers a solid biblical-theological perspective for reflecting on the benefits for contemporary CPNs.<sup>60</sup> Warrick Farah, a researcher at the Oxford Centre of

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<sup>56</sup> Stetzer and Im, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Stefan Paas and Alrik Vos, "Church Planting and Church Growth in Western Europe: An Analysis," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 3 (July 2016): 243–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939316656323>.

<sup>58</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Craig Ott, "The Word Spread Through the Whole Region: Acts and Church Planting Networks," in *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations*, ed. Warrick Farah (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library, 2021), 96.

<sup>60</sup> Ott, 97.

Mission Studies, further supports Ott's perspective by suggesting that CPNs can learn from the integration of first-order and second-order perspectives presented in the book of Acts.<sup>61</sup> Peyton Jones, a church planting trainer for the Southern Baptists' North American Mission Board, echoes the sentiments of Paas, Murray, Ott, Stetzer, and Im regarding the crucial role of church planting movements in Acts. He likens CPNs to the hidden operating system of the book of Acts, underlying and enabling the various activities depicted. Jones asserts that without these networks, the book of Acts would merely depict the travels of itinerant preachers, lacking the necessary context for the epistles and their intended recipients.<sup>62</sup>

### *Principles to Contextualize the Gospel for the Changing World*

One key benefit discussed in the literature is the contribution the book of Acts makes to the important task of contextualizing the gospel in a changing world. Paas emphasizes the importance of contextualizing church planting strategies within sociological and historical contexts. He suggests that the book of Acts offers resources for investigating target cultures if one takes the time to explore the dynamics at play.<sup>63</sup> Murray likewise emphasizes the importance of engaging in theological, missiological, and cultural reflection, as Luke's narrative in Acts appears to invite such exploration.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Farah, "Identifying Current Gaps"; Ott, "The Word Spread," 5. Paul and Barnabas presented a first-order perspective to the Jerusalem Council, while Peter and James offered a second-order perspective that has benefited Gentile believers ever since.

<sup>62</sup> Peyton Jones, *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 28.

<sup>63</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 181.

<sup>64</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 75.

Paas further notes that the lack of contextualization often leads CPNs to value market share in declining American Christendom rather than work toward wider-kingdom renewal as Acts demonstrates.<sup>65</sup> Stetzer and Im concur that missionaries in the West must learn and utilize the skill of contextualization to effectively make disciples of all nations as they adapt the message to specific cultural contexts.<sup>66</sup>

Murray argues that the lack of consensus on biblical guidelines for church planting is a result of the challenge of contextualization in today's world.<sup>67</sup> Paas, Stetzer, Im, urban church-planting pioneer Tim Keller, and Alawode all agree that emphasizing contextualization in all evangelism methods is crucial.<sup>68</sup> However, Paas and Murray challenge the assumption put forth by Stetzer, Im, Keller, and Alawode that church planting serves as a universal evangelism method. They argue that while the narrative of Acts describes contextualized church planting methods in different regions during Paul's time, it does not necessarily mean that church planting should remain the primary emphasis to reach the West today.<sup>69</sup>

Paas, Keller, and Jones do agree that the apostolic practice of evangelism focused on the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ.<sup>70</sup> Paas emphasizes that the

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<sup>65</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 181.

<sup>66</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68.

<sup>68</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 31; Keller, *Center Church*, 148–49; Jones, *Church Plantology*, 259; Paas, *Church Planting*, 246; Murray, *Church Planting*, 68; Alawode, “Challenges of Church Planting in the Book of Acts, Its Implications for Contemporary Church.”

<sup>69</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68; Paas, *Church Planting*, 246.

<sup>70</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 246; Keller, *Center Church*, 148; Jones, *Church Plantology*, 259.

gospel itself is a message, not a strategy.<sup>71</sup> Keller adds that Paul's ministry in Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus provides missiologists with insights on how to reach the intellectual, cultural, and religious centers of their respective cultures.<sup>72</sup> Jones adds that all models of church planting strategy have pros and cons that depend on the specific setting in which they are implemented.<sup>73</sup> He emphasizes that the New Testament presents different options because different approaches were needed for different mission contexts. Jones emphasizes that one size does not fit all, and that mission always takes precedence over models. Strategy should be adaptable and flexible, prioritizing the mission over rigid structures.<sup>74</sup>

### **Post-Christian West and the Pre-Christian World in the Book of Acts**

Several authors provide valuable insights by comparing and contrasting the post-Christian West with the Greco-Roman world depicted in Acts.<sup>75</sup> Paas asserts the critical

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<sup>71</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 246. In evangelical church planting literature this plain historical observation is often obscured, because of the tendency to read Donald McGavran's identification of evangelism with church growth (cf. 1.3.4) into the New Testament. This means that no real distinction is recognized between evangelism "proclaiming" the good news on the one hand and the "gathering of converts on the other. Thus, the apostles' efforts to preach the gospel every. where can be described without reduction as a church planting strategy: This is exactly what happens in much church planting literature.' In other words, out of the New Testament pioneer practice where evangelism usually (but not always) resulted in the planting of a church, it is concluded that church planting rather than evangelism was the first intention of the apostles. I believe that this is a distortion of the biblical material; it amounts to confusing the nature of an activity with its results. The apostolic practice of evangelism was concentrated on the good news of what God had done in Jesus Christ. It was a message, and not a strategy. The apostles believed that the world had changed by the coming of the Christ, they did not believe that they were the ones who had to change the world by their strategies.

<sup>72</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 148.

<sup>73</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 259.

<sup>74</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 259.

<sup>75</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 359; Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 7; Paas, *Church Planting*, 265.

role of church planting in shaping the future of the church, enabling it to effectively address the needs and aspirations of the current post-Christian society.<sup>76</sup> Farah likewise emphasizes that the early church faced new questions and challenges as Gentiles embraced Jesus, similar to the obstacles encountered by CPNs in reaching the least-reached areas today.<sup>77</sup> Keller agrees with Paas and Farah and further highlights the significant parallels between the world of Acts and the shifts in the Western landscape, where secularism, multiculturalism, and global interconnectedness have given rise to vibrant religious communities in modern cities.<sup>78</sup> Jones aligns himself with this perspective by asserting that CPNs in a post-Christian society should increasingly look back to the pre-Christian world for answers.<sup>79</sup> New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, and Michael Byrd, an Australian theologian, explore in great depths the parallels between the pre-Christian world depicted in Acts and the post-Christian West of today, shedding light on the significant shifts that have occurred over time, providing valuable insights for CPNs.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 359.

<sup>77</sup> Farah, “Identifying Current Gaps.”

<sup>78</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 359. E.g., Keller summarizes this perspective in writing, “Yet our secular, urbanized, global world today is strikingly like the Greco-Roman world in certain ways. For the first time in fifteen hundred years, there are multiple, vital, religious faith communities and options (including true paganism) in every society. Traditional, secular, and pagan worldviews and communities are living side by side. During the Pax Romana, cities became furiously multiethnic and globally connected. Since we are living in an Acts-like world again rather than the earlier context of Christendom, church planting will necessarily be as central a strategy for reaching our world as it was for reaching previous generations.” (*Center*, 359).

<sup>79</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 19.

<sup>80</sup> N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI : London: Zondervan Academic : SPCK, 2019), 150–51.

## Shifts in Missional Practices Between the Old Testament and the New Testament

In their respective research, Keller, Jones, and Paas note that Acts highlights a shift in missional practices between the Old and New Testaments. Keller and Jones both highlight the centripetal nature of evangelism in the Old Testament, where the focus was on inviting people to come in and worship God.<sup>81</sup> Keller explains that in the Old Testament the increase in the number of Jews in Babylon was primarily achieved through natural growth and the expansion of families, but in the New Testament, the church takes on a centrifugal nature, moving outward from the center through evangelism and discipleship in larger cities.<sup>82</sup> This centripetal-to-centrifugal perspective aligns with Jones' research which argues that the disciples in Acts chose to go where the people were instead of waiting for them to come.<sup>83</sup>

Regarding cultural identity and engagement, Keller secondly notes that the Jews in Babylon maintained their distinct cultural identity while engaging with the society around them, adhering to the Mosaic code, including dietary laws that required them to eat separately from pagans. However, with the coming of Christ, the ceremonial and cultural regulations became obsolete. Acts 15:1-35 and the teachings of Jesus in Mark 7 reflect this shift.<sup>84</sup> Jones further adds that while buildings can serve as gathering hubs, the early church plants saw the crowds gathering outside of these structures, highlighting a different approach to engaging with people. This further emphasizes the shift in

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<sup>81</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 147; Jones, *Church Plantology*, 330.

<sup>82</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 147.

<sup>83</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 330.

<sup>84</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 147.

approach, where the focus was on engaging with people outside the confines of traditional structures.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the newfound freedom in Christ, Keller and Paas both acknowledge the potential danger of assimilation and compromise for Christians. They emphasize the importance of discerning and avoiding the idolatries and injustices of their culture while appreciating the common-grace blessings it offers. This requires holding a robust tension for cultural engagement without compromising one's commitment to Christ.<sup>86</sup>

### **The Basis of Church Planting is the Holy Spirit's Empowerment**

Both Jones and Ott, along with Craig Keener, Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, and Dieudonne Komla Nuekpe, Pentecostal studies and cross-cultural mission's scholar, note the Holy Spirit's empowerment as the basis of CPNs.<sup>87</sup> Jones emphasizes the connection between mission and supernatural empowerment throughout the book of Acts, highlighting the power that accompanies every example of outward expansion.<sup>88</sup> This aligns with Ott's perspective. Ott states that the Spirit empowers both the messengers and the message of Christ, leads individuals to respond to the gospel, and drives the emergence of CPNs.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 330.

<sup>86</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 147; Paas, *Church Planting*, 94–98.

<sup>87</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 283; Craig Ott, "The Word Spread," 104; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1, *Introduction and 1:1-2:47* (Baker Books, 2012), 442; Dieudonne Komla Nuekpe, "The Significance of the Incident of Pentecost in the Book of Acts for Christian Mission Today," *Pentecostalism, Charismaticism and Neo-Prophetic Movements Journal* (July 28, 2022), 34–43, <https://doi.org/10.38159/pecanep.2022322>.

<sup>88</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 283.

<sup>89</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 104.



Keener, in his commentary on Acts, affirms the correlation between the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the act of church planting.<sup>90</sup> He contends that despite facing opposition, church planting serves as a means of spreading the gospel. Keener suggests that the actions of Jesus, as well as the evangelizers and church planters in Acts, provide a missiological model for the dissemination of the gospel message.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, he emphasizes the importance of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the church, as evidenced by Acts 1:8 and Acts 2:38-39, which highlight the Spirit's role in empowering believers for mission across generations.<sup>92</sup> Nuekpe agrees with Keener's perspective and emphasizes the great significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for Christian mission.<sup>93</sup> He supports the idea that the Holy Spirit's empowerment is essential for successful mission work by highlighting the impact of the Spirit on evangelism, leadership, character transformation, and cross-cultural efforts. Jones agrees with Nuekpe and Keener but asserts that a church can only experience Acts 2 results by engaging in the activities of Acts 1, noting the inseparable connection between supernatural power and mission.<sup>94</sup> Scholar of church planting, Erwin Ochseneier, adds that throughout Acts

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<sup>90</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1: Introduction and 1:1-2:47:442.

<sup>91</sup> Keener, 1: Introduction and 1:1-2:47:442.

<sup>92</sup> Keener, 1: Introduction and 1:1-2:47:442.

<sup>93</sup> Nuekpe, "The Significance of the Incident of Pentecost in the Book of Acts for Christian Mission Today."

<sup>94</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 281.

the title of apostle is portrayed as a divine calling by the Holy Spirit rather than a result of institutional decision-making.<sup>95</sup>

### *Principles to Guide CPN Development Today*

In addition to contextualization, Acts provides principles to guide the development of CPNs today. Jones and Murray both mention that Paul's strategic breakthrough was the creation of multiple CPNs that spanned a continent in just over a decade.<sup>96</sup> Likewise, Nigerian church planting scholar, Christopher Oluwale Oluwatusin, demonstrates from the book of Acts that churches corporately multiplied themselves by starting a network of significant, biblically based churches in target areas.<sup>97</sup> Ott agrees with Jones, Murray, and Oluwatusin, underscoring the significance of strategic CPNs on the widespread impact of the early church by highlighting their formation in various regions, as indicated by geographic descriptions of reaching "all" (9:31; 19:10) or "whole" (13:49) areas.<sup>98</sup> Jones likewise says that if one traces the geographic outline of Acts, one sees that Paul defined the entire region around the north rim of the Mediterranean as "reached" because he had set multiplying networks in place to serve as gradually expanding and reproducing network hubs.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Erwin Ochsenmeier, "Antioch as a Church Planting Community: Revisiting Barnabas and Paul's Departure in Acts 13:1–4," *Neotestamentica* 56, no. 2 (July 2022): 317–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/neo.2022.a900316>.

<sup>96</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 34, 391; Murray, *Church Planting*, 33.

<sup>97</sup> Christopher Oluwale Oluwatusin, "A Biblical Examination of the 'Great Commission' and Church Planting in Nigeria," *Journal of Biblical Theology* 5, no. 2 (2022): 194–211, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

<sup>98</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 96.

<sup>99</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 391.

Missiologist and Founder of the US Coalition of Apostolic Leaders, Joseph Mattera, notes how Paul established a pattern in his missionary journeys that involved evangelizing cities, making disciples, planting new churches, appointing elders, and connecting these churches with key churches in strategic cities.<sup>100</sup> Keller agrees with Mattera in suggesting that after successfully establishing churches in a city, Paul appointed elders to oversee these newly-formed congregations as he continued his journey to the next region.<sup>101</sup> Jones adds that if Paul had only planted individual churches one after another, his remarkable speed alone would be sufficient to impress, with an average of one church planted every three to four months.<sup>102</sup>

### **With Whom to Plant?**

Several scholars today insist that in order to replicate the growth and widespread influence of Christianity today, church planters must move beyond the notion of individual church plants and instead envision the establishment of networks of churches as the early church did.<sup>103</sup> Mattera argues that rather than relying on institutions like

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<sup>100</sup> Joseph Mattera, “The Global Apostolic Movement and the Progress of the Gospel,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 47, no. 2 (May 2023): 147, Academic Search Premier. Missiologist and Founder of the US Coalition of Apostolic Leaders, Joseph Mattera, suggests that “generally, we see the Pauline pattern repeat itself in every city and in every one of his missionary trips. The Ephesian church planted other churches in Asia Minor (Acts 19; Rev 2–3). The Corinthian church was used by Paul as a hub of influence to reach the regions beyond (Acts 18:1–11; 2 Cor 10:12–18). The Thessalonian church sounded out the word of the Lord to all of Macedonia and Achaia (Acts 17:1–9; 1 Thess 1:7–8). This pattern—to evangelize cities, make disciples, plant new churches, set in elders to oversee each of the churches, and connect each of the churches through key churches in strategic cities (like Ephesus), who became hubs of influence and church planting throughout their region—was paramount in the continuation of the establishment of Christ’s Kingdom.”

<sup>101</sup> Keller, “Why Plant Churches?”

<sup>102</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 34.

<sup>103</sup> Jones, 61, 390; Keller, *Center Church*, 355; Murray, *Church Planting*, 75; Mattera, “Global Apostolic Movement”; Ott, “The Word Spread,” 99.

Bible colleges, mission agencies, and para-church organizations, the apostles' strategy focused on making Spirit-empowered disciples who would establish strong and stable local churches. These local churches would then come together to form complex apostolic networks, with support and resources provided by stronger hub churches in strategic cities. The local churches would maintain a connection with the founding apostles through financial support and sending co-laborers to serve on missionary teams.<sup>104</sup> Jones agrees with Mattera and adds that Jesus had a network-oriented approach long before the establishment of formal networks.<sup>105</sup> Jones notes that Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Rome formed the key network hubs in the New Testament world.<sup>106</sup> This pattern of apostolic connection for Mattera ensured that each congregation retained a global focus while still prioritizing their local community. At the same time, apostolic leaders like Paul established church elders to maintain local influence, while they continued their global missionary efforts in spreading the gospel. As a result, Mattera continues, the churches continued to thrive even after the departure of the apostles because they successfully passed leadership responsibilities to the elders chosen from among the disciples (Acts 20:17-34). Furthermore, Paul preserved his legacy by providing instruction to his primary apostolic protégés, as seen in his later epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 148.

<sup>105</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 61.

<sup>106</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 61.

<sup>107</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 148.

Notably, Jones and Keller argue that Jesus invested significant time and attention into three individuals, James, Peter, and John, who eventually assumed leadership roles in these cities.<sup>108</sup> Jones notes that Jesus singled them out to train apostles who would function within networks, demonstrating his focus on these key network leaders.<sup>109</sup>

Ott challenges Mattera's, Keller's, and Jones' assumption by highlighting that there is no record of intentional sending of evangelists or missionaries to outlying regions in the early church until Antioch.<sup>110</sup> Jones counters Ott's argument by suggesting that records would not be expected since a network of churches formed naturally apart from established formality.<sup>111</sup> Ott admits that circumstance such as persecution, famine, war, or economic upheaval can be used by God to compel human migration and enable ordinary Christians to become witnesses for Christ in new places without formal ecclesial commissioning or mission strategies.<sup>112</sup> Regardless of the means of gospel migration, Mattera, Jones, Keller, and Ott emphasize that networks are crucial for achieving the recorded levels of multiplication.

### *Regional Hubs within Networks*

Keller notes that the book of Acts demonstrates how churches actively resource new pioneer works and plant daughter churches in a natural, regular, and expectant

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<sup>108</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 61; Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

<sup>109</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 61.

<sup>110</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 99.

<sup>111</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 61.

<sup>112</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 99.

manner from within their membership.<sup>113</sup> Jones builds on Keller' ideal but suggests that these church plants are not isolated, but rather connect to strategic hubs which form inchoate CPNs .<sup>114</sup>

Jones identifies a total of nine networks that emerged, each branching out from strategic hubs.<sup>115</sup> He asserts that after the initial dispersion of the church due to Saul's persecution, the primary focus was to reestablish Jerusalem as a mission hub for Israel.<sup>116</sup> During Paul's first missionary journey, three networks were formed. The first network extended from Tarsus to Antioch, giving rise to the Antioch network. The second network formed as Paul traveled from Antioch to Cyprus, encompassing towns such as Paphos and establishing the Cypriote network. The third network emerged as Paul journeyed from Cyprus to Turkey, establishing the Galatian network, which included cities such as Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra.<sup>117</sup>

Jones suggests that Paul initiated two additional networks during his second missionary journey. The travels from Troas to Berea led to the formation of the Macedonian network, encompassing Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.<sup>118</sup> Jones, along with Mattera, posits that the church in Thessalonica played a significant role in spreading the word of the Lord to the regions of Macedonia and Achaia.<sup>119</sup> As Paul concluded his

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<sup>113</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

<sup>114</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 389–90.

<sup>115</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 390.

<sup>116</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 31.

<sup>117</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 31.

<sup>118</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 390–91.

<sup>119</sup> Jones, 391; Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

second missionary journey, Jones proposes that his journey from Berea to Greece established the Grecian network, including Cenchreae, Corinth, and Athens.<sup>120</sup>

During Paul's third missionary journey, Jones suggests that Paul established another network as he traveled from Antioch Psidia to Ephesus, giving rise to the Ephesian network, which included the seven churches of Asia Minor. Mattera agrees with this reading of Acts 19.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, while en route to Rome, Jones argues that Paul established the Cretan Network. Finally, according to Jones, the Roman Network consisted of several house churches within the city that were established by individuals influenced by Paul through previously-formed regional networks.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, for Mattera, at the conclusion of Paul's third missionary journey, the Corinthian church served as a hub of influence for Paul to reach the regions beyond, as evidenced in Acts 18:1-11 and 2 Corinthians 10:12-18. Mattera affirms that the Thessalonian church, too, spread the word of the Lord throughout Macedonia and Achaia, as seen in Acts 17:1-9 and 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8.<sup>123</sup> These hub churches for Jones and Mattera then become centers of influence and church planting throughout their respective regions.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 391.

<sup>121</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 148.

<sup>122</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 391.

<sup>123</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 148.

<sup>124</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 391; Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 148.

### *Importance of Regional Hubs*

Jones and Ott both emphasize the significance of regional hubs, as they served to safeguard the integrity of the gospel when heresy spread rapidly.<sup>125</sup> Jones also suggests that CPNs provide strength in numbers, shared goals, and pooled resources.<sup>126</sup> Ott and Wilson mention that Paul recognized the importance of training and equipping others, particularly when facing the imminent risk of imprisonment. They argue that Paul understood that having a strategic command center in a city hub would be more effective than being confined to a jail cell. Ott and Wilson suggest this insight by Paul is one reason why he devoted considerable time to Ephesus.<sup>127</sup>

Stetzer and Im also observe that the establishment of the Ephesus network proved highly effective in promoting multiplication.<sup>128</sup> By the end of Paul's third missionary journey, he confidently proclaimed that there were no more uncharted regions left for him to visit in those areas, as mentioned in Romans 15:23.<sup>129</sup> Jones further notes that as Paul made his way towards Spain via Rome, he had already established a network of churches in Rome, despite never having been there personally. This, according to Jones, demonstrates Paul's ability to develop adaptable teams capable of operating effectively within local networks.<sup>130</sup> Notable individuals like Priscilla and Aquila were part of both

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<sup>125</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 390; Ott, "The Word Spread," 99.

<sup>126</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 389–90.

<sup>127</sup> Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 66, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

<sup>128</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 74.

<sup>129</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 391.

<sup>130</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 390.



the Corinthian and Ephesian networks. With such networks in place, Paul did not feel the need to extensively minister in Rome, as the local network naturally facilitated multiplication.<sup>131</sup>

### *Varied Roles of Networks and Network Churches*

Jones asserts that it is important to acknowledge the existence of various types of networks, which are typically centered around a church planting hub serving as the central point of operations. These hubs, such as Antioch, Ephesus, or Corinth, differ in their nature and function.<sup>132</sup> Murray agrees and notes that churches may hold different roles within networks.<sup>133</sup> According to Jones, the New Testament describes different types of hubs: 1. Affinity Hubs, exemplified by Jerusalem; 2. Catalyst Hubs, represented by Antioch; 3. Collaboration Hubs, such as Lystra and Derbe; and 4. Training Hubs, with Ephesus as an example.<sup>134</sup>

Murray argues that one could see the place for a doctrinally focused church that manages rather than sends out church planters.<sup>135</sup> He hypothetically imagines that Luke's emphasis on Paul's ministry in the second half of Acts implies that the church back in Jerusalem was not fully engaged in active church planting activities. He argues that the Jerusalem church is portrayed as functioning more as an arbiter of orthodoxy rather than

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<sup>131</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 390.

<sup>132</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 393–400.

<sup>133</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 77.

<sup>134</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 393–94.

<sup>135</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 77.

a training and sending ground for church leaders, while Antioch is presented as a missionary congregation (cf. Acts 4:26-28; 11:1-18; 13:1-3; 15:1-29).<sup>136</sup>

### *Testing Church Planters through Assessment*

Despite the abundance of research on the evaluation of church planters in recent years, there appears to be limited literature that references the book of Acts as the primary biblical source for church planter assessment.<sup>137</sup> Yet, John Worcester, a respected church planter trainer, and founder of Church Planting Leadership, argues that Acts actually endorses the practice of assessing church planters.<sup>138</sup> Worcester highlights that Paul, as a church planter himself, demonstrated the importance of carefully selecting teammates for church planting endeavors. In particular, Paul discovered Timothy, a young man from Lystra, who possessed qualities that aligned with the needs of his team. Worcester asserts that Paul conducted a thorough evaluation of Timothy's character and reputation by checking his references, testing his commitment and dedication, and requiring him to demonstrate a strategic level of involvement (Acts 16:1-3).<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 77.

<sup>137</sup> Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 361–63; Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 49–51; Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, and Keith Wulff, “Assessing the Effectiveness of Support Strategies in Reducing Professional Burnout Among Clergy Serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA),” *Practical Theology* 6, no. 3 (January 1, 2013): 319–31, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1756073X13Z.00000000021>.

<sup>138</sup> John Worcester, “Biblical Principles of Training Church Planters,” *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 18, no. 2 (2021): 255–67, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

<sup>139</sup> Worcester, “Biblical Principles of Training Church Planters.”

## When to Plant?

The literature on church planting in the early church of Acts underscores the organic and natural process that took place, with ordinary believers being empowered by the Spirit to share the gospel in their daily lives.<sup>140</sup> Additionally, various crises can arise where planting becomes necessary, even if there is initial reluctance.<sup>141</sup> In such cases, it is essential to navigate these challenges and discern when the circumstances call for the establishment of a new church or network.<sup>142</sup>

### *Organic Church Planting*

According to Ott, the messengers of the gospel in the early days were ordinary believers. When the gospel reached the Gentiles in Syrian Antioch, it was not the Christians from Jerusalem who shared the message, but believers from Cyprus and Cyrene.<sup>143</sup> Ott emphasizes that these ordinary believers, who were not officially sent or sanctioned by the Jerusalem church, were empowered by the Spirit and naturally shared the gospel.<sup>144</sup> Keller also agrees with Ott, stating that church planting in Acts was expectant and customary, rather than traumatic or unnatural.<sup>145</sup> Jones further supports this

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<sup>140</sup> Ott, “The Word Spread,” 99–100; Keller, *Center Church*, 355–57; Jones, *Church Plantology*, 28; Paas, *Church Planting*, 10; The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, “Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” December 12, 2001, 15, <https://opc.org/chm/chplant/>.

<sup>141</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>142</sup> Ott, “The Word Spread,” 99–100; Keller, *Center Church*, 355–57; Jones, *Church Plantology*, 28; Paas, *Church Planting*, 10; Orthodox Presbyterian Church, “Planting,” 15.

<sup>143</sup> Ott, “The Word Spread,” 99–100.

<sup>144</sup> Craig Ott, “The Word Spread,” 100.

<sup>145</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

perspective by highlighting that in the missionary context of Acts, church planting was the norm for the early church.<sup>146</sup> Church planting became synonymous with church itself, and it happened organically as a result of gospel proclamation.<sup>147</sup>

Paas emphasizes that the early church placed a primary focus on gospel preaching and apologetics within the context of homes and neighborhoods. Churches were formed and established through the active involvement of families, neighbors, farmers, and merchants.<sup>148</sup> Ott concurs with this view, adding that the followers of Jesus in Acts preached the gospel spontaneously and informally wherever they went.<sup>149</sup>

When considering the initiation of a new church plant or network, Keller's research and that of the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (COHMC-OPC) demonstrate from the book of Acts that it is crucial to address several key factors, namely, motives, resources, population movement, and support methods. The key questions below summarize the literature in this sub-area.

#### **Is the Motive Missional?**

Keller's research indicates that churches ready to engage in church planting are characterized by their willingness to prioritize the advancement of the kingdom over any group or faction. This principle is exemplified in Paul's attitude towards Apollos, as depicted in Acts 18:24-28. Despite not being directly mentored by Paul, Apollos is highly

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<sup>146</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 28.

<sup>147</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 28.

<sup>148</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 10.

<sup>149</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 99.

regarded by him, as evidenced by the warm terms in which Paul refers to him (1 Cor 3:6; 4:6; 16:12). It is worth noting that Apollos' disciples seemed to view themselves as a distinct group, separate from Paul's followers (1 Cor 1:12; 3:4). Additionally, Paul demonstrates his commitment to this principle by willingly stepping back and allowing the newly planted churches to operate independently (as seen in Acts 16:40: "Then they left").<sup>150</sup>

### **Is the Sending Congregation Willing to Sacrifice?**

Keller asserts that the attitude of a church toward church planting, particularly when it entails sacrifice, serves as a test of their mindset and priorities. It reveals whether they are focused on their own institutional interests or on the well-being and growth of the kingdom of God in the area.<sup>151</sup> A church that laments minor losses instead of celebrating the broader gains for the kingdom is betraying a narrow perspective, according to Keller. However, it is important to recognize that new church planting can bring significant benefits to older congregations, even if these advantages may not be immediately apparent.<sup>152</sup> Paas and Vos note in secularized cultures like Western Europe the evidence suggests at best new church plants bring very small-scale numerical growth to the kingdom, and only under certain conditions.<sup>153</sup> They encourage sending churches

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<sup>150</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>151</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>152</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>153</sup> Paas and Vos, "Church Planting and Church Growth."

to focus instead on the benefit of a long-term investment in church planting for the good of the wider culture.<sup>154</sup>

#### **Is the Sending Congregation Willing to Yield Control?**

According to Keller's research, the book of Acts encourages mother churches to relinquish control over the ministry of daughter churches.<sup>155</sup> He demonstrates that even in a time when different apostles had their own followers and emphases, Paul's focus was on the kingdom as a whole and not on his own power or the influence of his party.<sup>156</sup> For example, Keller notes that when a congregation loses several families to a new church that is effectively reaching a hundred new people who were not attending any church previously, a choice arises. The question that needs to be asked is whether to celebrate the growth of the kingdom through the new church or to harbor resentment and lament the families that were lost.<sup>157</sup>

#### **Does the Sending Congregation Have Confidence in God's Providence?**

Keller argues that Paul entrusted the new churches he planted to the Lord rather than leaving them to their own devices or relying on external care as Acts 14:23 demonstrates. Paul's faith in God's providence allowed him to relinquish control and have confidence that God would sustain the work he had initiated. This mindset of natural church planting demands spiritual maturity and a deep trust in God's providential

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<sup>154</sup> Paas and Vos, "Church Planting and Church Growth in Western Europe."

<sup>155</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>156</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>157</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

guidance.<sup>158</sup> As one example of this, Keller highlights that Acts teaches that Paul appointed elders in each church, granting them a certain level of independence. This was possible because the mindset of natural church planting is not solely about trusting new leaders, but rather about trusting in God's providence as His Spirit directs young leaders to aspire to leadership.<sup>159</sup>

### **Is this a Time of Rapid Growth and Population Migration?**

The COHMCE-OPC identifies the establishment of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19–26) and Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-10) as examples of unique opportunities for church planting. In both cases, the circumstances presented clear indications for the need to establish new churches.<sup>160</sup>

In Antioch, the rapid growth of believers and their effective outreach to the Gentiles demonstrated the necessity of establishing a new church. Similarly, in Thessalonica, the positive response to the gospel led to the planting of a church that served as a model for other believers.<sup>161</sup>

Additionally, when a significant number of believers relocate or conversions occur as seen in Acts 2:41, it is reasonable to consider the need for a new church in that specific place and time. According to the COHMCE-OPC, these instances highlight the

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<sup>158</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>159</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>160</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church, "Planting," 15.

<sup>161</sup> The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, "Planting," 15.

importance of discerning and responding to the specific opportunities and needs that arise, ultimately leading to the establishment of new churches.<sup>162</sup>

### *Crisis Church Planting*

Keller notes that the persecution faced by believers in Acts 8 serves as an example of crisis church planting in the book of Acts.<sup>163</sup> In today's context, defiant church planting and reluctant church planting are two prevalent forms of crisis church planting but the outcomes, Keller says, are often less than ideal.<sup>164</sup>

#### **Defiant Church Planting**

The first form is defiant church planting, where individuals within a church become frustrated and choose to split off to form a new church. This separation can stem from feelings of alienation related to differences in doctrine, vision, or philosophy of ministry. Often, this kind of division is accompanied by clashes between strong personalities or cultural divides, where second-generation leaders choose to start a church in opposition to the desires of the first-generation leaders in the existing church.<sup>165</sup>

#### **Reluctant church planting**

The second form, according to Keller, is reluctant church planting, which arises when circumstances force a church's leaders to plant a new church against their will. For instance, a church may outgrow its building and, despite their reluctance, eventually must

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<sup>162</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 15.

<sup>163</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>164</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>165</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.



leave. Alternatively, some members may move to a new area and advocate for a similar church to the one they left. Members with differing visions or preferences may also drop out or push for a new service or church. While leaders may reluctantly provide permission, financial support, or active assistance, these situations are considered “unnatural” since church planting is unlikely to occur again unless dictated by circumstances.<sup>166</sup>

Paas adds another situation that leads to reluctant church planting. Churches can sometimes lose their convictions and accept heresies.<sup>167</sup> In such cases, Paas argues, denominations and networks should exercise patience and persist in reforming struggling nearby churches. However, strategic decisions may eventually lead to the establishment of a new congregation.<sup>168</sup>

### **Where to Plant?**

In the literature Acts 1:8 is regarded as the foundation for the early church’s expansion strategy from rural beginnings to the ends of the earth through population centers, and the literature largely reflects this trajectory for today.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>167</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 257.

<sup>168</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 257.

<sup>169</sup> c.f., Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches That Multiply* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 29–34; Murray, *Church Planting*, 209; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 2011), 95.

### *The Importance of Population Centers in the First Century*

According to Craig Keener's commentary on Acts, the narrative in the book highlights the growth of the early Christian movement from its humble rural beginnings in Galilee to the culturally significant urban centers such as Jerusalem and eventually the prestigious cities of the Roman Empire.<sup>170</sup> Keller also supports this viewpoint, emphasizing that Paul believed focusing on strategic cities was the most effective way to spread the gospel throughout the region, a key assumption derived from Acts.<sup>171</sup> Mattera further agrees with this perspective, highlighting Paul's strategic plan to preach the gospel in major cities and regions within his reach, culminating in his desire to reach Rome and possibly Spain.<sup>172</sup>

### *The Importance of Population Centers Today*

The COHMCE-OPC acknowledges the significance of targeting influential population centers, such as the leading Roman colony of Philippi, for church planting. They argue that the goal of such efforts is to bring the transformative power of the gospel to the entire cultural framework of the area.<sup>173</sup> Keller agrees. Drawing from the book of Acts, he highlights Paul's church-planting endeavors in significant cities as the biblical basis for an effective strategy to reach the Western world today. This understanding of

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<sup>170</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1: Introduction and 1:1-2:47:583.

<sup>171</sup> Keller, "Why Plant Churches?"

<sup>172</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 148.

<sup>173</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church, "Planting," 16.

Paul's approach serves as a guiding principle for contemporary church planting strategies.<sup>174</sup>

The church in Philippi is one example for the OPC. They argue that Philippi not only supported Paul's ministry but also gained recognition even in distant cities like Rome.<sup>175</sup> While not every population center automatically becomes a church planting target, they argue that the presence of influential cities throughout the United States and Canada warrants consideration for focusing church planting efforts in these areas.<sup>176</sup>

Mattera adds that by prioritizing key cities and establishing strong churches within them, the gospel can be effectively shared, and communities can be positively impacted.<sup>177</sup> Keller likewise emphasizes the need to empower local leaders to sustain and nurture these churches, ensuring continued growth and influence.<sup>178</sup>

According to Christopher Oluwatusin, Dean of Christ Apostolic Church Theological Seminary in Nigeria, a study of the missionary journeys in Acts reveals that Paul's travels were focused on planting churches in highly pagan territories and cultures.<sup>179</sup> Jones agrees and adds that a truly missional church is one that boldly engages these well-populated areas of town like the temples, which served as the city centers.<sup>180</sup> As a result of such an approach, Oluwatusin suggests, Paul and others successfully

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<sup>174</sup> Keller, "Why Plant Churches?"

<sup>175</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church, "Planting," 16.

<sup>176</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 16.

<sup>177</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 148.

<sup>178</sup> Keller, "Why Plant Churches?"

<sup>179</sup> Oluwatusin, "A Biblical Examination."

<sup>180</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 329.

established high-impact churches in major cities such as Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Ephesus.<sup>181</sup>

### **What Kinds of Churches to Plant?**

The literature focuses on two kinds of church plants derived from Acts: Pioneer church plants and household church plants. In discussing what kinds of churches to plant, Keller asserts that different generations and cultures will naturally give rise to churches with unique characteristics.<sup>182</sup> Keller argues that uniqueness does not undermine the strength of the mother church; rather, it serves as a testament to its effectiveness.<sup>183</sup>

#### *Pioneering Church Plants*

Murray, Paas, and Keller separately emphasize that when the mission of Christ's kingdom carries the gospel into regions where there are no existing churches, it closely mirrors the early pioneering church planting movement witnessed in the unreached Mediterranean area during the New Testament era.<sup>184</sup> Murray further highlights that in pioneering efforts, evangelism naturally leads to church planting.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Oluwatusin, "A Biblical Examination."

<sup>182</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>183</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 357.

<sup>184</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68; Paas, *Church Planting*, 245; Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>185</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68.

### *Household Church Plants*

Keller records that the churches planted by Paul, as well as most Christian churches for nearly two hundred years, were household churches.<sup>186</sup> Mattera supports this claim, noting that by AD 100, the gospel had spread to almost every region and province of the Roman Empire. He states that while initially the focal point of the church was Jerusalem and Samaria, within the next fifty years the primary means of spreading the gospel transitioned from the synagogue and temple to house churches.<sup>187</sup> Keller further remarks that when a member of a household became a Christian, such as the wife, children, or slaves, the gospel would spread indirectly.<sup>188</sup> This is exemplified in the conversion of Lydia in Acts 16 where her household also embraced the gospel, making her home the first church in Philippi. Similarly, in Acts 18, Keller suggests that the household of Crispus experienced the same pattern.<sup>189</sup> He emphasizes that this natural multiplication of new house churches was crucial for the growth of churches in places like Philippi, and Corinth.<sup>190</sup>

Ott agrees with Keller and Mattera, explaining that as individuals embraced the gospel, these house churches served as the foundational building blocks of the early church as evidenced in Acts 2:41-47.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>187</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

<sup>188</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 278.

<sup>189</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>190</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>191</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 106.

Jones, however, suggests a broader perspective. He argues that the Jerusalem church was a hybrid between missional house churches and churches in public spaces, as seen in Acts 5:42.<sup>192</sup> The temple courts mentioned in the Bible refer to the public square, the center of society in Jerusalem.<sup>193</sup> Jones emphasizes that for the apostles, being missional meant regularly meeting not only in homes but also in public spaces.<sup>194</sup>

### **Network Leadership**

Seth Akhilele, a cross-cultural leadership expert, asserts that the early Church's decision to empower second-tier leaders, as seen in Acts 6:1-7, aligns with contemporary leadership theories that emphasize decentralizing decision-making and empowering individuals closer to the issues at hand.<sup>195</sup> Mattera agrees with this perspective, highlighting that apostolic leaders like Paul strategically trained and passed on leadership to chosen elders, which allowed the churches to continue thriving even after the departure of the original apostles as Acts 20:17-34 illustrates.<sup>196</sup>

Jones, drawing from the examples in Acts, identifies five types of leaders required for every church planting church and CPN: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers.<sup>197</sup> According to Jones, an apostle is a pioneer who serves as the strategic

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<sup>192</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 529.

<sup>193</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 329.

<sup>194</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 329.

<sup>195</sup> Seth Akhilele, "Power and Decision Making in the Early Church," *Scholar Chatter* 1, no. 2 (December 14, 2020): 9–20, <https://doi.org/10.47036/SC.1.2.9-20.2020>.

<sup>196</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 148.

<sup>197</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 141–58, 267.

visionary for the team.<sup>198</sup> The role of a prophet is exemplified by Silas and Barnabas in Acts 15:52, where they encouraged and strengthened the believers with their words.<sup>199</sup> Jones defines the evangelist as the leader responsible for sharing the gospel and carrying the burden for those who are lost, drawing inspiration from Apollos in Acts 18:24-26.<sup>200</sup> Tang and Cotherman also emphasize the significance of the evangelist in the team, noting that Paul would select faithful individuals from the local church to accompany him and further disciple them in the work of church planting. This is because the work of an evangelist is a critical aspect of exercising leadership in the local congregation.<sup>201</sup> The fourth member of Jones' team, the shepherd, cares for the needs of the members and protects them from false beliefs. The teacher, on the other hand, leads the community by imparting an understanding of the Scriptures.<sup>202</sup>

Jones emphasizes that in the early Church, leadership required being filled with the Holy Spirit. This was evident when the apostles selected seven men who were “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5) to serve. Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection made it possible for the indwelling of the Spirit within believers, and thus the filling of the Spirit became a vital condition for leadership in the early Church.<sup>203</sup> It was the Spirit's power which enabled CPN's to build relationships, equip leaders, and normalize conflict.

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<sup>198</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 267.

<sup>199</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 267.

<sup>200</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 151.

<sup>201</sup> Tang and Cotherman, 69.

<sup>202</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 155.

<sup>203</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 279.

### *Church Plant Networks Build Relationships*

Chris Bruno, a pastor and executive director of the Antioch School Hawaii, and Matt Dirks, a pastor and church planter trainer, highlight the collaboration between Paul and leaders from various churches as a reflection of his strategic approach to building friendships, fostering cooperation, and strengthening the broader network of churches (Acts 19-20).<sup>204</sup> Bruno and Dirks emphasize that Paul's ability to orchestrate such gatherings showcases his exceptional leadership in the early Christian movement and also serves as a model for catalytic leaders today.<sup>205</sup> Jones agrees with Bruno and Dirks. Jones highlights Paul's ability to recruit others. Jones states that, like Paul, a network leader can leverage relationships built in previous years of ministry, seeking to partner with individuals for future ministry endeavors.<sup>206</sup>

### *Church Plant Networks Equip Leaders to Mobilize People*

John Lo, a church-planting scholar, points out that Paul intentionally chose individuals from each city he visited.<sup>207</sup> Jones similarly emphasizes that the progression of empowering, activating, and deploying every believer was key in the first-century to mobilize all believers for the mission.<sup>208</sup> For example, Lo shows that Paul's companions on his third missionary journey included those he had met during his second missionary

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<sup>204</sup> Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 69–76.

<sup>205</sup> Bruno and Dirks, 69–76.

<sup>206</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 41.

<sup>207</sup> John Lo, "How Does God's Story Spread?," in *Sent to Flourish: A Guide to Planting and Multiplying Churches*, ed. Len Tang and Charles E. Cotherman (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 70.

<sup>208</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 32.



journey, namely, Timothy from Lystra, Erastus from Corinth, Gaius from Derbe, Aristarchus from Thessalonica, Sopater from Berea, Secundus from Thessalonica, and Tychicus and Trophimus from Ephesus. After establishing themselves as committed disciples, Paul took them along for further training and discipling.<sup>209</sup> Jones stresses from Acts 2 that facilitating this progression of recruiting leaders is one of the primary goals of church planters in every era.<sup>210</sup>

Lo also notes the remarkable breadth of Paul's equipping ministry. Out of approximately one hundred names connected with Paul in Acts and the Pauline letters, they note that thirty-eight were his co-workers, including eight women.<sup>211</sup> Consequently, when Paul was imprisoned, Lo notes that Paul had a group of co-workers who could continue the work of ministry. Timothy spread the gospel in Asia, Titus worked in Illyricum and Crete, and Epaphras worked in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea, further illustrating for future network leaders the importance of Paul's equipping and mobilizing priorities.<sup>212</sup>

#### *Church Plant Networks Equip Leaders to Normalize Conflict*

Len Tang, director of Fuller Theological Seminary's church planting program, emphasizes that the significant responsibilities and fast pace of church planting may inevitably lead to conflicts among leaders. He argues that instead of treating conflict as a

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<sup>209</sup> Lo, "God's Story," 70.

<sup>210</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 32.

<sup>211</sup> Lo, "God's Story," 70.

<sup>212</sup> Lo, "God's Story," 70.

failure or aberration among God’s people, we should normalize it and recognize its potential for growth.<sup>213</sup> Ott agrees with this importance of prioritizing the unity of believers and addressing emerging conflicts promptly for sustainable and healthy growth in movements.<sup>214</sup>

Tang points out that even prominent figures like Peter and Paul faced conflicts (Gal 2:11-14), and Barnabas and Paul parted ways over a disagreement regarding John Mark (Acts 15:36-39). He argues that conflicts are inevitable among gifted individuals with strong visions and passions who are relatively new to each other, especially when it comes to the mission and methods of a church plant.<sup>215</sup> Ott observes that in the case of the conflict between Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking widows in Jerusalem, the resolution of this conflict led to the continued growth of the church.<sup>216</sup>

Jones adds that Paul’s first missionary journey was a learning experience filled with mistakes he wanted to avoid in the future.<sup>217</sup> One common mistake that new church planters make, Jones says, is failing to invest enough time in building a suitable planting team.<sup>218</sup> Jones notes that Paul recognized this oversight during his first journey and made corrections on his second and third.<sup>219</sup> Tang acknowledges that planters may feel like

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<sup>213</sup> Len Tang, “How Are Leaders Mutually Formed for God’s Mission,” in *Sent to Flourish: A Guide to Planting and Multiplying Churches*, ed. Len Tang and Charles E. Cotherman (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 118.

<sup>214</sup> Ott, “The Word Spread,” 99.

<sup>215</sup> Tang, “Leaders Mutually Formed,” 118–119.

<sup>216</sup> Ott, “The Word Spread,” 99.

<sup>217</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 35–36.

<sup>218</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 38.

<sup>219</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 36–38.

pastoral failures for not preventing or resolving early conflicts. However, he argues that if a church-planting team views conflict as a normal and necessary part of building a leadership community and forming resilient disciples, it can be productive, even though it may be challenging.<sup>220</sup>

## **Network Training**

The book of Acts provides training topics for CPN leaders and church planters. These include prayer, preaching, discipleship and teaching, liturgy design, bi-vocational encouragement, evangelism, stewardship, and diaconal ministries.

### *Prayer*

The book of Acts, as highlighted by Indonesian theologian Bolean Silalahi, emphasizes the importance of intercessory prayer for churches today, especially in times of crisis.<sup>221</sup> Nuekpe agrees. According to him, the incident of Pentecost in the Book of Acts holds great significance for contemporary Christian mission endeavors.<sup>222</sup> Silalahi argues that the recognition of the power of prayer among the leadership of church planting organizations allows for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and facilitates growth

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<sup>220</sup> Tang, “Leaders Mutually Formed,” 118–119.

<sup>221</sup> Bolean Silalahi, “The Contribution of Intercessory Prayer in the Growth of the Early Church According to the Book of Acts,” *International Journal of Science and Society* 3, no. 1 (February 8, 2021): 229–48, <https://doi.org/10.54783/ij soc.v3i1.290>.

<sup>222</sup> Nuekpe, “The Significance of the Incident of Pentecost in the Book of Acts for Christian Mission Today.”

and empowerment within the churches.<sup>223</sup> Among other areas, Nuekpe notes that Acts provides valuable guidance on the necessity of prayer as a necessary component of preparation for evangelism, preaching, effective leadership, and godly character.<sup>224</sup>

### *Preaching*

According to Oluwatusin, the entire New Testament, particularly Acts, demonstrates that the gospel advanced through preaching and is an important aspect of pastoral training.<sup>225</sup> Oluwatusin notes that Phillip, as a preacher, focused on proclaiming the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and that Paul, interestingly, identified himself as both a preacher and an apostle, appointed by God. He further notes the zeal generated by Pentecost and the disciples' response to growing persecution led them to preach everywhere in the known world.<sup>226</sup> Jones agrees and states more generally that since the book of Acts serves as a primary record for sermons throughout the early Mediterranean world, it becomes a primary source for church-planting training principles.<sup>227</sup>

Mattera emphasizes the role of preaching and discipleship in establishing the early churches.<sup>228</sup> He suggests that Peter's sermon to the Gentiles in Cornelius' home and

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<sup>223</sup> Silalahi, "The Contribution of Intercessory Prayer in the Growth of the Early Church According to the Book of Acts."

<sup>224</sup> Nuekpe, "The Significance of the Incident of Pentecost in the Book of Acts for Christian Mission Today."

<sup>225</sup> Oluwatusin, "A Biblical Examination."

<sup>226</sup> Oluwatusin, "A Biblical Examination."

<sup>227</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 31.

<sup>228</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement."

the similar messages delivered by Peter and Paul to Jewish audiences highlight the importance of the content of preaching. He argues that Acts demonstrates that the other apostles also dedicated time to preaching, safeguarding the gospel and its practical application.<sup>229</sup>

### **Preaching is Used to Reach the Ends of the Earth**

Ott suggests that the growth of the church to the ends of the known Roman world is closely associated with the preaching and teaching of the gospel.<sup>230</sup> Mattera agrees with Ott and notes that preaching played a significant role in spreading the gospel to all known parts of the world during Paul's lifetime.<sup>231</sup> Oluwatusin asserts that the zeal sparked by Pentecost, along with the increasing persecution faced by the early church, motivated the disciples to preach the gospel everywhere in the known world. He further emphasizes that all preaching in Acts carries an evangelistic thrust, with Peter's testimony in particular bearing great fruit.<sup>232</sup> Jones' research complements this view. He highlights the impact of proclaiming the gospel, as it led to the formation of faith communities across the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe within a forty-

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<sup>229</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement."

<sup>230</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>231</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147. It should be noted that when it is stated that all Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia heard the gospel, it does not imply that every single individual in the region received the message. Rather, it signifies that churches were established in significant centers within the province, which serves as an indication of the progress of evangelization. This interpretation aligns with the context of Romans 15:19b and 23, where Paul expresses that he has fulfilled his mission throughout the entire eastern Mediterranean region under Roman rule. The emphasis is on the establishment of churches and the spread of the gospel in key locations rather than a claim of every individual hearing the message.

<sup>232</sup> Oluwatusin, "A Biblical Examination."

year period. This demonstrates for Jones the transformative power of preaching in reaching the ends of the earth and establishing vibrant communities of faith.<sup>233</sup>

### **Contextualized Preaching**

Stetzer and Im expand upon a training principle derived from Paul's sermons in the book of Acts. The principle suggests that different people groups within the population segments of Acts rightly hold distinct social values.<sup>234</sup> Ott also emphasizes the crucial role of contextualizing the gospel message in the speeches of Acts, highlighting the importance of maintaining the central message while establishing common ground and utilizing appropriate forms, rhetoric, arguments, and plausibility structures to ensure the message is comprehensible to diverse audiences.<sup>235</sup> Keller further supports this idea by noting how Paul communicated the gospel with different emphases to address the deeply-held values of various people groups.<sup>236</sup> For instance, when speaking to Bible believers in Antioch, Paul quoted Scripture. In his address to the polytheistic peasants in Lystra, he appealed to general revelation. When engaging with the sophisticated pagans in Athens, Paul challenged their presuppositions. To the Christian elders in Miletus, he shared his personal testimony. In the face of a hostile Jewish mob in Jerusalem, Paul used the Old Testament to convey his message. When addressing the Roman and Jewish governing elites in Caesarea, he focused directly on the person and work of Christ.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 86.

<sup>234</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 31.

<sup>235</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>236</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 44, 112–13.

<sup>237</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 112–13.

According to Stetzer and Im, Ott, and Keller, these examples demonstrate the significance of adapting the presentation of the gospel to effectively connect with different audiences, taking into account their cultural, intellectual, and spiritual backgrounds. By doing so, the message becomes more relatable and impactful, while still maintaining the unchanging essence of the central gospel message.

Yet Keller emphasizes caution. While Paul's sermons do provide biblical support to engage in careful contextualization, he asserts that Luke only records fragments of Paul's complete sermons in Acts.<sup>238</sup> Therefore caution should be exercised in drawing tactics to address analogous audiences today.<sup>239</sup>

### *Discipleship & Teaching*

Mattera and Ott both emphasize the importance of discipleship and teaching God's Word in CPN training regimens, drawing from the book of Acts.<sup>240</sup> However, they approach the topic from slightly different perspectives. Mattera asserts that the book of Acts demonstrates the significance of both preaching the gospel (*kerygma*) and providing teaching and instruction (*didache*) in establishing early churches. He emphasizes that Paul actively sought out existing disciples or made new disciples himself when entering new regions. Specifically, for Mattera, Paul's primary focus was on planting the gospel by making disciples, rather than solely focusing on church planting.<sup>241</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>238</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 114.

<sup>239</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 44, 112–13.

<sup>240</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147; Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>241</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

Ott argues that Paul's ministry encompassed both public preaching and teaching, such as in synagogues and the hall of Tyrannus, as well as personal instruction from house to house.<sup>242</sup> Ott also emphasizes the influence of one's worldview on the interpretations of texts and miracles, using the example of the people in Lystra mistaking Paul and Barnabas for Greek gods.<sup>243</sup>

Both Mattera and Ott agree that clear and ongoing instruction in the Word of God is crucial for the health and well-being of CPNs to thrive. While they share a common emphasis on the importance of discipleship and teaching, Mattera focuses on the role of discipleship in planting the gospel, while Ott emphasizes the combination of public preaching, teaching, and personal instruction in Paul's ministry. Additionally, Ott brings attention to the influence of worldview in discipleship, which Mattera does not explicitly address in his research.<sup>244</sup>

### **Paul Prioritized Discipleship**

Jones and Tang and Cotherman both discuss the importance of discipleship and teaching in CPN training regimens, with a specific emphasis on Paul's methods and outcomes.<sup>245</sup> Jones highlights Paul's primary focus on discipleship, noting that his diligent efforts in planting churches led to the formation of new churches and CPNs along his path.<sup>246</sup> Jones asserts that Paul's discipleship approach involved taking his team on

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<sup>242</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>243</sup> Craig Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>244</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147; Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>245</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 28; Lo, "God's Story," 70.

<sup>246</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 28.



mission with him and then sending them out to learn and grow. The key to training the team for his absence, according to Jones, was to have them shadow him like disciples would shadow a rabbi.<sup>247</sup>

On the other hand, Lo delves into the scope of Paul's discipling efforts. As mentioned previously, he highlights the thirty-eight coworkers connected with Paul in Acts and the Pauline letters. As mentioned earlier, these co-workers played crucial roles in spreading the gospel and continuing the work of the ministry when Paul was jailed. Timothy, Titus, and Epaphras are mentioned as examples of co-workers who were sent to different regions to carry out specific missions.<sup>248</sup> Furthermore, Lo suggests that once discipleship has been established, the focus can shift to the formation of churches.<sup>249</sup>

#### **The Apostles' Teaching Ministry in Acts**

Mattera's observation in Acts 11:26 that the apostles dedicated an entire year to teaching the believers is significant. It underscores the importance they placed on nurturing the faith and knowledge of those who had already embraced the gospel.<sup>250</sup> Ott concurs with Mattera's perspective, highlighting that the proclamation of the gospel was not limited to unbelievers but also aimed at edifying and building up the believers. He emphasizes that Paul's commitment to the apostles' teaching was a defining characteristic of the early Jerusalem church. Teaching played a crucial role in Paul's ministry and calling, as evidenced by various passages such as Acts 2:42, 4:2, 5:21, 42,

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<sup>247</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 43.

<sup>248</sup> Lo, "God's Story," 70.

<sup>249</sup> Lo, "God's Story," 73.

<sup>250</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

11:26, and 2 Timothy 1:11.<sup>251</sup> Despite facing persecution and the need to relocate, Paul dedicated substantial time to teaching. For instance, he spent a year and a half in Corinth and three years in Ephesus, prioritizing the spiritual growth and development of the believers in those communities.<sup>252</sup>

Mattera further highlights the apostles' diligent efforts in dedicating substantial time to teaching the believers.<sup>253</sup> This commitment, he offers, was not only aimed at ensuring the practical application of the gospel but also fostering unity within the church. Mattera points to the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15 as a clear example of the apostles' commitment to teaching and safeguarding the integrity of the gospel message.<sup>254</sup>

### *Liturgy Design*

Jones and Keller offer different perspectives on developing liturgy design for church planters based on their interpretations of the book of Acts 1-2. Jones emphasizes the freedom in crafting worship gatherings based on cultural context, while Keller offers guidance on how to design worship services that engage and inspire those outside the faith.<sup>255</sup> Jones points out that elements such as prayer, preaching, breaking bread, and fellowship are mentioned in these chapters, providing a glimpse into the forms of worship

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<sup>251</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>252</sup> Craig Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>253</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

<sup>254</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

<sup>255</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 529; Keller, *Center Church*, 102–8.

in the early church.<sup>256</sup> However, Jones suggests that the church today should not be limited by these forms and promotes freedom in crafting worship gatherings based on the cultural context surrounding the church.<sup>257</sup> On the other hand, Keller focuses on Acts 2 where he draws specific insights for designing worship services that attract the interest of outsiders. He highlights the scene in which the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples in the upper room, resulting in a crowd gathering.<sup>258</sup> Keller notes that the crowd is drawn to the disciples' declaration of the wonders of God in various languages. This leads to curiosity, interest, and ultimately conviction and conversion. Keller sees Pentecost as providing valuable insights for church planters when designing their worship services.<sup>259</sup> So, while Jones focuses on the overall forms of worship in the early church, Keller hones in on the specific elements that can capture the attention and curiosity of outsiders.

### *Bi-vocational Encouragement*

Jones' exploration of the book of Acts in relation to bi-vocational church planting stands out as a unique contribution. He sheds light on an aspect of Paul's life that is often overlooked—his experience as a tentmaker.<sup>260</sup> Jones points out that, like many Pharisees, Paul was initially trained for a life of separation from the crowds, carrying an air of superiority. However, his work as a tentmaker taught him to engage with everyday

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<sup>256</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 529.

<sup>257</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 529.

<sup>258</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 302–8.

<sup>259</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 307–8.

<sup>260</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.

people and have conversations with them. Jones confidently asserts that his practical experience provided him with valuable insights into the lives of ordinary individuals, complementing his religious studies that focused more on the workings of men's souls but disconnected him from the everyday realities of people. By working diligently and interacting with people from different walks of life, Paul gained a deep understanding of their needs and struggles, which ultimately helped him in his teaching ministry.<sup>261</sup>

Moreover, Paul's tentmaking also served as a means of financial support for himself and his companions. The ability to earn money through his trade allowed Paul the freedom to travel to various marketplaces, establish connections quickly, and sustain his missionary work. In fact, Paul proudly shared with the Ephesian elders that his tentmaking endeavors directly supplied not only his own needs but also the needs of his fellow missionaries.<sup>262</sup>

By engaging in tentmaking, Paul not only gained valuable insights into the lives of everyday people but also had a practical means of sustaining himself and supporting his missionary efforts. This bi-vocational approach enabled Paul to connect with people on a deeper level and effectively proclaim the message of the gospel.<sup>263</sup>

### *Evangelism*

It is generally agreed among scholars that the apostles' central mission was to communicate the message of the gospel, not to implement a predetermined evangelistic

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<sup>261</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.

<sup>262</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.

<sup>263</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.

strategy for establishing churches.<sup>264</sup> The book of Acts highlights both the church planter's engagement with non-Christians, and the importance of training the laity in evangelism strategies.<sup>265</sup>

### **Message Over Strategy**

Paas and Keller emphasize the importance of focusing on the message of the gospel rather than treating it as a strategic formula. They highlight that the apostolic practice of evangelism centered on proclaiming the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. They caution against reducing the gospel to a mere strategy.<sup>266</sup>

Murray aligns with Paas and Keller's perspective and emphasizes the need to differentiate between the nature of an activity and its results.<sup>267</sup> He argues that the apostolic practice of evangelism was primarily concerned with the proclamation of the good news rather than adhering to a predetermined strategy for church planting. By recognizing this distinction, Murray suggests that networks can plant healthier churches.<sup>268</sup>

### **Importance of Contextualization in Evangelism**

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<sup>264</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 246; Keller, *Center Church*, 277–78.

<sup>265</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 278; Ott, "The Word Spread," 105–7; Jones, *Church Plantology*, 314; Paas, *Church Planting*, 246.

<sup>266</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 246; Keller, *Center Church*, 277–78. Paas and Keller lament that in evangelical church planting literature, there is a tendency to read Donald McGavran's association of evangelism with church growth into the New Testament. As a result, there is a failure to recognize a real distinction between evangelism, which involves proclaiming the good news, and the gathering of converts into a church. This leads to the conclusion that the apostles' efforts to preach the gospel everywhere can be described purely as a church planting strategy. This perspective is prevalent in much of the church planting literature.

<sup>267</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 75.

<sup>268</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 75.

Jones astutely observes that the method for sharing the gospel, as depicted in Scripture, is not a simple, one-size-fits-all message. The book of Acts provides ample evidence that evangelism is often characterized by fluid and unpredictable two-way conversations. In different contexts, the key elements of the gospel message are communicated in unique ways.<sup>269</sup> Jones points to the diverse approaches employed by Jesus Himself when sharing the gospel. He used storytelling to illustrate the message, confronted the rich young ruler, issued warnings of judgment to the Pharisees, and extended love and grace to the woman caught in adultery. In each situation, Jones suggests that the Holy Spirit guides and directs the appropriate response.<sup>270</sup>

#### **Paul's Public Evangelistic Strategies**

Keller and Ott both highlight the significance of Paul's public dialogue and reasoning with non-believers in the book of Acts.<sup>271</sup> Keller explains that non-Christians were drawn to take classes, attend lectures, and engage in dialogue with teachers.<sup>272</sup> He suggests that the apostle Paul's lecturing in the public hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus serves as an early example of this form of evangelism. Paul engaged in interactive dialogue (*dialogomenos*) with all who came, discussing the Christian faith on a daily basis for two years.<sup>273</sup> Similarly, Ott cites multiple instances in Acts where Paul engages in dialogue and reasoning, emphasizing the value of intellectual engagement in spreading the

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<sup>269</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 314.

<sup>270</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 314.

<sup>271</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 278; Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>272</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 278.

<sup>273</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 278.

Christian message.<sup>274</sup> Both Keller and Ott see Paul's example as a model for church planters engaging in evangelism through respectful dialogue and intellectual persuasion.<sup>275</sup>

### **Laity Trained in Evangelism**

Ott's analysis of the book of Acts further reveals the crucial role played by ordinary believers in the emergence of movements of multiplying churches. He argues that the growth and saturation of regions with the gospel were not solely dependent on the apostles or a few gifted individuals. Rather, it is highly likely that local believers who had recently come to faith were instrumental in the expansion of churches and the establishment of believing communities, such as house churches.<sup>276</sup> Ott refers to this pattern as "indigenous agency," which he argues has been a significant force throughout the history of Christianity's expansion.<sup>277</sup> Indigenous believers are empowered as witnesses for Christ and church planters. This witness often occurs spontaneously and unplanned, beyond the control of foreign missionaries. While challenges and unhealthy developments may arise, Ott suggests that it is important not to be surprised by this and instead allow the movement to unfold naturally, as it did in the early church.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>275</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 278; Ott, "The Word Spread," 105.

<sup>276</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 107. Ott notes that the spread of the gospel into Judea, Samaria, and Syria, for instance, was a result of everyday followers of Jesus bearing witness as they were scattered due to persecution in Jerusalem (Acts 8:4). Similarly, those who preached to the Gentiles in Antioch did not come from Jerusalem (Acts 11:19-21).

<sup>277</sup> Craig Ott, "The Word Spread," 107.

<sup>278</sup> Craig Ott, "The Word Spread," 107.

Like Ott, Keller also highlights the effectiveness of informal evangelism conducted by the laity within their extended households.<sup>279</sup> However, Keller argues that a person's strongest relationships are typically within the household, including blood relatives, servants, clients, and friends. When an individual becomes a Christian, the household becomes a significant ministry center where the gospel is taught to all members of the household as well as neighbors.<sup>280</sup>

### *Stewardship*

Jones contributes a unique insight in this literature review by highlighting from the book of Acts the importance of stewarding one's vocational calling and equipping others in their own vocational journeys.<sup>281</sup> He notes the transformation of Paul's career from being a Pharisee to becoming a tentmaker not only provided him with practical skills for financial support but also led to a divine connection with Priscilla and Aquila as missional business partners.<sup>282</sup> This bond had a transformative effect not only on Paul's ministry but also on the fellow workers he trained. Paul's training of church planters went beyond church establishment; he also taught them the importance of self-sufficiency.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 278.

<sup>280</sup> Keller, 278. Keller argues that this emphasis on household evangelism is evident in various examples from the book of Acts, such as Lydia's and the jailer's homes in Philippi, Jason's home in Thessalonica, Titius Justus's home in Corinth, Philip's home in Caesarea, and Stephanas's home in Corinth. The home serves as a venue for systematic teaching and instruction, planned presentations of the gospel, prayer meetings, impromptu evangelistic gatherings, follow-up sessions with inquirers, evenings dedicated to instruction and prayer, and fellowship.

<sup>281</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.

<sup>282</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.

<sup>283</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.



Jones further documents how Priscilla and Aquila's business venture played a crucial role in supporting Paul's team abroad and the ministry in Rome. Their partnership with Paul and their strategic positioning in key cities along significant trade routes, including Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome, played a vital role in establishing regional hubs for church planting.<sup>284</sup>

### *Diaconal Ministries*

Keller asserts that another benefit of the book of Acts for CPN training is the significance of diaconal ministries.<sup>285</sup> He argues from Acts 6 the importance of meeting practical needs, especially for the poor in the church. He notes the counterintuitive truth that during a time when servanthood was viewed as demeaning, diaconal ministry in the church stands in stark contrast to the values of the world.<sup>286</sup>

### **Network Case Studies**

The book of Acts provides the additional benefits of unique case studies for contemporary CPN's to examine. Attention in the literature is given to the significant role Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth played in the development of CPN's.

### *Antioch*

According to Ott, the early leaders in the Antioch movement were likely new believers. As the movement progressed and more mature believers became available, the

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<sup>284</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.

<sup>285</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 323.

<sup>286</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 323.

qualifications and standards for leadership roles became more formalized.<sup>287</sup> Worcester adds that in Antioch many Gentiles came to Christ, and Barnabas was sent by the Jerusalem church to assess the situation. Recognizing Paul's experience in winning Gentiles, Barnabas recruited him and brought him back to Antioch. It seems that Paul's time under Barnabas prepared him for the challenges of church planting (Acts 13:1-4).<sup>288</sup>

Interestingly, Ott adds, it was the church in Antioch, not the Jerusalem church, that affirmed Paul's calling and sent him and Barnabas on the first intentional mission to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-3).<sup>289</sup> Keller notes that Paul was accountable to the Antioch church for his doctrine and behavior.<sup>290</sup> Ott further suggests that after their initial mission, Paul and Barnabas returned to the churches in the region to provide encouragement and appoint elders (Acts 14:21-23). These elders, from Ott's perspective, were likely new believers, but it is later emphasized that an overseer should not be a recent convert (1 Tim 3:6; 5:22). Ott clarifies this rationale by arguing that it is possible that these elders came from a Jewish background rather than recently converted from paganism.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 101.

<sup>288</sup> Worcester, "Biblical Principles."

<sup>289</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 100.

<sup>290</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 356.

<sup>291</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 101.

Using Antioch as a case study for modern CPNs, Tang identifies several aspects of fruitful leadership teams based on the Antiochene model in Acts 13.<sup>292</sup> These include shared leadership, diverse leadership, and missional leadership.

### **Shared Leadership**

Ott agrees with Tang that shared leadership is an observable in Antioch. Ott observes that Paul continued to revisit the churches around Antioch to strengthen their leaders and equip them to mutually encourage one another in their shared leadership (cf. 15:41-16:5; 18:23).<sup>293</sup> Tang further suggests that because of their understanding of shared leadership, the leaders in Antioch were able to come to a consensus over commissioning Paul and Barnabas, through the laying on of hands and sending them out for God's mission.<sup>294</sup>

### **Diverse Leadership**

Jones' research shows that Paul formed teams from Antioch consisting of diverse roles and gifts.<sup>295</sup> These teams included church planters like Titus, prophets like Agabus, teachers like Priscilla and Aquila, and evangelists like Apollos.<sup>296</sup> Tang further supports this idea by highlighting the ethnic, social, and behavioral diversity of leadership that emerged from Antioch.<sup>297</sup> Ott adds that the spread of the gospel in the villages under the

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<sup>292</sup> Tang, "Leaders Mutually Formed," 105.

<sup>293</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 101.

<sup>294</sup> Tang, "Leaders Mutually Formed," 105.

<sup>295</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–21.

<sup>296</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–21.

<sup>297</sup> Tang, "Leaders Mutually Formed," 105.

jurisdiction of Antioch was not solely reliant on Paul and Barnabas. It is likely that local believers played a significant role in this process.<sup>298</sup>

For Jones, Tang, and Ott this emphasis on diverse leadership and the active involvement of local believers underscores the importance of collaboration and the recognition of different gifts and perspectives in the spread of the gospel.<sup>299</sup>

### **Missional Leadership**

Jones provides insights into the missional leadership demonstrated in the context of Antioch. When Barnabas was sent by the Twelve to investigate Antioch, his first action was to recruit Saul, who had once been a prominent figure but had faded into obscurity after eleven years.<sup>300</sup> Jones suggests that this demonstrates the strategic approach of forming interchangeable teams for church planting, allowing for flexibility and effectiveness in reaching multiple targets within a broader area.<sup>301</sup> Ott agrees with Jones by highlighting the presence of both continuity and discontinuity in the work of God in Antioch. For Ott there is discontinuity in the sense that the Antioch movement emerged independently from Jerusalem's direct involvement. However, Ott suggests that there is also continuity in that Barnabas, representing the Jerusalem church, recognized and affirmed the work in Antioch (Acts 11:27-30). The church in Antioch was

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<sup>298</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 101.

<sup>299</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–21; Tang, "Leaders Mutually Formed," 105; Ott, "The Word Spread," 101.

<sup>300</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–121.

<sup>301</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–121.

strengthened through the authorized teaching of Barnabas and Saul, demonstrating the interconnectedness and shared mission between churches.<sup>302</sup>

However, it is important to consider Ochsenmeier's research, which challenges the commonly held belief that the church of Antioch serves as a model of a missional community. Ochsenmeier argues that the sending of Barnabas and Paul in Acts 13:1-4 was initiated by the Spirit, not the church in Antioch. The concept of apostleship is portrayed as a divine calling rather than a result of institutional decision-making or strategic planning.<sup>303</sup> Furthermore, Ochsenmeier notes, the verb "to send" (ἀπολύω) is not used in the context of "missional" sending in Acts. Paul himself does not explicitly link his apostleship with Antioch. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize and appreciate the theological patterns present in Acts, which may challenge or complicate the common understanding of the Antioch narrative as a model of missional leadership.<sup>304</sup>

### *Ephesus*

The case study of Ephesus highlights the remarkable growth and impact of the church in that region. Scholars such as Ott, Worchester, Jones, and Mattera agree that Ephesus became a key center for church planting and the establishment of multiple reproducing churches.<sup>305</sup>

### **Establishment of a Training Center Equips and Sends Planters**

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<sup>302</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 101.

<sup>303</sup> Ochsenmeier, "Antioch as a Church Planting Community."

<sup>304</sup> Ochsenmeier, "Antioch as a Church Planting Community."

<sup>305</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 102; Worcester, "Biblical Principles"; Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–21; Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

One significant aspect of the Ephesian church was its role as a training center. Jones asserts that Paul, during his three years in Ephesus, established a training hub where he prepared and equipped evangelistic leaders.<sup>306</sup> Worchester adds that this intentional focus on training contributed to the growth and spread of the gospel in the region.<sup>307</sup> Ott argues that the existence of the “seven churches of Asia Minor” mentioned in the book of Revelation, as well as other churches in Colossae and Hierapolis, serve as evidence of the establishment of new churches through this regional network.<sup>308</sup>

Jones asserts that Paul’s method of sending out planters from Ephesus is also noteworthy. According to Jones, Paul formed a strategic team of qualified and experienced church planters who were deployed across the network of Asia in teams of two.<sup>309</sup> This approach allowed for effective and coordinated church planting efforts.

#### **Persecution Leads to Progress of the Gospel Through the Ephesian Church**

Current literature notes that the Ephesian church faced adversity, but it did not hinder its growth. Despite persecution, Ott asserts, the word of the Lord spread among both Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia within a short period.<sup>310</sup> According to Jones, Paul’s establishment of networks of churches under ordained leaders enabled the work of training, preaching, and multiplication to continue even in his absence.<sup>311</sup> Stetzer

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<sup>306</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 48.

<sup>307</sup> Worchester, “Biblical Principles.”

<sup>308</sup> Ott, “The Word Spread,” 102.

<sup>309</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–21.

<sup>310</sup> Ott, “The Word Spread,” 102.

<sup>311</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–21.

and Im, and Keller agree with Jones and add that the Ephesian elders demonstrated their ability to defend the church against attackers, showcasing the strength and resilience of the CPN.<sup>312</sup> This collaborative approach, Jones reports, ensured the expansion of the Kingdom of God and the sustainability of the network beyond Paul's direct involvement.<sup>313</sup>

### *Corinth*

The case study of Corinth reveals important insights into effective church planting strategies. According to Mattera, the Corinthian church served as a hub of influence for Paul to extend his ministry and impact to surrounding regions. Through his work in Corinth, Paul was able to reach beyond the city and make a lasting impact.<sup>314</sup> The Corinthian church serves as a case study for the benefits of an existing core group.

### **Planting with an Existing Core Group**

The COHMCE-OPC suggests that one key aspect of the Corinthian church's establishment was the presence of an existing core group of believers.<sup>315</sup> According to this Committee, the core group, consisting of Aquila and Priscilla, formed the foundation for the church.<sup>316</sup> This highlights the importance of core group members recognizing the responsibility to support and continue the work of Christ among believers.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 74; Keller, *Center Church*, 148–49.

<sup>313</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 120–21.

<sup>314</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

<sup>315</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church, "Planting."

<sup>316</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>317</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

### **Core Groups May Help Church Planters Rest When Needed**

Another valuable lesson from Corinth is the recognition of the need for rest and support in church planting. Jones emphasizes the importance of authenticity and taking breaks when needed.<sup>318</sup> He suggests that Paul himself experienced weariness and learned that the Spirit can work through human brokenness. Having team leadership in a church plant, Jones continues, ensures that the work can continue even when the leader requires rest.<sup>319</sup> The data here suggests that by building upon existing foundations and recognizing the need for rest and support, church planters can establish strong and sustainable communities of faith.

### *Conclusion*

The review of the literature reveals benefits from the book of Acts for developing strategies for CPNs today. Acts offers valuable principles for contextualizing the gospel and shaping the structure of CPNs in the modern Western context. It provides insights into the shifts in missional practices between the Old Testament and the New Testament, emphasizing the importance of the Holy Spirit's empowerment in church planting.

The book also offers guidance on various structural aspects of CPNs. It explores the significance of regional hubs within networks, and the roles of networks and network churches. Acts also addresses important questions for organic church planting situations, such as the motive behind the planting, the willingness to sacrifice and yield control, and

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<sup>318</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 45.

<sup>319</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 45.



the confidence in God's providence. It also considers the timing of church planting, taking into account factors like rapid growth and population migration.

A study of Acts can also provide insight into understanding crisis, defiant, and reluctant church planting. It examines the importance of population centers both in the first century and today when deciding where to plant churches. The book offers insights into the types of churches to plant, including pioneering church plants and household church plants.

Additionally, Acts provides valuable information on CPN leadership. It explores how CPNs build relationships, equip leaders to mobilize people, and train leaders on how to handle conflict. Acts also offers guidance on network training, covering areas such as prayer, preaching, discipleship and teaching, liturgy design, bi-vocational encouragement, evangelism, stewardship, and diaconal ministries. Lastly, the Acts narrative includes case studies so the network dynamics in Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth can be further explored.

The benefits of the book of Acts reveal a wealth of insight for contemporary CPNs. While most scholars speak extensively of these benefits, challenges to using the book of Acts for the development of today's CPNs do remain.

### **Challenges for Using Acts to Develop CPNs**

The literature speaks not only of many benefits, but also of many challenges in learning about CPN from the book of Acts. Murray, Paas, and Jones caution against blindly adopting the strategies employed by Paul in the first century, and explore where

the line of prescriptive and descriptive principles lie.<sup>320</sup> Using the circumcision of Timothy as one example, Murray highlights the need to avoid feeling beholden to follow Paul's specific examples.<sup>321</sup> Paas goes further, emphasizing that Paul's Mediterranean strategy outlined in Acts cannot be directly applied as guidelines for contemporary church planting.<sup>322</sup> He argues that the context of ministry in Western Europe, for example, is too different from the first century. Jones adds another layer to the discussion by noting Luke's role as a missionary and practitioner, emphasizing his transparency in recording both Paul's mistakes and successes.<sup>323</sup>

Ott aligns with Murray and Paas, emphasizing the importance of understanding the underlying dynamics and principles that contributed to the growth and impact of the early church movements. Rather than seeking an exact replication of a CPN as understood today, Ott suggests focusing on grasping the foundational principles that drove those early networks forward.<sup>324</sup> Mattera aligns with Ott in saying that Paul's primary goal was to plant the gospel and make disciples, rather than solely focusing on church planting.<sup>325</sup>

Colin H. Yuckman, a researcher in New Testament and Mission Theology, provides a different perspective by highlighting the relationship between Christology and

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<sup>320</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68; Paas, *Church Planting*, 11; Jones, *Church Plantology*, 18.

<sup>321</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68.

<sup>322</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 11.

<sup>323</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 245.

<sup>324</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 96.

<sup>325</sup> Mattera, "Global Apostolic Movement," 147.

mission in Acts.<sup>326</sup> He challenges the traditional mission-as-mandate model and suggests that mission involves discovering who Jesus is through universal witness, rather than focusing on conversion.<sup>327</sup> Keller likewise acknowledges the tension between prescriptive and descriptive statements in Acts, questioning the distinction between good and bad examples.<sup>328</sup> Keller challenges the notion of following a specific sequence or set of tactics in church planting. For Keller, Paul contextualized the gospel's presentation in a different way in nearly every place he ministered.<sup>329</sup>

Overall, these authors agree on the limitations of the book of Acts to shape church planting strategies today. As discussed previously, the literature encourages careful exegesis to derive generalized strategies and universal principles for contemporary church planting. Additional challenges in using Acts to shape church planting strategies emerge in the literature. These include dubious rationale for church planting, discernment to identify general principles over prescriptive models, and commentaries overlooking church planting application.

### *Dubious Rationale for Church Planting*

Murray and Paas agree that there is biblical rationale for contemporary church planting strategies. However, both challenge what they view as the typical rationale put

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<sup>326</sup> Colin H Yuckman, "Mission and the Book of Acts in a Pluralist Society," *Missiology* 47, no. 2 (April 2019): 105–6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829619830423>.

<sup>327</sup> Yuckman, "Mission and the Book of Acts," 106.

<sup>328</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

<sup>329</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

forth for by those in evangelical circles because it is exegetically dubious.<sup>330</sup> Their three slightly different erroneous rationale are as follows. According to Murray, the first one centers around the Great Commission, which assumes that church planting is a natural outcome of individual evangelism. As individuals are reached and discipleship takes place, the well-accepted argument according to Murray, is that then baptism and teaching within the context of a local church become crucial.<sup>331</sup> On the other hand, Paas identifies common proof texts that are used to argue that since church planting was practiced in the New Testament, it should necessarily continue in the present day.<sup>332</sup> However, the issues around motivating church planting are not so simple or consistent.

The second erroneous rationale, as identified by Murray, highlights the centrality of the church in the Pauline epistles, suggesting that church planting is a normal expression of the mission of the church. The organic language used to describe the church further supports a commitment to multiplication.<sup>333</sup> Similarly, Paas' second erroneous rationale emphasizes the organic nature of the church, which he says evangelicals argue must lead individual churches to strive for multiplication through church planting.<sup>334</sup> This universal conclusion is highly assumptive based on the text of Acts.

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<sup>330</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 67–68; Paas, *Church Planting*, 244.

<sup>331</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 67.

<sup>332</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 244.

<sup>333</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68.

<sup>334</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 244.

Finally, Murray suggests that a popular church planting argument concludes with the assertion that since church planting was a primary method of evangelism in the New Testament, it should continue to be so today.<sup>335</sup> Meanwhile, Paas demonstrates the eisegesis of using specific biblical passages to provide specific guidelines for church planting.<sup>336</sup> Murray elsewhere acknowledges the same point when discussing the understandable temptation to view Acts as a blueprint for church planting, given its remarkable record of success.<sup>337</sup> The point Murray and Paas make is that the biblical rationale for church planting is not as strong as many assume and is in fact an instrumental rather than a single biblical approach or right way to do things.<sup>338</sup>

Indeed, Ott agrees with Murray's and Paas' observations. Ott adds that seeking explicit justification for every contemporary mission strategy or method solely through proof-texting or strict adherence to biblical passages can be a hermeneutically suspect endeavor.<sup>339</sup> Ott emphasizes the importance of theological reflection on contemporary gospel movements, drawing inspiration from the early church. Rather than striving for exact replication of events in Acts, the focus should be on assessing whether these movements align with the trajectory and theology found in the book. Ott sees it as a

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<sup>335</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68.

<sup>336</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 244.

<sup>337</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 68.

<sup>338</sup> Murray, 68; Paas, *Church Planting*, 40.

<sup>339</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 94.

matter of determining whether they are consistent with the principles and teachings observed in the early church.<sup>340</sup>

Yuckman points out that simplistic views of Acts often rely on assumptions about the author's editorial intent. He notes that the book offers a narrative rather than a direct account from eyewitness sources or a detailed description of their editing process.<sup>341</sup>

Jones agrees by saying that the strategist must recognize that the book was not written to provide a rationale for church planting.<sup>342</sup>

### *Discerning General Principles Over Prescriptive Models*

Missiologists widely agree that the Book of Acts contains perspectives and general principles for church planting but is not a step-by-step instruction manual.<sup>343</sup> Keller, in line with this view, suggests that, while relevant for contemporary research, Acts offers general principles rather than specific practices. Keller warns against rigidly interpreting Acts as a rule book for church planting.<sup>344</sup> Paas and Vos concur with Keller, observing that evangelical church planting literature often draws conclusions based on theological, cultural, and contextual reflections, rather than direct biblical references or necessary inferences from Acts.<sup>345</sup> Ott supports this perspective by asserting that when

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<sup>340</sup> Craig Ott, "The Word Spread," 94.

<sup>341</sup> Yuckman, "Mission and the Book of Acts in a Pluralist Society," 113; Murray, *Church Planting*, 74–75.

<sup>342</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 31.

<sup>343</sup> Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 29–34; Murray, *Church Planting*, 209; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 2011), 95.

<sup>344</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355, 358.

<sup>345</sup> Paas and Vos, "Church Planting and Church Growth."

applying lessons from Acts to modern mission practice, the focus should be on understanding the spiritual dynamics and underlying principles that guided the mission in the first century, rather than attempting to replicate specific methods.<sup>346</sup> Murray acknowledges the significance of biblical foundations in church planting, particularly in terms of ethos, motives, and goals. However, he cautions against establishing strict biblical guidelines for the contemporary context. He highlights the lack of direct parallels between missions in the first-century eastern Mediterranean and the present-day circumstances.<sup>347</sup>

### **Discerning General Principles from Narrative Literature**

In another layer of analysis on the Book of Acts, scholars like Keller, Murray, and Paas emphasize the importance of discernment and critical reflection when deriving principles from narrative literature.<sup>348</sup> Murray argues that the narrative nature of Acts leaves it vulnerable to being poorly used as a prescriptive guide for church planting.<sup>349</sup> More specifically, Keller questions the extent to which narrative literature can serve as a foundation for theological, ethical, missiological, or ecclesiological principles.<sup>350</sup> He highlights the challenge of distinguishing between prescriptive and descriptive statements in the Bible, noting that the descriptive histories of the Old and New Testaments contain

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<sup>346</sup> Ott, “The Word Spread,” 96.

<sup>347</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 75.

<sup>348</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355; Murray, *Church Planting*, 75–76; Paas, *Church Planting*, 15.

<sup>349</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 77.

<sup>350</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

both good and bad examples.<sup>351</sup> His perspective raises the question of how certain one can be in determining which actions or strategies are appropriate or transferable to other contexts of church planting strategies.

Murray aligns with Keller's viewpoint, emphasizing that an action or strategy portrayed in the Book of Acts does not automatically imply its appropriateness in that specific context or its transferability to other contexts.<sup>352</sup> Paas also acknowledges the temptation to defer unduly and uncritically to early church practices, without critically evaluating them in light of wider biblical revelation. He emphasizes the importance of considering the broader biblical context when interpreting and applying the practices depicted in Acts.<sup>353</sup> This suggests the need for careful evaluation rather than blind adoption of early church practices relative to modern CPN's.

### **Acts is Not a Church Planting Handbook**

It is a cause for concern among some experts that the book of Acts has been treated naively as a church planting handbook.<sup>354</sup> Paas argues that the language of church planting finds its roots in New Testament terminology. He emphasizes that the early church primarily focused on gospel preaching and apologetics in homes and neighborhoods; with families, neighbors, farmers, and merchants playing a vital role in

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<sup>351</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

<sup>352</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 75–76.

<sup>353</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 15.

<sup>354</sup> Murray, *Church Planting*, 75; Keller, *Center Church*, 355; Paas, *Church Planting*, 11; Paas and Vos, "Church Planting and Church Growth"; Yuckman, "Mission and the Book of Acts."



the organic formation of churches.<sup>355</sup> Keller and Murray, also recognize that treating Acts solely as a church planting manual fails to acknowledge the broader purpose that author Luke had in mind.<sup>356</sup> Ott, in agreement with this sentiment, argues that if Luke had intended to write a manual on evangelism and church planting, the book of Acts would have taken a different form.<sup>357</sup> Jones concurs, stating that interpreting Acts in this way would misrepresent the author's original intention.<sup>358</sup> Ott further asserts that Luke did not include all the essential details that one would expect to find in a comprehensive church planting manual.<sup>359</sup> Instead, he suggests that biblical mission should be understood as a continuation of the redemptive story within the salvation-historical trajectory established in Acts, empowered by the Holy Spirit.<sup>360</sup>

Jones adds that Acts is not a comprehensive account of the mission of the New Testament, nor does it offer a theology of planting or a philosophy of ministry.<sup>361</sup> Ott agrees and further argues that it is crucial to recognize that much of what is recorded in Acts represents unique and non-repeatable salvation-historical developments specific to the birth of the church as the New Covenant people.<sup>362</sup> Ott says that the exegete must

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<sup>355</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 10.

<sup>356</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355; Murray, *Church Planting*, 75.

<sup>357</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 95.

<sup>358</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 31.

<sup>359</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 95.

<sup>360</sup> Craig Ott, "The Word Spread," 95.

<sup>361</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 31.

<sup>362</sup> Ott, "The Word Spread," 95.

extract the principles and underlying theology found in the text of Acts and apply them in a way that is relevant and effective in a contemporary context.<sup>363</sup>

Ott argues against the mere imitation of apostolic ministry and highlights the importance of contextualizing both the method and the message to specific audiences.<sup>364</sup>

Paas challenges the notion that planting churches in an area with existing churches will automatically spread the gospel.<sup>365</sup> He suggests that church planting should be contextual and strategic, rather than a prescribed practice solely based on the Book of Acts.<sup>366</sup>

This caution by reputable scholars against interpreting Acts as a church planting manual is an additional challenge in learning about CPNs. This together with the challenge of discerning general principles over prescriptive models emphasizes the need to understand the broader purpose and underlying principles of the book, while also considering the unique historical context in which Acts was written.

### *Commentaries Overlook Church Planting*

One final challenge, uniquely presented by Keller and Paas, is the observation that limited attention is given to church planting in commentaries on Acts. For Keller, this highlights a potential oversight in the scholarly literature of this topic.<sup>367</sup> Keller writes,

“I have often found it odd that right there in Acts, along with everything else the church is doing, is church planting—yet this element of ministry is often ignored! I believe there is a dubious, tacit, cessationism at work.

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<sup>363</sup> Craig Ott, “The Word Spread,” 95.

<sup>364</sup> Craig Ott, “The Word Spread,” 95.

<sup>365</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 10.

<sup>366</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 10.

<sup>367</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

Almost unconsciously, readers of the book of Acts have said, ‘Yes, but that was for then. We don’t need to do that now.’”<sup>368</sup>

Paas disagrees with Keller and reasons that commentators often overlook church planting application in Acts because the text lacks explicit mention of church planting.<sup>369</sup> Paas further raises an interesting point about the historical development of the term “church planting,” tracing it back to the Middle Ages.<sup>370</sup> As has been already mentioned, Paas argues that the support for church planting as a normative or prominent strategy today may be more tentative than commonly claimed.<sup>371</sup> Paas argues instead for a more nuanced understanding of the applicability and effectiveness of church planting in contemporary contexts.<sup>372</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The review of this second area of literature reveals that the book of Acts offers challenges when it comes to developing strategies for CPNs in the present day. One challenge is discerning general principles from the narrative. It can be difficult to extract clear and universally applicable principles from the descriptive accounts in Acts. Scholars agree that the book offers more of a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach, making it essential to carefully interpret and apply its teachings. Another challenge is the lack of

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<sup>368</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 355.

<sup>369</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 246.

<sup>370</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 246.

<sup>371</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 10, 246.

<sup>372</sup> Paas, *Church Planting*, 246.

explicit church planting application in commentaries and scholarly works. While Acts provides rich narratives and accounts of early church planting, there is a scarcity of direct application and guidance for contemporary church planting efforts in the commentaries available.

In summary, while Acts offers valuable insights and principles for CPNs today, it is important to approach it with discernment, recognizing the challenges of deriving general principles and the limited explicit application found in commentaries. The book of Acts serves as a helpful resource, but additional sources and considerations are necessary for developing effective church planting strategies in the modern context.

### **Best Practices for Networking**

The third area of this literature review focuses on identifying best practices for establishing and maintaining fruitful connections within CPNs. David Ehrlichman, a network expert and co-founder of Converge, emphasizes that vital networks exist in every organization, even though they often go unnoticed.<sup>373</sup> Manuel Castells, a renowned Spanish sociologist and communication scholar, also recognizes social and organizational networks as a fundamental aspect of contemporary societies.<sup>374</sup> Professors of Economics in Osijek, Croatia, Anamarija Delić, Julia Perić, and Tihana Koprivnjak highlight the increasing importance of networks for entrepreneurs. Their research suggests that

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<sup>373</sup> David Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration, and Catalyze Systemic Change* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021), 13.

<sup>374</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), xxiii.

networks provide entrepreneurs with access to markets, information, technology, personal relationships, competitive advantages, and risk reduction.<sup>375</sup>

At its core, Ehrlichman describes networks as intricate webs of relationships to accomplish shared goals. He draws a parallel to neural networks in the bodies that ensure coordinated functioning.<sup>376</sup> Individuals are represented as nodes, and the connections between them are depicted as links. These connections form clusters or communities within the network, where individuals are more closely connected to others within their cluster than to those outside it.<sup>377</sup> Castells shares a similar perspective, viewing networks as comprised of nodes connected through various forms of communication where interaction is facilitated by digital technologies.<sup>378</sup> In a religious context, Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks, church-planter trainers at the Antioch School in Hawaii, speak of networks in terms of kingdom partnerships which they define as “a gospel-driven relationship between interdependent local churches that pray, work, and share resources together strategically to glorify God through kingdom advancing goals they could not accomplish alone.”<sup>379</sup> In speaking of the interdependence, Bruno and Dirks, agree with Ehrlichman and Castells’s nodes metaphor; their emphasis on shared resources also complements the importance of resource access that Delić, Perić, and Koprivnjak emphasize.

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<sup>375</sup> Anamarija Delić, Julia Perić, and Tihana Koprivnjak, “The Role of Networking in the Company’s Growth Process,” in *Entrepreneurship in Post-Communist Countries: New Drivers Towards a Market Economy*, ed. Jovo Ateljević and Jelena Budak (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 147–62, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75907-4\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75907-4_10).

<sup>376</sup> Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 14.

<sup>377</sup> Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 20.

<sup>378</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, xxiii–xxvii.

<sup>379</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 18.

Ehrlichman's research goes deeper into network structure. He says that communities of collaborators within networks—known as clusters—naturally form as people gravitate towards those who share similarities. Clusters are characterized by like-mindedness, shared language, similar conversations, and geographical proximity.<sup>380</sup> However, he argues that network limitations arise when clusters remain separate, without bridges to connect them. The bridges serve as vital links that prevent information from being confined within echo chambers where individuals merely reinforce each other's beliefs. The individuals responsible for creating bridges are referred to as bridgers, boundary spanners, or brokers. By intentionally forming networks and strengthening the connections of bridges between clusters, information flow is enhanced, and the negative effects of echo chambers are mitigated. This intentional networking involves creating opportunities for people to come together, build relationships, and learn from each other's work.<sup>381</sup>

Castells adds additional understanding by highlighting three key attributes of networks. The first is horizontal connections. Networks are characterized by the absence of centralized authority or hierarchy. Instead, nodes within the network connect members with each other on relatively equal footing, facilitating the exchange of information, resources, and social interactions.<sup>382</sup>

The second attribute, decentralized decision-making, follows logically from the first. Decision-making in networks is dispersed among multiple nodes, rather than

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<sup>380</sup> Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 22.

<sup>381</sup> Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 20.

<sup>382</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 176.

concentrated in a single authority. This decentralized approach empowers nodes to make autonomous decisions based on local knowledge and information, fostering flexibility, adaptability, and responsiveness.<sup>383</sup>

Flexibility and fluidity combine for the third key attribute of a network. Networks are dynamic and adaptable structures, allowing nodes to join or exit, connections to form or dissolve, and organizational structure to evolve over time. Flexibility and fluidity enable networks to effectively respond to changing circumstances and conditions.<sup>384</sup>

In addition to the three attributes, Castells also emphasizes that networks are not solely technological infrastructures but also social structures with distinct characteristics that play significant roles in shaping social, economic, and political interactions in society.<sup>385</sup>

The above-mentioned researchers highlight the importance of networks within any organization in the late modern world. What best practices for networks does the literature offer? This limited review focuses on best practices in two highly relevant areas for church planters: network practices within hierarchical environments and network practices for team building.

### *Network Practices within Hierarchical Environments*

According to Niall Ferguson, Milbank Family Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and a senior faculty fellow of the Belfer Center for

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<sup>383</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 176–78.

<sup>384</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 71.

<sup>385</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 51–59.

Science and International Affairs at Harvard, the term hierarchy has its roots in the Greek word *heirarcheia*, which referred to the authority of a high priest. Initially it was used to describe the celestial hierarchy of angels and represented a structured system of spiritual or temporal governance. According to Ferguson, the term “network” had a different meaning until the sixteenth century when it simply referred to a woven mesh created by interlacing threads.<sup>386</sup> Ferguson explains the widespread emergence of networks in the later part of the twentieth century. Ferguson says that the evolution in our understanding of networks began with transportation and electrical networks, followed by the establishment of telephone and television networks. Eventually, with the advent of computers and online platforms, online social networks came into existence. Interestingly, according to Ferguson, it wasn’t until around 1980 that the term “network” started being used as a verb, indicating purposeful and career-focused social interaction.<sup>387</sup>

Castells also examines the relationship between hierarchies and the rise of networks. He defines hierarchies as structures of power and control within social, economic, and political systems, characterized by vertical lines of authority and decision-making flowing downward.<sup>388</sup> Networks for Castell are interconnected nodes of collaboration toward an agreed intention.<sup>389</sup> He emphasizes the conflict that exists in contemporary society between the formal structure of hierarchies and the agility of

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<sup>386</sup> Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, 19–20.

<sup>387</sup> Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, 20.

<sup>388</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 178.

<sup>389</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 501.



networks, and underscores the significance of their symbiotic coexistence.<sup>390</sup> Ehrlichman agrees with Castells' emphasis and notes that networks and hierarchies can coexist harmoniously.<sup>391</sup> He adds that hierarchical organizations often contain organic and informal networks that contribute to performance, learning, and innovation.<sup>392</sup> Ehrlichman further contends that heterarchical networks organized around shared purpose and relationships lead to more effective short-term adaptability than hierarchical structures allow.<sup>393</sup>

Ferguson's research complements Castell's and Ehrlichman's findings. He suggests that traditional hierarchies and networks can coexist, yet there is a dynamic interplay between established structures (which he symbolizes by the square), and the connections formed among individuals outside those structures (symbolized by the tower).<sup>394</sup> In agreement with Ehrlichman, Ferguson's research reveals the impact informal social networks have had on formal hierarchies throughout history.<sup>395</sup> Ferguson's perspective underscores that networks often operate independently from traditional hierarchies and present opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and mutual support. These networks challenge existing power dynamics and provide alternative pathways for growth and innovation.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 190.

<sup>391</sup> Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 35.

<sup>392</sup> Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 37.

<sup>393</sup> Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 37.

<sup>394</sup> Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, 23.

<sup>395</sup> Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, 24–48.

<sup>396</sup> Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, 354ff.

Anne-Marie Slaughter is President and CEO of New America. She agrees alongside Castells, Ehrlichman, and Ferguson that hierarchies and networks are not mutually exclusive. She adds, however, that hierarchical organizations need to flatten their structures to allow for more flexible arrangements for networks to flourish.<sup>397</sup> Slaughter's research highlights the importance of Castell's second attribute of a network mentioned above, decentralized decision-making.<sup>398</sup>

The work of Castells, Ehrlichman, Ferguson, and Slaughter collectively suggests that networks have the capacity to disrupt and reshape formal hierarchies. By enabling decentralized communication, promoting flexibility and collaboration, and challenging established power structures, networks can bring about significant changes in the way organizations and societies are structured and governed.

For example, Ferguson considers the impact of social media networks such as X and Facebook. These platforms, he says, have empowered individuals to come together as content creators, sharing their perspectives, opinions, and news in real-time to a global audience. Through social media networks, people can bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly reach a wide audience, challenging the authority and influence of established media organizations. This shift has led to a democratization of information, as the power to shape narratives and influence public discourse is no longer solely in the hands of hierarchical media institutions.

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<sup>397</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, "How to Succeed in the Networked World," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 6 (December 11, 2016): 76–89, Academic Search Premier.

<sup>398</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 176–78.

Additionally, the emergence of social media networks has disrupted the traditional hierarchical structure of media and information dissemination. It has empowered individuals, and communities to challenge the existing power dynamics and influence societal conversations.<sup>399</sup> Social media networks can mobilize and organize collective action. Examples include the Arab Spring uprisings, Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, and the #MeToo Movement. These networks have catalyzed social and political change without traditional hierarchical consents.

By leveraging networks, Castells, Ehrlichman, Ferguson, and Slaughter demonstrate how networks can tap into the collective intelligence and diverse perspectives of their members, enabling more innovative solutions and problem-solving. This approach can foster a sense of ownership, empowerment, and engagement among employees, leading to higher job satisfaction and retention rates.

Overall, the positive change brought by networks to formal hierarchies lies in their ability to enhance collaboration, communication, and decision-making, leading to increased agility, adaptability, and improved organizational performance. In this way, the informal networks can significantly serve the formal hierarchies of organizations. By embracing these network best practices, organizations can leverage the strengths of hierarchies to create more effective and responsive structures.

### *Network Practices for Team Building*

Amy C. Edmondson, the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, emphasizes the value of bringing together individuals from

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<sup>399</sup>Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, 399–411.

diverse backgrounds outside of traditional hierarchies to address complex problems and drive innovation through teaming behavior.<sup>400</sup> Edmondson defines teaming behavior as the ability of individuals to collaborate, learn, and adapt in complex and uncertain environments by forming temporary teams or collaborating across existing team boundaries. Teaming emphasizes effective communication, trust, and a willingness to learn from others to address challenges and achieve shared objectives.<sup>401</sup> Her approach aligns with the recognition of the power and potential of networks to foster collaboration and creativity.

A research project conducted by four experts, Edmondson, Jean-François Harvey, Johnathan R. Cromwell, and Kevin J. Johnson, provides valuable insights into network best practices.<sup>402</sup> Harvey is an associate professor in the Department of Entrepreneurship and Innovation at HEC Montreal. His research focuses on how individuals, teams, and organizations learn and adapt, especially in uncertain and ambiguous contexts. Cromwell is an assistant professor in the School of Management at the University of San Francisco. His research focuses on creativity and innovation, particularly how individuals and teams attempt to solve vague, open-ended, and ambiguous problems in organizations and startups. Johnson is an associate professor in the Department of Management at HEC Montreal. His research interests fall into the field of organizational behavior, with a particular focus on psychological adaptation during organizational change.

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<sup>400</sup> Amy C. Edmondson, *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 12, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

<sup>401</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 12–15.

<sup>402</sup> Jean-François Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning: Harmony and Rhythm in Teamwork Arrangements for Innovation,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (September 2023): 601–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00018392231166635>.

The result of their collaborative research emphasizes the importance of ongoing team learning and highlights the role of team activities in achieving high levels of performance.<sup>403</sup> Their study demonstrates that achieving harmony and rhythm in network activities is crucial for innovation teams to achieve their stated goals. By fostering a collaborative and adaptive learning environment, networks can effectively navigate uncertain and ambiguous contexts, enabling individuals, teams, and organizations to learn and adapt more effectively.<sup>404</sup>

Their research sheds light on the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive network culture that encourages creativity, problem-solving, and open communication. It emphasizes the significance of team dynamics and the role of leadership in fostering an environment that promotes learning, experimentation, and continuous improvement. By understanding factors that contribute to effective team learning, networks can enhance their innovation processes, drive performance, and stay competitive in dynamic and challenging environments. Two best practices for network team building are explored below: trust building and team learning.

## **Trust Building**

Scholars widely agree that trust is a crucial element in the success of any network that facilitates resource exchange.<sup>405</sup> Kuhn and Galloway argue that as trust develops

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<sup>403</sup> Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning.”

<sup>404</sup> Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning.”

<sup>405</sup> Robert J. Bennett and Mark Ramsden, “The Contribution of Business Associations to SMEs: Der Nutzen von Unternehmensverbänden Für KMUs.,” *La Contribución de Las Asociaciones Comerciales a Las PYME*. 25, no. 1 (February 2007): 49–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242607071781>; Terry L. Besser and Nancy Miller, “The Structural, Social, and Strategic Factors Associated with Successful Business

among peers within a network, benefits arise.<sup>406</sup> By tapping into the collective wisdom of a trusted network, Kuhn and Galloway conclude that individuals navigate challenges, make informed decisions, gain unique insights, innovative ideas, and strategic perspectives that give them a competitive edge in their respective fields.<sup>407</sup> Bruno and Dirks agree and suggest that existing relationships within a denomination or church associations serve as convenient starting points for new networks to grow. Local pastors' prayer and networking groups can also be fertile grounds for inchoate network partnerships. They suggest that starting with a small group of three or four pastors who commit to regular meetings for prayer and fellowship can be the catalyst for networks to deepen.<sup>408</sup>

Professors Terry L. Besser of Iowa State and Nancy Miller of University of Nebraska call the concept of trust described by Kuhn and Galloway and Bruno and Dirks generalized trust or "soft trust".<sup>409</sup> Soft trust exists among individuals who share a common identity, such as being members of the same college fraternity, religion, or ethnic group. Soft trust is relevant for low-risk exchanges, such as referring customers or visiting each other's businesses, where personal familiarity or relationships are not

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Networks," *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 23, no. 3/4 (April 2011): 113–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985620903183728>; Alejandro Godino, Oscar Molina, and Joel Martí, "Coffee and Cigarettes in Industrial Relations: A Comparative Network Analysis of the Role of Informality," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 65, no. 5 (November 2023): 663–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856231194760>; Kristine M. Kuhn and Tera L. Galloway, "With a Little Help from My Competitors: Peer Networking among Artisan Entrepreneurs," *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 39, no. 3 (May 2015): 571–600, <https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12053>.

<sup>406</sup> Kuhn and Galloway, "With a Little Help from My Competitors."

<sup>407</sup> Kuhn and Galloway.

<sup>408</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 147.

<sup>409</sup> Besser and Miller, "The Structural."

necessary.<sup>410</sup> The importance Besser and Miller place in soft trust supports Castell's first key attribute of a network above: horizontal connections.<sup>411</sup> Robert Bennett, Cambridge professor, and Mark Ramsden, Kings' College London sociologist, add that soft trust is only possible if "hard trust" is present. Hard trust is facilitated by the institutional environment within the network, which includes agreed-upon rules of behavior, monitoring mechanisms, sanctions for rule-breaking, and rewards for compliance.<sup>412</sup> These rules and regulations, articulated in by-laws and enforced by network leadership, establish an institutional environment that nurtures trust and enables effective collaboration among network members.

Besser and Miller calls the concept of trust described by Kuhn and Galloway and Bruno and Dirks generalized trust or "soft trust".<sup>413</sup> Soft trust exists among individuals who share a common identity, such as being members of the same college fraternity, religion, or ethnic group. Soft trust is relevant for low-risk exchanges, such as referring customers or visiting each other's businesses, where personal familiarity or relationships are not necessary.<sup>414</sup> The importance Besser and Miller place soft trust supports Castell's first key attribute of a network above, horizontal connections.<sup>415</sup> Bennett and Ramsden add that soft trust is only possible if "hard trust", is present.<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Besser and Miller.

<sup>411</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 176–78.

<sup>412</sup> Bennett and Ramsden, "The Contribution of Business Associations to SMEs."

<sup>413</sup> Besser and Miller, "The Structural."

<sup>414</sup> Besser and Miller.

<sup>415</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 176–78.

<sup>416</sup> Bennett and Ramsden, "The Contribution of Business Associations to SMEs."

Besser and Miller's research on network success reveals intriguing findings about how soft trust within network relates to members' education and member organizations' ages. They note that network stakeholders with a wide range of educational backgrounds tend to have lower levels of soft trust. This lack of soft trust negatively impacts network success. Besser and Miller also see from their research that networks with a greater variation in the age of businesses have a direct negative association with network success.<sup>417</sup> Besser and Miller further assert that members perceive networks containing businesses of different ages engaged in activities such as referring customers, visiting each other's businesses, and collaborating on marketing projects perceive these networks to be less successful compared to networks with more similarity in the ages of businesses.<sup>418</sup>

These findings highlight the complexities of network practices in developing trust as networks grow. Hard and soft trust plays a crucial role in network success, and when there is greater variation in education or age, it can impact the level of soft trust within the network. Understanding these nuances can help network leaders and members make informed decisions to foster trust and enhance network success.

### *Alignment*

Arnold Hoosbeek and Jan de Vries are experts in networks within industrial companies, specializing in areas such as innovation, continuous improvement, management control, and operations strategy. They have conducted research based upon

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<sup>417</sup> Besser and Miller, "The Structural."

<sup>418</sup> Besser and Miller.



Edmondson's work. Their work shows that when stakeholder interests are strongly aligned, there is less hierarchical exercise of power observed.<sup>419</sup> This suggests that stakeholder collaboration and alignment positively influence soft trust, the flexibility required for effective teaming behavior. Alejandro Godino, Oscar Molina, and Joel Martí are researchers in the field of sociology of work, industrial relations, and working conditions. Their research complements Hoosbeeks and de Vries by demonstrating that trusted relationships within a network create favorable conditions for reaching agreements.<sup>420</sup>

### *Psychological Safety*

Edmondson's work on teaming behavior introduces the concept of psychological safety as a crucial element of trust within teams. Psychological safety refers to an environment where team members feel secure in expressing their ideas, asking questions, and taking risks without the fear of negative consequences or embarrassment. According to Edmondson, this type of environment is essential for promoting learning, fostering creativity, and enabling effective collaboration.<sup>421</sup>

In line with Edmondson's findings, Hoosbeek and de Vries highlight the significance of psychological safety in influencing teaming behavior attributes within networks. They observe attributes such as speaking up, collaboration, experimentation,

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<sup>419</sup> Arnold Hoosbeek and Jan de Vries, "Stakeholder Influence on Teaming and Absorptive Capacity in Innovation Networks," *Creativity and Innovation Management* 30, no. 3 (2021): 632–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/caim.12448>.

<sup>420</sup> Godino, Molina, and Martí, "Coffee and Cigarettes in Industrial Relations."

<sup>421</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 77, 118.

and reflection were prominent in environments of psychological safety.<sup>422</sup> This suggests that when team members feel psychologically safe, they are more inclined to share their ideas, engage in collaborative efforts, and exhibit innovative behaviors.<sup>423</sup>

In the context of CPNs, Bruno and Dirks agree with these scholars and offer four best practices for CPNs to cultivate psychological safety.<sup>424</sup> First, they suggest to avoid creating an atmosphere of pressure and guilt when forming networks. Similar to how Paul approached the Corinthian church, they argue that it is important to steer clear of compelling or coercing participation. They suggest giving potential participants ample time to consider their involvement and allow them to make a thoughtful, prayerful decision without feeling rushed or obligated.<sup>425</sup>

Second, Bruno and Dirks recommend that CPNs cultivate an atmosphere of joy in their duty. They assert that when individuals feel a sense of ownership and delight in their duty, they are more likely to contribute wholeheartedly to the partnership.<sup>426</sup>

Third, they encourage CPNs to cultivate an atmosphere of mutual praise. Bruno and Dirks say that focusing on God's grace naturally leads to worship and celebration of His work in other churches as the network accomplishes shared goals. They suggest that network participants regularly acknowledge and praise the great things happening in partner churches. Even in challenging situations, they point to the Apostle Paul as an

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<sup>422</sup> Hoosbeek and de Vries, "Stakeholder Influence."

<sup>423</sup> Hoosbeek and de Vries, "Stakeholder Influence."

<sup>424</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 118–25.

<sup>425</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 118–21.

<sup>426</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 121–23.

example in first-century Corinth. The Apostle Paul was willing to speak positively about the Macedonians, demonstrating the importance of highlighting strengths and celebrating accomplishments.<sup>427</sup>

Fourth, Bruno and Dinks suggest CPNs cultivate an atmosphere of openness and accountability. They emphasize how detrimental financial mismanagement can be to a church or partnership and assert that it is crucial to prioritize transparency and accountability. Again, using the Apostle Paul as an example, they highlight his openness and transparency about the handling of finances within the Corinthian network. He took steps to involve trusted leaders to ensure responsible management and accountability.<sup>428</sup>

By fostering such an environment of openness, accountability, praise, and joy, churches can establish psychological safety within a CPN. Bruno and Dirks offer practical steps that align with Edmondson, and Hoosbeek and de Vries, enabling trust to deepen within a psychologically safe system.

### *Importance of Leadership*

Network leaders play a significant role in encouraging the exchange of ideas among team members. Edmondson suggests that they need to create platforms and opportunities for team members to share their perspectives, expertise, and experiences. This can be done through regular team meetings, brainstorming sessions, or other collaborative activities that promote knowledge sharing.<sup>429</sup> By fulfilling these crucial

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<sup>427</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 123–25.

<sup>428</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 125–26.

<sup>429</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 95.

roles, CPN leaders can foster a culture of teamwork that enhances learning and innovation.

Edmondson emphasizes the vital role network leaders must create a conducive environment for effective teaming behavior. She argues that network leaders have the responsibility to set the tone, establish psychological safety, and encourage the exchange of ideas among team members.<sup>430</sup> Effective network leaders understand the importance of creating a positive and inclusive atmosphere where team members feel safe to voice their opinions, share their ideas, and take risks. By setting the tone, network leaders can foster an environment that promotes open communication, collaboration, and learning, which leads to better problem-solving and innovation.<sup>431</sup>

Building on Edmondson's teaming research, Harvey et al. note the success of networks where leaders approach team projects as a series of teamwork episodes, recognizing that each episode presents an opportunity for learning and improved performance. A teamwork episode, according to Harvey et al., refers to a specific timeframe where a team comes together to collaborate on a task, solve a problem, or achieve a shared objective. It is a focused period during which team members actively engage in joint efforts to identify obstacles and brainstorm solutions. By viewing projects in this way, network leaders can create an environment that encourages continuous learning dynamics and promotes higher team performance.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 93–95.

<sup>431</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 93.

<sup>432</sup> Harvey et al., "The Dynamics of Team Learning."

Additionally, Harvey et al. recommend several other best practices for network leaders. Firstly, leaders can implement workflow structures that clearly demarcate each teamwork episode, ensuring that team members understand their roles and responsibilities for each period. This clarity helps to maintain focus and mitigate potential conflicts. Furthermore, leaders can facilitate a time of reflection in the last episode by providing constructive feedback to team members. This feedback helps individuals reflect on their performance, identify areas for improvement, and enhance their learning.<sup>433</sup> Maintaining membership stability within the team, co-locating team members, and distributing the workload evenly are further strategies suggested by the research. These practices contribute to a more cohesive, trusting, and collaborative team environment, reducing potential conflicts and enabling effective knowledge sharing.<sup>434</sup>

Interestingly, Besser and Miller's research suggests that having a paid network leader does not significantly impact network success.<sup>435</sup> They note that this is a deviation from previous studies that positively correlated network success with a compensated leader. While their finding is noteworthy, Besser and Miller encourage readers of their study to approach it with a critical lens and consider their potential explanations for this discrepancy.<sup>436</sup>

In sum, leaders have the responsibility to model desired behaviors and provide constructive feedback. By embracing a learning mindset themselves and promoting

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<sup>433</sup> Harvey et al., "The Dynamics of Team Learning."

<sup>434</sup> Harvey et al., "The Dynamics of Team Learning."

<sup>435</sup> Besser and Miller, "The Structural."

<sup>436</sup> Besser and Miller, "The Structural."

continuous improvement, leaders can inspire their team members to do the same.<sup>437</sup>

While compensation and dedication are qualities typically associated with successful network leaders, other factors such as communication skills, collaboration abilities, and the ability to foster trust and cohesion within the network are critical determinants of success.<sup>438</sup>

### **Team Learning**

Peter M. Senge, the founding chairperson of the Society for Organizational Learning and senior lecturer at MIT, defines team learning as the ability to effectively address the barriers that hinder productive dialogue and discussion within teams.<sup>439</sup>

Harvey et al. defines team learning more broadly than Senge does. In the context of teaming building, Harvey et al. contend that team learning refers to the collective process of acquiring and applying knowledge, skills, and insights within a team.<sup>440</sup> Team learning involves shared learning, reflection and feedback, experimentation and innovation, active dialogue and collaboration, and application of expertise by team members to improve team performance and achieve team goals. Harvey et al. explain that in team learning, team members actively engage in exchanging information, experiences, and perspectives, and collectively make sense of new information and apply it to their work. It goes beyond

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<sup>437</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 93–95.

<sup>438</sup> Besser and Miller, “The Structural.”

<sup>439</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* (Crown, 2010), 220.

<sup>440</sup> Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning.” Harvey et al. use the music theory to explain the language team learning. They explore the effectiveness of reflexive learning (tone), exploitation (harmony), and exploration (rhythm) in teams of MBA cohorts.

individual learning and emphasizes the learning that takes place through interactions and collaboration within the team.<sup>441</sup> Senge agrees with this and adds that team learning buffers organizations from the ingrained patterns of interaction aimed at protecting themselves and others from threats or embarrassment but ultimately impede the learning process.<sup>442</sup>

Harvey et al. also make a significant observation that team learning theory leads to trust building inside a network.<sup>443</sup> Team learning theory refers to a body of knowledge and conceptual frameworks that aim to understand and explain how learning occurs within teams. It focuses on the processes, dynamics, and factors that contribute to effective learning and knowledge creation within a team or network context. Team learning theory acknowledges that teams are not merely a collection of individuals, but rather a collective entity with shared goals and interdependent relationships. It highlights the idea that team members can learn from each other through collaboration, communication, and shared experiences. Harvey et al. assert that a team learning perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of network performance. Team learning theory can enhance network members' understanding of how different learning activities influence collaboration, strengthen weak ties, and promote reflexive learning.<sup>444</sup> These three areas are intentional practices for team learning that the research by Harvey et al. shows is particularly relevant to network effectiveness.

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<sup>441</sup> Harvey et al., "The Dynamics of Team Learning."

<sup>442</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 220.

<sup>443</sup> Harvey et al., "The Dynamics of Team Learning."

<sup>444</sup> Harvey et al., "The Dynamics of Team Learning."

### *Power of Collaboration*

Edmondson emphasizes the importance of fostering a culture of teamwork for organizations to thrive in the knowledge economy.<sup>445</sup> This is supported by research conducted by Sergey Edunov et al., which reveals the interconnectedness and social network dynamics within the Facebook community. Their findings indicate that each person in the world is connected to every other person on Facebook by an average of three and a half other people.<sup>446</sup> Stam, Arzlanian, and Elfring's research agrees. They highlight that social capital generates value for small firms, despite the significant resources required to cultivate networks.<sup>447</sup> It is notable that they also suggest that the optimal configuration of entrepreneurs' social capital changes over time as firms mature.<sup>448</sup>

Hoosbeek and de Vries further argue that collaboration enhances knowledge acquisition, while dialogue and reflection facilitate knowledge assimilation.<sup>449</sup> Bruno and Dirks agree that knowledge assimilation is important and argue that churches that collaborate more often effectively fulfill their ministry tasks. They assert that churches who partner together multiply gifts, strengths, expertise, availability, resources, experience, and connections. Neil Powell and John James, directors of a British CPN,

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<sup>445</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 12–14.

<sup>446</sup> Sergey Edunov et al., "Three and a Half Degrees of Separation," Meta Research, February 4, 2016, <https://research.facebook.com/blog/2016/2/three-and-a-half-degrees-of-separation/>.

<sup>447</sup> Wouter Stam, Souren Arzlanian, and Tom Elfring, "Social Capital of Entrepreneurs and Small Firm Performance: A Meta-Analysis of Contextual and Methodological Moderators," *Journal of Business Venturing* 29, no. 1 (January 2014): 152–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2013.01.002>.

<sup>448</sup> Stam, Arzlanian, and Elfring, "Social Capital of Entrepreneurs".

<sup>449</sup> Hoosbeek and de Vries, "Stakeholder Influence."



agree with Hoosbeck and deVries. Powell and James argue that collaboration within a network can be further categorized by different degrees of engagement: listeners, receivers, participants, and influencers.<sup>450</sup>

Listeners are individuals who evaluate the value of the network and envision potential participation in the future. They are interested in the network's activities and keep themselves informed about its progress and developments.

Receivers establish relational connections within the network and unofficially become a part of it. They engage in informal interactions and benefit from the relationships and resources within the network.

Participants are formal partners of the network and actively contribute to its functioning. They take on specific responsibilities and actively participate in the network's initiatives, projects, and decision-making processes.

Influencers are individuals who generously offer their time, skills, and resources to strengthen and support the network. They use their influence to provide valuable contributions and enhance the overall capabilities and effectiveness of the network.

By understanding these different degrees of collaboration, CPNs can identify and engage individuals based on their level of interest, involvement, and potential contributions, thereby creating a more dynamic and diverse network that can achieve greater impact.<sup>451</sup>

Bruno and Dirks add that through whatever degree of collaboration is practiced, networked churches better utilize their God-given gifts and innovate to achieve goals in

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<sup>450</sup> Powell and James, *Together for the City*, 162–69.

<sup>451</sup> Powell and James, *Together for the City*, 162–69.

today's rapidly changing cultural moment.<sup>452</sup> Hoosbeek and de Vries likewise affirm the role of collaborative experimentation in driving transformation.<sup>453</sup> According to Harvey et al. this aligns with goal-setting theory, which emphasizes reflection, strategy adaptation, and progress evaluation.<sup>454</sup>

Finally, the analysis of Powell and James suggests that network collaboration goes deeper than network partnership. They define partnership as what happens when distinct parties work together. Collaboration goes even further. According to Neil and James, collaboration is what happens when distinct parties work together to produce something they could not simply produce on their own.<sup>455</sup> They suggest that there are four types of collaboration within a CPN: sowing, sending, supplying, and supporting. Sowing churches are defined as those being actively involved in planting new churches. Sending churches are those who send and support sowing churches. Supplying churches are those who provide an active contribution when a new church plant is launched. Supporting churches are committed to resource church plants but are not in a position to do their own planting.<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 59–60.

<sup>453</sup> Hoosbeek and de Vries, “Stakeholder Influence.”

<sup>454</sup> Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning.”

<sup>455</sup> Powell and James, *Together for the City*, 154–55.

<sup>456</sup> Powell and James, *Together for the City*, 155–62.

### *Strength of Weak Ties*

Weak ties are connections or relationships between individuals that are less frequent, intimate, or reciprocal compared to strong ties. Weak ties often connect people from different social groups or domains.<sup>457</sup> On the other hand, strong ties are close, intimate, and enduring relationships between individuals within a social network. These ties are characterized by frequent interaction, emotional closeness, mutual trust, and a sense of mutual support. Strong ties typically provide access to redundant information as they are typically formed with individuals who share similar interests, backgrounds, and experiences.

In their research, Laura K. Gee, Jason Jeffrey Jones, and Moira Burk, who are experts in economics, sociology, and computational social science respectively, found that the Descriptive Weak Ties Hypothesis holds true.<sup>458</sup> The Descriptive Weak Ties Hypothesis is a concept in social network theory that suggests that weak ties in a social network tend to provide more diverse and novel information compared to strong ties. They observed that most job opportunities arise from weak ties rather than strong ties collectively.<sup>459</sup> This finding underscores the importance of expanding one's network beyond close connections when seeking new employment opportunities. By reaching out to weaker ties, individuals can tap into a broader range of contacts and increase their chances of accessing new and diverse job opportunities. This research suggests that

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<sup>457</sup> Laura Gee, Jason Jones, and Moira Burke, "Social Networks and Labor Markets: How Strong Ties Relate to Job Finding On Facebook's Social Network," *Journal of Labor Economics* 35, no. 2 (February 17, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1086/686225>.

<sup>458</sup> Gee, Jones, and Burke, "Social Networks and Labor Markets."

<sup>459</sup> Gee, Jones, and Burke, "Social Networks and Labor Markets."

relationships between CPN participants ministering in different contexts may discover new insights and opportunities to learning from different perspectives more frequently.

### *Reflexive Learning*

The research conducted by Harvey et al. studies the benefits of reflexive learning in team learning among MBA cohorts. According to Harvey et al., reflexive learning refers to the process of self-reflection and self-assessment to improve collective performance. It involves analyzing and evaluating actions, decisions, and outcomes, and using this information to adjust the team's strategies, behaviors, and goals. Developing reflexive learning skills enables teams to think on the fly and continuously adapt and improve by learning from their experiences.<sup>460</sup>

Several methods employed by Harvey et al. can enhance reflexive learning and network team learning among CPNs. These methods encourage networks to develop explorative and exploitative learning patterns. Exploration is the act of seeking new opportunities, knowledge, and ideas. It involves venturing into uncharted territories, experimenting with different approaches, and embracing uncertainty. On the other hand, exploitation is the act of leveraging established strengths, resources, capabilities, and processes to extract the maximum value and efficiency in the present context.

Powell and James assert that CPNs greatly benefit from exploitative learning patterns during season of growth. They emphasize the importance of initiating change before a decline sets in, when momentum, resources, and morale are at their peak. In this season of growth, they suggest CPNs leverage their strengths, evaluate their vision, and

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<sup>460</sup> Harvey et al., "The Dynamics of Team Learning."

consider whether it needs to be expanded or refined to align with the evolving needs and aspirations of the network. This proactive approach ensures that the CPN maximizes its potential and capitalizes on the favorable conditions for progress.<sup>461</sup>

Harvey et al. adds that exploitation involves refining and improving existing products, services, and operations to enhance performance and profitability in the short term. By effectively managing the tensions between exploration and exploitation, networks can drive continuous learning, innovation, and long-term success by examining where the network needs to explore new opportunities or exploit existing capabilities.

The concept of ambidexterity proposes a dynamic perspective on network learning. Ambidexterity refers to a network's organizational capability to effectively balance and integrate the above two seemingly contradictory modes of operation: exploration and exploitation. Harvey et al. encountered positive results of harmony and alignment when MBA cohorts navigated through a series of explorative and exploitative episodes of learning. Focused time on exploring new possibilities followed by and concluding with intentional time to leverage current strengths and strategies. Furthermore, Harvey et al. suggest that teams can avoid trade-offs between exploration and exploitation by switching between activities. They propose that the output from one type of learning activity serves as input to another, leading to cumulative effects over time.<sup>462</sup>

Self-questioning is another practice of reflexive learning. Self-learning occurs when a leader asks the network members meaningful questions about their experiences,

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<sup>461</sup> Powell and James, *Together for the City*, 192–93.

<sup>462</sup> Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning.”

actions, and assumptions. This helps the network leadership delve deeper into the thoughts and motivations of its participants to uncover biases and gain new perspectives. Self-questioning can be exercised through group work in the moment or utilized through participant journaling.

A final practice of reflexive learning is seeking feedback. Listening to how different perspectives and insights align among members leads to greater opportunity for team learning. Constructive feedback in a psychologically safe environment provides valuable insights and challenge existing assumptions.

Within the framework of team learning, reflexive learning acts as a stabilizing and predictable activity that helps teams build a strong foundation for their innovation efforts. It provides a space for teams to reflect on their progress, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments. By engaging in reflexive learning, teams can align their understanding of the project goals, and enhance their collective effectiveness.<sup>463</sup>

Harvey et al. conclude that reflexive learning is a crucial activity for innovation teams in providing stability and predictability. They emphasize that the timing and quality of reflexive learning, as well as its combination with other activities, are critical factors. They suggest that teams should engage in reflexive learning multiple times throughout a project and update their shared thinking patterns and team alignment based on new information. The research suggests that reflexive learning that occurs through different combinations of exploitation and exploration can have positive or negative

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<sup>463</sup> Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning.”

effects on performance depending on the degree to which they create harmony, dissonance, or rhythm in teamwork alignment.<sup>464</sup>

In light of these findings, Harvey et al. propose that reflexive learning should be recognized as an essential network skill that requires practice, development and refinement over time. By cultivating this skill, CPNs can experience positive effects on their performance and enhance their overall effectiveness.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, extensive research has been conducted in the field of network dynamics within organizational hierarchies. Some of the findings in the literature are particularly relevant for team building. These findings have made significant contributions to an understanding of effective collaboration, knowledge utilization, and network performance. The literature highlights several best practices that leaders should consider.

First and foremost, developing trust is a crucial element. According to the literature, trust is the foundation of successful network dynamics, enabling team members to feel safe and confident in sharing their ideas and concerns. It fosters an environment of openness and mutual respect, which is essential for effective teamwork.

Alignment is highlighted as another best practice in the literature. Ensuring that team members are aligned in terms of goals, expectations, and roles is crucial for

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<sup>464</sup> Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning.”

effective teamwork. When everyone is working towards a common purpose, it enhances coordination, efficiency, and ultimately improves team performance.

Maintaining psychological safety is also emphasized as an important aspect of successful teams. When team members feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to take risks, voice their perspectives, and engage in constructive dialogue. This psychological safety encourages innovation and creativity within the team.

Leadership is another key factor in team dynamics and performance. Effective leaders inspire, motivate, and guide their teams towards achieving shared goals. They encourage open communication and reflexive learning, and provide support and guidance when needed.

Furthermore, the research provides valuable insights into various aspects of team learning, including stakeholder collaboration, network structure, timing of team activities, and the power of reflexive learning. These insights offer practical implications for leaders, emphasizing the importance of fostering a teamwork culture, leveraging the power of collaboration, and creating an inclusive environment where team members can openly communicate, share ideas, and take risks. By adopting a dynamic perspective on team learning, leaders can optimize team performance, drive innovation, and navigate the challenges posed by uncertain contexts and hierarchical challenges. This body of research serves as a valuable resource for innovative networks and their leaders, offering practical strategies for enhancing performance, achieving ambidexterity, and ultimately driving successful network outcomes.



## **Summary of Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors engage with CPNs. This literature review began exploring the benefits of the book of Acts for developing strategies for CPNs in the present day. Acts provides valuable principles for contextualizing the gospel and structuring CPNs, emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in church planting. It also offers guidance on regional hubs, network churches, organic church planting, and the timing and types of church plants. Additionally, the literature on Acts delves into CPN leadership, relationships, conflict management, and network dynamics in various contexts.

The second literature review area explored the challenges in the literature for using Acts as a basis for contemporary CPN development. Extracting general principles from the descriptive accounts in Acts can be challenging, and the lack of explicit church planting application in commentaries limits its direct guidance for modern efforts. While Acts provides rich narratives of early church planting, there is a lack of direct guidance for modern church planting efforts in the available commentaries. This second literature review area reveals how crucial it is to approach Acts with discernment and recognize the challenges in deriving general principles and finding explicit application in commentaries. Additional sources and considerations are necessary for developing effective church planting strategies in the present context.

The third area of the literature review focuses on best practices for networking. Trust, alignment, psychological safety, leadership, and team learning through collaboration and reflexive learning are highlighted as best practices for networking. The research emphasizes the importance of fostering a teamwork culture, collaboration, and

creating an inclusive environment for open communication and risk-taking. These practices optimize team performance, innovation, and navigation of challenges in uncertain contexts. These areas provide the background for exploring senior pastors' engagement with CPNs today.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore how senior pastors engage with church planting networks (CPN). The assumption of this study was that senior pastors who have been involved in CPNs experienced benefits and challenges which both equipped and eclipsed their own church planting vision for their ministry context. These benefits and challenges presented opportunities to examine best practices of the senior pastor's execution of a church planting strategy in his context. Thus, a qualitative study was proposed as a means of gathering and examining the experience of senior pastors who are involved in church-planting networks.

To examine these experiences more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What benefits do senior pastors experience when they engage with church-planting networks?
2. What challenges do senior pastors face when they engage with church-planting networks?
3. How do senior pastors navigate the challenges they face when they engage with church-planting networks?
4. What are senior pastors' desires for engagement with church-planting networks?

## Design of the Study

This study followed a basic qualitative research method. Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, describes qualitative research as being “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”<sup>465</sup> Merriam identifies four key characteristics regarding the nature of qualitative research: “[T]he focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive.”<sup>466</sup> An examination of these four characteristics is in order.

The first feature of qualitative research is on process, understanding, and meaning to make sense of how senior pastors interpreted their own experiences as members of a CPN. Qualitative research is interested in “understanding how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning making,” and in describing “how people interpret what they experience”<sup>467</sup> (as opposed to quantitative research which focuses on the use of “numbers as data and analyzes them using statistical techniques.”)<sup>468</sup> The qualitative research approach made possible a

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<sup>465</sup> Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 14.

<sup>466</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

<sup>467</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

<sup>468</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 6.

detailed interpretation of information provided by senior pastors who are engaged in CPNs.

The second feature of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument. This allowed the researcher to follow up on critical insights using probing questions and redirection in areas of key insights salient to the research. Professor of Education at Stanford University and proponent of qualitative research, Alan Peshkin observes, “That subjectivity can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected.”<sup>469</sup> The researcher’s findings provide further insights to relevant audiences because of the qualitative research methodology. The potential shortcomings and biases that characterize the subjective nature of the qualitative approach were mitigated by a clear statement of the “researcher’s position.”

The third feature of qualitative research is the utilization of an inductive process. Researchers conducting a basic qualitative study are interested in how people interpret their experience, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The key element of the inductive process is the perspective of the participants themselves, focused on the so-called *emic*, or insider’s, point of view as opposed to the *etic*, or outsider’s (i.e., researcher’s) perspective.<sup>470</sup> The researcher’s agenda is therefore to understand participants’ viewpoints rather than confirm a particular

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<sup>469</sup> Alan Peshkin, “In Search of Subjectivity—One’s Own,” *Educational Researcher* Vol. 17, No. 7 (October 1988): 18.

<sup>470</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 14.

thesis. Findings of basic qualitative research are the recurring patterns and themes supported by the data that the researcher elicits from the participant's understanding of the phenomenon of interest.<sup>471</sup> This aspect of qualitative research enabled the researcher to move from the particular themes derived from the interviews to the general insights that transcend the participant's unique context.<sup>472</sup> As a result, qualitative research leveraged the insights of senior pastors' experiences in church-planting networks to better understand the issues in question.

The fourth feature of qualitative analysis is the richly descriptive nature this method of research yields. Interviews are an ideal vehicle, providing opportunities for observation and for probing more deeply to follow-up participants' statements. This research is 'richly descriptive' because words are the primary data, rather than statistics sought in a quantitative study. "Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon."<sup>473</sup> Quotes, interviews, and stories added important details that yielded a highly descriptive portrait that enabled the researcher to better "build toward theory."<sup>474</sup>

Thus, the basic qualitative research method allowed the researcher to encounter wide-ranging and descriptive data from participant perspectives on the narrow experiences of senior pastor's engagement with church-planting networks.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 24.

<sup>472</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

<sup>473</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

<sup>474</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data-gathering. The open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews facilitated the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues to explore them more thoroughly. As Merriam explains, “Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways.”<sup>475</sup> This qualitative method provided for the discovery of the most comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives.

### **Participant Sample Selection**

This study involved purposeful, criterion-based sampling.<sup>476</sup> Participants were selected based upon specific characteristics because of their special experience. According to Merriam, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned.”<sup>477</sup> Participant competence limited variables in data collection and provided information-rich interviews.

To gain data towards best practices from those with a depth of experience with the benefits and challenges of engaging with a church-planting network, the researcher’s criteria were senior pastors of church-planting churches in the Presbyterian Church in American (PCA) who had extensive experience in church-planting networks. To minimize variables for this in-depth research, the researcher interviewed six PCA teaching elders who were 1) senior pastors who also 2) planted a church in the Southwest

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<sup>475</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 90.

<sup>476</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 97.

<sup>477</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 96.

Church Planting Network (SWCPN), 3) remained involved in the SWCPN for at least ten years, and 4) planted at least one church out of their congregation.

The researcher chose participants within the SWCPN to allow for a diversity of ministry contexts—across six states in the southwest United States—and yet limit it to one church-planting network organization to distinguish salient data.

Because variables involved in the data are focused on the SWCPN, criterion for participants provided avenues for enhanced exploration of the intricacies of a church-planting network. Additionally, the study's analysis work provided a fuller understanding of the single context of church planting in the southwest United States, an area where 108 churches and twenty-six chapters of Reformed University Fellowship have been established in the first twenty-five years of the SWCPN. The success of the SWCPN has led to nearly 30,000 people worshipping in PCA churches across the southwest U.S. Due to the vision and collaborative start to the SWCPN, this study enabled the researcher to gain a more complete, *emic* perspective of senior pastors' engagement with a church-planting network.

The criterion of senior pastor was included because of the substantial influence such leaders exhibit upon the vision of a local church and its partnership with church-planting networks. As church planters themselves, these senior pastors were able to provide unique insight for younger church planters trained by the SWCPN. Further, they understood the benefits and challenges of involvement with CPNs for established churches. Active involvement for a decade allowed for substantial relationships to form within the SWCPN. Finally, planting a daughter church shows they were able to further the goals of the SWCPN through their congregation's own vision for church planting.



By analyzing the demographic data of 108 church planters in the SWCPN using denominational directories, six senior pastors who fit the above criteria were identified. Participants were invited to participate through an introductory email explaining the purpose of the research, relaying the protocol questions to be asked, and containing a “Research Participant Consent Form”. A personal phone call or text was made to confirm their participation and arrange the specific details of an interview appointment. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed the “Research Participant Consent Form” to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is “minimal” to “no risk” according to the Seminary IRB Guidelines. The following is a sample of this consent form.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Blake Altman to investigate senior pastors' engagement with church-planting networks for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to investigate senior pastors' engagement with church planting networks.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include identification of best practices for the senior pastor's engagement with church-planting networks, and opportunities to explore one's own church-planting hope and desires. Though there may be no direct benefit for participants, there may be encouragement from sharing experience with an attentive listener who is eager to learn.
- 3) The research process will include eight separate interviews, one with each participant in person or via video conference for approximately 90 minutes.
- 4) Participants in this research will not be required to do any intentional preparation before sitting for a 90-minuted interview with the researcher.
- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: Only those associated with self-disclosure.
- 6) Potential risks: Minimal – The participant may be inconvenienced due to the approximately 90-minute length; the participant will be sharing regarding individual viewpoints, background, experience, behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs.
- 7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will the participant's name be reported along with responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without the participant's prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
- 8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

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Printed Name and Signature of Researcher

Date

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Printed Name and Signature of Participant

Date

*Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.*

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary;  
12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

## **Data Collection**

A pilot test of the interview protocol was performed to help evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but open to evolve around the explanations and descriptions emerging from doing constant comparison work during the interview process.

Prior to the interview, each participant received a letter explaining the purpose of the research, the consent form, and the protocol questions to be asked. Findings were then transcribed by the researcher and coded for analysis.

The interviews were audiotaped with a digital recorder. By conducting one interview every three to seven days, the researcher completed the data gathering over six weeks. After each interview, field notes with descriptive and reflective observations were written.

## **Interview Guide**

The interview protocol contained the following pre-prepared questions:

1. Tell me about a time when you were encouraged by the Southwest Church Planting Network (Network)?
  - a. What are some other Network connections that encouraged you?
  - b. Describe a time when you walked away from a Network meeting encouraged by what took place there?
2. What were some of the other things the Network has done that were significant for you?

3. What were some things that encouraged your ongoing involvement in the Network?
4. Tell me some of the challenges you experienced in your involvement with the Network.
5. What kinds of things helped with those challenges?
6. If you could snap your fingers and make this the ultimate Network, what would it look like?
  - a. If resources were limitless, what does it look like?
  - b. What would the ideal team dynamic look like among other senior pastors?
    - i. How well would you know each other?
    - ii. What kind of work would you get done?

## **Data Analysis**

Merriam and Tisdell define the work of data analysis in this way:

Data analysis is the process of making sense of the data. And making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning.<sup>478</sup>

“Making meaning,” according to the authors, is the process used to answer the research questions by uncovering and interpreting the data. To make sense of the data in this study the researcher personally transcribed each interview as soon as possible and always within one week of the interview by using computer software to play back the digital recording on a computer and typing out each transcript. The researcher utilized the

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<sup>478</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 202.

constant comparative method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. As Merriam explains, “The constant comparative method [of data analysis] involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences.”<sup>479</sup> This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.<sup>480</sup> Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed further. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying common themes, patterns, and experiences across the variation of participants, as well as congruence or discrepancy among the participants’ perceptions of their engagement with the SWCPN.

### **Researcher Position**

Researchers conducting interviews serve as primary instruments for data collection and analysis in qualitative research.<sup>481</sup> Therefore, the researcher has shortcomings, perspectives, values, and biases that influenced this study.

First, the researcher is an ordained teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. Secondly, he was a church planter in the SWCPN, and is now a senior pastor of a member church in the SWCPN. Further, he has served on the board of the SWCPN. In

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<sup>479</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 32.

<sup>480</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 203.

<sup>481</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 16.

addition, he recently completed a five-year term as a member of the PCA's permanent committee for church planting and revitalization, Mission to North America.

Thus, he writes from the perspective of an insider-outsider.<sup>482</sup> As a former campus minister the researcher has experienced isolation in ministry contexts where fewer opportunities for fellowship existed. As a church planter the researcher was strengthened by ample informal fellowship with other church planters. These experiences allow him an insider's perspective in the development of interview protocol and preparation of participants. While each context is unique, the researcher's deep experiential (*emic*) knowledge of the challenges of church planting allows him an insider's perspective in the development of interview protocol and preparation of participants.

In sum, while the researcher remains critically distinct from the participants, his shared experience and language contributes to the researcher's ability to deeply understand and to code the data to identify patterns or congruence and discrepancies of meaning.

### **Study Limitations**

"In qualitative research," Merriam and Tisdell explain, "a single case or a small, non-random, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many."<sup>483</sup> As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed for this study were limited to PCA teaching elders who were 1) senior pastors who 2) planted a church in the

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<sup>482</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 16.

<sup>483</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 254.

Southwest Church Planting Network (SWCPN), 3) remained involved in the SWCPN for at least ten years, and 4) planted at least one daughter church. Therefore, data collected will be limited to the context of the Presbyterian Church in America.

Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other CPNs in other contexts or theological traditions. Readers who desire to generalize particular aspects of these conclusions on the benefits and challenges of senior pastors working with CPNs should test those aspects in their particular context. Pioneers of qualitative research, Yvonna Lincoln of Texas A&M University, and the late Egon Guba, remind the reader, "The burden of proof lies less with the original investigator" according to the concept of transferability "than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere. The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought."<sup>484</sup> As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for parachurch organizations and entrepreneurs in peer-to-peer networking groups across a variety of fields.

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<sup>484</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 254.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how senior pastors engage with church planting networks (CPN). This chapter provides the findings of the six research subjects meeting the criteria outlined in chapter three, and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. What benefits do senior pastors experience when they engage with church-planting networks?
2. What challenges do senior pastors face when they engage with church-planting networks?
3. How do senior pastors navigate the challenges they face when they engage with church-planting networks?
4. What are senior pastors' hopes for engagement with church-planting networks?

### **Introductions to Participants and Context**

The researcher selected six Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) teaching elders who were senior pastors who also planted a church in the Southwest Church Planting Network (SWCPN), remained involved in the SWCPN for at least ten years, and planted at least one new church out of their congregation.

Each participant pastored for at least ten years in the southwest United States between 1998 and 2024. The churches they currently or formerly pastored in the SWCPN



vary in size from three hundred to twelve hundred. Each pastor is seminary trained, Caucasian, and married with children. Their ages range from 47-63. Tony, Chris, Seth, and Ford pastor congregations in the suburban context of large metro areas with over one million people. Theo and Kevin pastor downtown congregations of large cities. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect identity.

### **Benefits of Involvement in Church Planting Networks**

The first research question examines the benefits that senior pastors gain from participating in CPNs. Through a series of interview questions, research participants had the opportunity to identify and elaborate on the benefits of their engagement with the SWCPN. Those benefits include three areas: camaraderie in ministry, inspiration from compelling vision, and access to capital funds for church planting initiatives.

#### *Camaraderie in Ministry*

Senior pastors engaged in CPNs are inspired by the opportunity to collaborate with respected colleagues who are dedicated to similar goals. When asked about the benefits of the SWCPN Kevin pauses to contemplate the nature of a network, questioning a network's defining characteristics. Then he says,

I don't even exactly know [how to define a network], but I don't really know that I care. It doesn't have to be all spelled out on paper. I was glad to be a part of it. It was one of the best things I ever did. If I wouldn't have been in the network, I don't think [my church plant] would've happened. It's one of the best networks I've ever been involved in. I think if you're not in a network, you're crazy.

Kevin may not be able to describe what a network is, but he appreciates his experience in it. He considering being part of the SWCPN one of the most impactful experiences he has ever had.

Other pastors agree with Kevin. Chris says, “Being around all those church planters, that *esprit de corps* and friendship just really was a huge encouragement.” Pastors use phrases like, “source life,” “joining forces,” “immense wealth of experience,” and “genuine care and concern.” In general, pastors say that planting a new church without the collaboration and assistance of others is never a wise decision. Pastors say that working without a network can limit growth, hinder progress, and deprive individuals of valuable insights and shared experiences.

Additionally, pastors’ collaborating on new church plants together build a legacy of new churches beyond what an individual church can achieve. Seth reflects upon the fact that in his presbytery, “nearly all church planting initiatives in the past 25 years have been undertaken by the churches within the [SWCPN] network. We’re all a part of that. It’s humbling.”

### **Building a Core Group**

One aspect of collaboration that pastors see as a benefit is the support that comes from the network to build a core group. Pastors say being a part of the network allows young churches to be encouraged by seasoned pastors as they begin their church plants. Seth shares an experience when a nearby pastor, who was a member of network leadership, invited Seth to preach at his Sunday morning worship service. During the service, the network leader publicly encouraged anyone in the congregation who felt led to join Seth in establishing the new church to step forward.

If any of you would like to go with [Seth], even if you just go for two or three years to help establish this new church, please go. Every Christian should be a part of a new church plant. Don't worry about the finances here. Don't worry about serving here. If you think you might want to be a part of starting a new work, I want to encourage you to go.

He emphasized that every Christian should be a part of a new church plant, even if it was only for a short period of time. That moment was a remarkable encouragement to Seth who contrasts this experience with his peers who planted churches without networks, where they often felt isolated without the same level of connection and support.

The participant pastors also say the personal connections they form within the SWCPN connects them to seasoned pastors to address their questions or concerns. Pastors mention learning “how to plan out sermon series,” “how to run a session meeting,” “how to train elders,” “how to lead a congregational meeting,” from the informal relationships within the network. Learning these skills within the web of relationships in the SWCPN further help pastors build a core group.

### **Psychological Safety**

Another benefit of camaraderie for pastors in a CPN like the SWCPN is the emotionally supportive environment for church planters. As opposed to what one pastor called the “hero model” of the past, today there is more permission in the SWCPN to openly express the burdens and challenges faced by church planters.

Theo recalls a time when he was unsure if he wanted to allow himself “go there” about a personal matter with others in the SWCPN. Yet he says that in the SWCPN he experienced a growing culture that allowed “for open and honest dialogue about struggles and transitions.”

Seth expected the network to care most about “certain metrics, such as the number of people at worship or the number of supporters you called.” However, he found that the SWCPN was more interested in conversations that delved deeper into the pastoral role and the challenges that they faced in their context. Seth recalls, “rather than expecting me to have all the answers, the leaders encouraged him to think through the challenges together with them.” This collaborative approach surprised Seth and provided a supportive environment where he could seek guidance and explore solutions in a way that “felt safe.”

Tony agrees. He recounts a conversation he had with a fellow pastor and network leader who invited him once to join his staff. But before the interview began the leader first shared about his own inner struggles.

I remember sitting down with him and he said, “Well, before we go further, I really want to know about your interior life. And before I can ask you about yours, I need to tell you about mine. So I’m gonna show you under my hood before I ask you to show me yours.”

Tony expresses his feelings of being overwhelmed by the weight of this leaders’ disclosure and the challenges he candidly presented. Tony felt a sense of relief and excitement in this. Such humble demeanor by this colleague made Tony eager to be a part of his team.

### **Hospitality Away from Home**

Some pastors share that the culture of a network’s camaraderie extends into hospitality when visiting other network cities. Seth fondly recalls a time during their family’s spring break vacation in a network city when a network colleague warmly welcomed them and served his kids hot chocolate in their church.

And we walk in and [this fellow network pastor] opens the door and proceeds to hug [my wife] and hug me and greet my kids. And then he said, “Guys, come in here. We just got a brand new hot chocolate machine!” The kids ran off with him. He made them hot chocolate. And then he gave us a tour of their student ministry room.

“Being greeted with this atmosphere of warmth and hospitality,” Seth recalls that this was “an extension” of the SWCPN collaborative spirit he grew to respect.

### **Mutual Pastoral Care**

Most pastors assert that the intentionality with which network leaders and members care for one another as one of the most positive aspects of collaborating in a network. Several pastors find it amusing that one of them is supposed to “coach” another or “help navigate their challenges” when the relationships quickly turn mutually beneficial.

Seth asserts with enthusiasm, “Without the network, I would’ve felt very isolated, disconnected, having to recreate the wheel.” Theo, too, acknowledges the common struggle among church planters to feel isolated and burdened by the challenges they face. He likens this experience to the biblical figure Elijah, who felt alone and overwhelmed by his circumstances. Theo admits that he, too, has fallen into this mindset at times, feeling as though he was the only one facing difficulties. However, he has come to realize “one big importance of the network is recognizing that you are not alone” in your church planting journey. Network pastors understand that there are other pastors and church planters who are going through similar experiences. This realization brings comfort and a renewed sense of purpose, knowing that each one has a community of fellow workers who are in it together.

Chris recalls a challenging moment early in his church plant when he decided to shut down certain Bible studies and childcare groups in order to have “enough adults in the room at one time” to focus on a unified vision. This decision upset some individuals, causing hurt feelings and resentment. However, support from network colleagues with more experience validated his choice, and helped him stay committed to the plant despite this early conflict.

### **Shared resources**

Some of the pastors say that seeing what others have done and sharing resources is a major network benefit. Kevin mentions how he learned to better design an order of worship, produce marketing materials, and printed annual reports through the network’s shared materials. He recalls saying in one meeting,

Show me your stuff. I want to see your bulletin. I got to make a bulletin. I don’t know what I’m doing. So let’s put them all out there. I want to see your design. I want to see your verbiage. I want to see how your welcome cards work....

Kevin would enthusiastically encourage other planters at the meetings to share their materials and ideas. He says, “I always liked it when we did some of that.” Planters would express a genuine desire to learn from their peers. Kevin says a collaborative and supportive environment where planters feel comfortable sharing their work and seeking guidance was crucial to dispel the sense of isolation in ministry. Everyone can benefit and improve their own practices in church planting.

Chris agrees. He found great enjoyment in being part of the network, as church planting can often be “so lonely the first years.” Being surrounded by other church

planters fostered a sense of camaraderie and friendship, which served as a significant source of encouragement for him.

Another pastor expresses his appreciation for the leadership's practice to take time in meetings for each planter to share updates with the network. He finds value in the opportunity for each member to share what is happening in their respective churches. That aspect of the meetings for him fosters a sense of camaraderie and teamwork, especially among planters in similar stages as he is.

Seth vividly recalls how these times of training refreshed him,

You're going to need care. You're going to need advice, you're going to need wisdom. You're going to need resources because we all need Jesus's resources. So we're going to work that out together. This is not a solo sport.

Pastors say they appreciated that prayer was emphasized at network meetings, often with a focus on supporting and praying for one another. Such activity in meetings emphasizes the importance of working together, as going alone increases the risk of failure.

### *Compelling Vision*

Another benefit for networks is being part of a compelling vision that extends beyond their own church and community. Tony says, "I was compelled by the big vision... wanting to be a part of something greater than just your immediate context. That's exciting!" The network's vision and philosophy of ministry is also important to Ford. The network confirmed his approach, "helped flesh it out," and further equipped him to execute the vision he had for his congregation.

## **Creative Model for Church Planting**

Several pastors say the early SWCPN leaders created a compelling ministry model that “leverages existing organizational structures and relationships” to “start a church planting engine.” One pastor describes it as “a creative risk.” Another says, “that approach was a stroke of genius.” The creative model of inviting existing regional missions committees to have a seat at the table provided a solid foundation and facilitated smoother adoption and integration within the denomination. Another participant expresses his admiration for the original leaders this way, “They have a humility, they have a desire not to say, ‘we demand that you do it this way.’”

One pastor shared that a key ingredient in the vision was originally excluded. He nervously called up one of the elder statesmen to ask, “Can you help me understand why you did not integrate one part of the vision as you said you would do?” The senior leader thanked him without “being defensive at all,” and corrected the issue. Several other pastors say that the humble approach by network leaders not to impose strict demands on the model allowed for freedom and flexibility in how the network matured into its current structure. One pastor said, “nearly all church planting networks in the PCA pattern themselves in some way after the SWCPN.”

## **Leadership Culture**

Pastors say that a key aspect of this compelling vision is the quality of network leadership. Network pastors view network leaders as aspirational figures who maintained an attractive leadership culture to build momentum and recruit other churches.

Seth said that the leaders of the network “are exceptional leaders” who have made a significant impact on him. Another pastor, Ford, says that being around “strong, godly



visionaries” is a “huge” and “refreshing” benefit. Pastors in particular note the gifts of network leaders as the preservers of the SWCPN leadership culture. Other pastors described their respect for the network leaders with phrases like “excellent recruiter,” “ability to adapt,” “effective communication skills,” “inspiring visionary,” and “ability to attract and onboard new planters.”

### *Shepherd Leaders*

One pastor summarized the significance of the network’s leadership culture with these words: “the importance, the meaning, the significance, the necessity of having a leadership who’s taking Jesus’ command seriously not just to love Him, but to love each other as he’s loved us” is a top benefit of the SWCPN. Another said that network leaders were gifted at “re-centering me on who Jesus is.” Others felt “shepherded by God’s shepherds,” and “cared for by God’s people.” One exclaimed, “Dude, I could go on for hours,” about the way leaders of the network cared for his soul. Another stressed, “I had never seen churches do this for each other, and I feel like the network gives access to that if you’re intentional about it.”

Seth’s recounts the first day he met with network leadership to pitch the idea of his church plant.

I came ready to share budgets. I actually had one of our vision packets ready to show them. I was ready for this lunch that we’re going to have. And we spent two hours together and all we did was eat and drink and talk about my needs and catch up. And they had questions about my wife. They had questions about [my children], and I said nothing I had planned on talking about. We didn’t talk about any of that! And so that was the beginning of me seeing that being a part of the network wasn’t just a performance thing.

Seth arrived prepared to discuss budgets. However, the conversation took a different direction, focusing on personal matters and catching up. This experience made him realize that being part of the network was not solely about performance but about making a deeper connection.

### *Listening Leaders*

Other pastors say that they appreciate the openness and humility of the leadership culture of the SWCPN. At a time when younger ministers were rarely invited to give their perspective, Theo recalls how refreshing it was to be invited by network leaders to help a focus group think about an important issue. Attending these meetings in his thirties, he felt unworthy of the opportunity to share his perspective on the network's vision with respected, older leaders. Asking for the perspective of younger voices "demonstrated the maturity and humility" of the network leaders for Theo.

Another network pastor describes a time when the leadership identified several destinations for church plants and then invited input from everyone in the room on how to reach those goals. The leader of the meeting said,

"These are the places that we're trying to get to. What are y'all's ideas about how to get there? If we're going to try to do one [new work] next year, where do we want to go? How do we do this?"

He appreciated that the leaders allowed the team to openly discuss where they want to go and actively seek ideas and suggestions from each member. "It felt shared," he says, "it fosters a sense of ownership and collaboration among the team members, allowing for a more comprehensive and inclusive decision-making process."

Some pastors recall instances where they had the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas, even though those ideas were not ultimately followed. Kevin said the

network maintained “a culture of respect and openness where differing viewpoints were valued and... considered.” He appreciated that the network leaders listened to his opinion and were not demeaned for expressing it.

### *Skilled Leaders*

Several pastors express admiration for the network leaders’ skill to fulfill their responsibilities. Chris says that the network leader’s ability to recruit and make effective matches between individuals and church planting opportunities was “really something.”

Nearly all pastors said that they would not have known where to go without the network leader’s encouragement. Seth shares that the network leader helped him understand that he was not yet ready to plant a church. “His grace,” and “cheerleading” was “so encouraging.” He expresses gratitude for a network leader’s understanding and for keeping his file for several years after that decision was made. Now a successful church planter in the network, he says, “without [the network leader], I would have struggled to find my place several years later when I was ready to plant.” He says that the network leader “prayed with me all those years and facilitated connections” that would have otherwise been difficult to make.

Not only recruitment and placement, but Seth appreciated the accountability that existed under the network leaders. New planters and existing network pastors were expected to attend and actively engage in the network meetings. He said that the experience of being in “a packed room” with such esteemed company left a lasting impression on him. He fondly recalls, “If you didn’t go, you would get phone calls, not that you’re in trouble, but like, ‘Hey, what happened?’” Ford agrees, “Holding us accountable to be [at the meetings]” was part of the leadership culture.

### *Organized Leaders*

In general pastors appreciate the dedicated efforts of a full-time leader, who plans and prepares well-organized meetings. Network pastors express the value they found in the SWCPN leaders' centralized office where they could point others with questions. "Having a regionally centered place to find resources helps a lot," one pastor says.

#### **Meetings Aligned with Vision and Prayer**

Pastors appreciate the strategic approach that leaders brought to the meetings, as it helped to ensure the network's progress and effectiveness. Some pastors learned how to lead a meeting from the network leaders who came prepared with an agenda and metrics to measure progress. These metrics and benchmarks provided direction and momentum, particularly in regions where their organization had limited presence. Theo recalls one meeting when the leader "mapped areas of the southwest without a strong presence of the gospel" and then "argued for why advancing the kingdom through the network" begins with "prayer for those areas." "We then spent the entire morning in prayer for those areas," he recalls.

#### **Meetings Aimed at Training and Refreshment**

Several pastors mention a meeting where a well-respected pastor from a large city spent all day with the church planters to teach them about his church's philosophy of ministry and then hosted an extended question and answer session. That meeting would not have been possible without the network leaders' "connection, friendship, and planning" for this speaker to come to the SWCPN training meeting.

Pastors also appreciate that wives are invited to attend network meetings, especially the meetings hosted by other network churches in various cities. One pastor

recalls that several older women made efforts to stay in touch with the wives by writing letters, making phone calls, and having meaningful conversations throughout the year, but these opportunities for in-person connections particularly allowed the wives to feel “supported and included within the network” community.

### *Access to Capital Funds*

Every pastor says the financial stability provided by the guaranteed financial support of the SWCPN is one of the main benefits derived from being part of it. The network’s unique financial structure supported church plants, church-planting churches, and the formation of new presbyteries.

#### **Finances to Launch New Church Plants**

Several participating pastors say that the financial support from the network provided them confidence to move to a new city and build a core team “without worrying about providing” for their families. Chris shares the significance of the church planting support he received in saying,

A second value for me was the money because it was a huge safety net. I knew I could fail and still feed my family for a year, and I was still scared, but not as scared as I would’ve been if we didn’t have any money in the bank. I mean, I wouldn’t have come out here and done it.

The financial “guarantee of two years’ salary,” along with the contributions they raised from the core group, brought stability and reassurance to their church planting journey.

#### **Finances to Empower Church-Planting Churches**

Nearly all pastors say that a benefit to being part of the SWCPN has been the presbytery receiving funding for church planting initiatives. One pastor stated, “without

the network my presbytery does not have the sustained ability to plant churches, not long term.”

Chris appreciates the financial benefit for his presbytery as well. He frankly says that once he heard the SWCPN wanted to focus on funding church plants, he became bolder in his requests. Chris explains his thought process this way,

We came out here to plant churches, so let’s plant churches....I came out here with the intention of saying, “Yes!” And so when [a group] said they wanted a church in [a suburb on the other side of town], I was like, yeah, let’s do it. It’s silly for people to drive to [my church]. And when [a young pastor] said he wanted to plant a church, but he wanted to work for me, I was like, yeah, great. Sounds good. And when [another church planter] said [his dream target area] was to plant a church [in a certain neighborhood]... we planted him right there at [in his target area] with the help of the network.

Upon arriving in his city with the purpose of planting churches, Chris’ mindset was focused on embracing opportunities rather than being obstructive. When individuals came to him with their desire for new church plants in his region, he could enthusiastically support them because of the network’s focus on funding churches.

One pastor says “the network enabled us to be something in name that we weren’t really in practice, you know, a church planting church.” Another pastor highlights how the network helped his church cast a vision for their church planting efforts. He says, “We could not have done it without the network.” The connection between his presbytery committee and the network allowed his people to feel a part of a greater movement dedicated to reaching people in various states, including Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Arizona. These pastors emphasize that being connected to this network and movement made his church realize that they were not just one congregation, but part of a larger effort to bring the kingdom of Jesus near.

## **Finances to Form New Presbyteries**

Kevin recognizes one additional financial benefit from the network, namely support in starting a new presbytery. The network's commitment to funding one church plant each year served as a significant boost for the presbytery to launch. Kevin expresses gratitude that the network agreed to participate in the formation of the new presbytery in part because of the network's financial support to help them expand by planting churches.

### *Summary of the Benefits of Church Planting Networks*

This first research question sought to determine the benefits senior pastors received through their involvement in CPNs. The analysis shows that pastors engaged with the SWCPN report benefits in three areas: collaborative ministry opportunities, inspiration from a compelling vision, and access to capital funds.

Ministry camaraderie within the network offers valuable opportunities to work alongside esteemed colleagues who share the common goal of church planting. The network provides access to a compelling shared vision and ministry philosophy that extends beyond local contexts. Psychological safety is fostered through an emotionally supportive environment where planters can openly share their burdens and struggles. Network members extend hospitality and mutual pastoral care, promoting deeper connections among peers. Valuable shared resources, including materials, designs, and best practices, equip planters with valuable knowledge.

Aspirational leadership inspire pastors with the network's compelling vision, and equips pastors to excel in their different stages of ministry. Skilled and organized leaders provide guidance and accountability, effectively advancing the network's work and

building a culture of leadership. Strategic meetings led by experienced church planters offer training and refreshment.

Lastly, the network's generous funding ensures financial stability for launching new church plants and ministries. Capital funds also empower church-planting churches and facilitate the formation of new presbyteries.

### **Challenges to Pastors' Involvement in Church Planting Networks**

The second research question sought to determine the challenges to senior pastors' involvement in CPNs. Three primary challenges emerged from the data: loss of relational connection among network members, a loss of aspirational leadership, and church planting malaise.

#### *Loss of Relational Connection Among Members in the SWCPN*

Pastors express a concern about the loss of connection among member churches in the SWCPN. They attribute this to the lack of a clear role for member churches once they become established. Challenges in this area included the lack of clear network identity, demands of the local congregation, crisis management, corporate mentality, travel logistics, tedium of reporting, return on investment, trends away from church planting, and presbytery culture. Several participants urge for a reevaluation of the network's structure to establish clearer roles of member churches to ensure they are valued and have a sense of purpose within the network.



## **Lack of Clear Network Identity**

The data reveals that some pastors see a lack of clear network identity to be a significant challenge in their involvement with the SWCPN. Ford, Chris, and Seth each highlight one aspect of this challenge.

### *Lack of Clarity for What Kinds of Churches to Plant*

Ford emphasizes a lack of clear identity of the type of churches the network aims to plant. He says,

I think the Southwest Church Planning Network has not had a clear enough identity into what kind of church they want to plant beyond being PCA. And I think generally the idea was there, it was more clear in the early days, but even then it lacked some clarity.

In Ford's opinion the SWCPN has lacked a clear identity in terms of the type of church they aim to plant, beyond being affiliated with the PCA. While the idea was somewhat present, even in the early days, there was still a lack of clarity. Ford additionally recognizes the challenges this lack of clarity presents when collaborating with multiple presbyteries.

### *Lack of Clarity on the Network's Purpose*

Chris agrees with Ford, but also points to the lack of clarity and shared purpose within the leadership of the network. He expresses frustration with the lack of a comprehensive approach to coaching, training, and a specific philosophy guiding the church planting efforts. This lack of direction and strategy for planting churches resulted in uncertainty and a lack of confidence in the potential success of these churches.

### *Lack of Clarity on Role for Established Churches*

Seth agrees with Ford and Chris but adds a third perspective. He highlights the lack of intentional connection between the mission and particularized churches. Seth says that it is crucial for established churches to have a clear role beyond financial contributions. He believes that without clarity on the intentional connection between church plants who have yet to raise up leaders from within their congregations (mission churches) and established church plants with indigenous leadership (particularized churches), pastors gradually disconnect from the network, losing both relational and strategic benefits.

Seth believes that fostering camaraderie among the network's established member churches is as important to the health of the network as it is for the church planters to know one another. Further, it is even more important, according to him, for the network to continually engage the existing churches to effectively maintain an exciting vision for church planting. Seth suggests exploring different ways for network member churches to rearticulate the vision for the network, rather than relying solely on network leaders or well-known speakers to rejuvenate unity in a semi-annual meeting. He expresses a desire for the network to be more strategic in casting the vision for church planting and believes that it can play a crucial role in inspiring and encouraging established churches to actively pursue church planting with intention and purpose.

### **Needs of Local Congregation**

In addition to the lack of a clear network identity, pastors say that as the demands and complexity of their local churches grew, they grew disconnected with the SWCPN. During demanding seasons of ministry, Ford and Kevin agree that priority should be

given to local efforts at the expense of network involvement. Ford argues that it is crucial not to lose sight of main goals and responsibilities and to avoid getting distracted by external commitments. Ford, Seth, and Kevin recognize that by balancing local and network commitments, they can better serve their congregations and contribute to the vision of church planting. This focus gradually leads them away from active SWCPN participation.

### *Normal Leadership Responsibilities*

Ford shares that while it is a blessing to see his congregation thrive, it diverts his attention from the SWCPN. For example, he mentions juggling two congregations and hiring a church planter that did not work out as planned. Only when he redirected his main assistant did the church plant start flourishing. In hindsight, he realizes the need to refocus his efforts locally and allocate some of the time spent with the SWCPN to shepherd his congregation better.

When already negotiating their own church, presbytery, general assembly, and tribe, as well as starting a presbytery within the CPN, Kevin says it became an exhausting and overwhelming experience to remain involved with the network. He recounts that he reached a point where he decided that attending just one meeting a year seemed to be the best option, although he still questions the overall purpose and value of his involvement. Despite feeling tired and needing to pull back, he acknowledges that the network made efforts to be helpful, including organizing beautiful events. “The sheer volume of negotiations and responsibilities became too much,” Kevin expresses with uncertainty about how to navigate this challenge effectively. While he appreciates the intentions of

the network and values the relationships, the cumulative demands reduced his network participation.

### *Leading the Local Church through Crises*

Tony, Ford, Seth, and Kevin additionally confess that local crisis management situations lured them away from their commitment to the SWCPN. Tony shares the challenges his church faced when a beloved pastor left staff, resulting in a significant loss of membership and financial resources. Comparing his church to two other large churches in the SWCPN, Tony noticed that his church's budget and membership were trending in the wrong direction. This crisis led to a sense of disconnection from the network as his church struggled to recover and regain stability.

Ford, on the other hand, explains that their disconnection from the network was influenced by a series of unexpected challenges. After experiencing a period of church expansion and taking a personal sabbatical, he was confronted with the immense challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, a staffing crisis led to the difficult decision to fire an assistant pastor.

And in the midst of that, I just have found, and I still kind of feel this way, I just don't have the bandwidth to give leadership much beyond what I'm doing for the presbytery and our local church.

These circumstances, combined with his ongoing responsibilities within the local church, left Ford feeling limited in his capacity to provide leadership beyond his immediate church community. This results in a sense of guilt over his reduced involvement in the network.

I feel terrible that I'm not giving back to the network... I don't have the money. We also planted two churches and started a ministry. It wasn't like

we were stingy. So that was rough and I felt very guilty, but I also was like, I can't do it. I don't know what to tell you.

He expressed a sense of guilt and frustration for not being able to contribute back to the network due to financial constraints. Despite his involvement in planting two churches and starting a ministry, he felt unable to meet the expectation of giving back. This conflicting situation left Ford feeling uncertain and at a loss for words.

Seth shares his personal disconnection from the network, attributing it to his busy life circumstances, including medical issues and caring for his child's medical needs. He expresses uncertainty about his role within the network after successfully completing the church planting process, feeling unsure about where he fits in. These personal challenges contribute to his reduced engagement with the network, leading to a sense of disconnection.

Ford also acknowledges the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pastors' willingness to engage in additional activities outside their local responsibilities. Ford believes the shift to virtual platforms like Zoom significantly altered the dynamics of engagement within the SWCPN. He questions the necessity of physically attending network meetings in distant locations when remote participation is possible. Ford suggests that there has been a shift in his attitude toward virtual meetings but concedes that a gradual return to in-person meetings seems productive as the pandemic's influence wanes.

Kevin expresses a different path. He didn't officially withdraw from the network but instead distanced himself relationally and financially. While the SWCPN has a formal transition exit process in the bylaws, Kevin's church suffered a sudden financial

downturn. As mentioned above, while he wishes he could have given more, the financial reality made it impossible to do so.

The analysis of these pastors' experiences reveals that each one faces unique crises that impact their connection with the SWCPN. Tony's church faces challenges after the departure of a pastor, while Ford deals with the unexpected combination of a pandemic and staffing crisis. Seth experiences personal challenges that lead to a sense of disconnection. Kevin faces financial hardship. Each pastors' circumstances influence their level of involvement in the network, highlighting the diverse ways in which crises impact pastors' engagement with the SWCPN.

### **Evolving into a Corporate Model**

Tony, Ford, and Chris each acknowledge that the SWCPN gradually adopted a more corporate-like model, causing concerns about it feeling like a group to politically navigate. The increase in bureaucracy has led to a decrease in relational connection among member churches.

### *The Network Leader's Influence*

Some pastors agree that, in addition to a shift toward a corporate cultural climate, there is uncertainty about the network's direction and a lack of united vision within the network leadership. Issues of insider control and accountability for the leaders are also raised. The focus on funding church plants has overshadowed the importance of relational connection within the network.

Tony says that the network leader's leadership style makes a significant impact on the organization's progress toward deeper relational connection. He appreciates the

SWCPN network leaders for their individual strengths. One had the ability to generate excitement and strong relationship-building skills, while another's more administrative tendencies tended to develop deeper financial resources for the network.

Ford agrees with Tony but expresses uncertainty about the direction of the network as it has grown. He feels that a more corporate model is necessary, but also admits the network did lose the personal connection and warmth as the network focused more on only funding church plants.

[Network leaders were] very good at giving what I needed for the presbytery, which was funding. And so every time I called for funding, he was a green light. That was great, but beyond that, I lacked inspiration.

Though he appreciated the network's financial support, Ford would have appreciated the spiritual and emotional support and inspiration that can be gained through more personal connections.

Chris echoes Ford, saying,

I led one whole long meeting on just what do we do? I asked that question a hundred times and the answer came out, we finance church plants. That's it. And that was a very frustrating answer, right? Because it's like we don't coach them? We don't train them? We don't have a particular philosophy that we're trying to plant? It is just putting churches in places with no confidence of what these churches are going to be like... I felt like they were going to fail from the beginning, which always frustrated me.

Chris led a lengthy network leadership meeting solely focused on determining the SWCPN's purpose, asking the question repeatedly. The answer that emerged was simply that the SWCPN finances church plants, which was highly frustrating for Chris. It seemed to him that the network has lost its coaching, training, or unique ministry components that fostered deep relationships, which planted successful churches.

### *“Unbreakable” Insider Group*

Chris raises additional concerns. He shares that there appears to be an “unbreakable” insider group that controls the network and a lack of accountability over network leadership. He stresses the need for stronger guidance to maintain the organization’s culture, even if it may upset some individuals. One pastor provides an example of a church that could have been planted earlier, but the network leadership did not want to upset key individuals in a neighboring church. This pastor says the church in question lacked the courage to church plant and needed to be encouraged to do so more firmly by the SWCPN.

### **Travel & Logistics**

Ford, Kevin, and Chris highlight the impact of time away from family and the financial strain of attending meetings as another barrier to engagement. Recognizing and addressing these logistical factors is crucial in fostering a stronger and more sustainable connection among SWCPN member churches.

Ford says the inconvenience of traveling to different locations hindered his participation.

Why would I fly [in for a leadership] meeting when I have to get there on a Sunday and leave on a Monday when I could just zoom in? I can’t help but think that had some role.

Ford’s challenges with juggling travel within such a tight turnaround window made him question whether virtual communication tools would have been sufficient for adequate participation, which would have relieved one aspect of the already heavy burdens he was bearing. This led him to speculate that this logistical aspect might be a barrier to more active engagement for others also.



In contrast, Kevin limits his involvement in the network. He decided to intentionally reduce his attendance from four times a year to just once a year. This approach allows Kevin to maintain a connection with the network, albeit at a reduced level of involvement, to better manage his other responsibilities.

Chris points out a different combination of challenges. He found that fulfilling network and other denominational responsibilities meant traveling to meetings 14 times a year, which proves to be a significant commitment away from his family. Chris also expresses frustration with the financial aspect of attending these meetings, especially during seasons when his church budget is tight. He highlights the contrast between his own financial struggles and the apparent ease with which others who live closer to the host city can attend the meetings.

The travel expense adds to an overall frustration for many of the network pastors. Chris explains that he had asked the network for financial support to cover the expenses of attending the meetings but was informed that his expenses are considered his contribution to the network.

Kevin notes that his commitment to the network remained strong until his congregation encountered the financial struggles mentioned previously. The lack of financial resources led to a shift in his session's perspective, questioning the value of his attendance at meetings when they have other pressing matters to attend to. Ultimately, Kevin made the personal choice to disengage from active participation in the network without external pressure, though he says that his session expressed its appreciation for his decision to do so.

These contrasting experiences shed light on the impact of seemingly mundane logistics, including travel time, frequency, and cost on their SWCPN involvement. Pastors highlight the logistical and financial challenges of traveling. This data reflects the diverse ways in which logistical factors can affect pastors' relational connection with others in the SWCPN.

### **Tedium of Reporting**

While contemplating the lack of relational connection within the network, Kevin mentions a unique challenge. Dedicating excessive time to writing monthly reports became a tedious chore for him. The constant need to prove himself and substantiate his worth is something Kevin says he struggles with anyway. Kevin also acknowledges the difficulty of engaging with the distressing stories that others report at the SWCPN meetings. In his own words, "Getting involved in the horror stories is pretty rough, but I don't know what you do about that either." Kevin mentions that conversations about the performance of others naturally arise, but he confesses to finding them emotionally overwhelming.

### **Cost of Partnership**

A few pastors offer another related challenge that hinders relational connection among pastors in the SWCPN. When Tony evaluated the substantial financial contribution his church was making to the SWCPN, he noticed a lack of proportional benefits at the local level. This led him to question whether his church can achieve its goals independently without relying on the network. He also began to contemplate

whether the network might be impeding his church's church planting progress rather than aiding it.

Kevin too considered the long-term cost of partnership, but recognized the network's role for churches varies during in the phases of the church's life; seasons of planning, growth, and sustainability are not all the same for Kevin. He experienced financial challenges once his church was sustainable, but at that point, even though the SWCPN became less helpful to him his church remained network members.

To maximize the impact of his church's funds, Tony considered getting involved on the network's board because he wanted to influence how the money is allocated. However, he began to question whether he had time for this additional effort. He says that his session then contemplated the idea of bypassing the network and directly using the funds to plant churches independently. This mindset is partly influenced by his church's financial capacity, as he believes his church can contribute over \$200,000 every three years to support church planters without going through the network. This direction appealed to his session because it simplifies the process and gives his session control of where the money is spent. His church's departure from the network naturally led to a loss of relationships and collaboration within the SWCPN.

### **Counter Trends Away from Church Planting**

Ford shares another unique aspect of the challenges that result due to the loss of relational connection with member churches. He wonders if this season of evangelical ministry in the United States should focus more on congregational care than on church planting. Ford describes the time when he arrived in his large city. He says that it was marked by a unique and significant movement of God. During that time, church planting

was universally accepted as the best way to reach the city. Individuals from various backgrounds, including Presbyterians and Baptists, formed a joint network. This network witnessed remarkable growth. They planted churches, hired a leading evangelical scholar, and started a seminary. Overall, it was a unique time of success for church planting.

However, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ford notes things changed in his city. The joint network functionally ended operations. Reflecting on the SWCPN, he asserts that it is crucial for any networks to avoid becoming too attached to its own existence. He suggests that just like churches, networks can have a season of prominence and influence that may eventually diminish. He wonders if the SWCPN, like any organization, might have a limited lifespan. Today, he says that he is still committed to church planting but has very little motivation to try to restart that local network.

### **Presbytery Culture and Formation**

Network pastors recognize the impact of individual churches within their regions, beyond the number of churches planted. They share stories of their own church's impactful work and desire to bring attention to it within the presbytery and network. They further acknowledge the complexities of presbytery formation supported by the SWCPN when new congregations to that presbytery choose not to become members of the network. They highlight the challenges of coordinating and funding multiple church plants and the limited engagement of some new presbytery churches with the network, hindering its ability to effectively support them.

## **Summary of Loss of Relational Connection Among Members in the SWCPN**

The first significant challenge for pastors' engagement with the SWCPN is loss of relational connection among member churches. They attribute this to the lack of a clear role for member churches once they become established. Challenges in this area include the absence of a clear network identity, the demands of the local congregation, managing crises, adopting a corporate mentality, travel logistics, the tedium of reporting, return on investment, shifting trends away from church planting, and presbytery culture.

### *Loss of Aspirational Leadership*

Several pastors express a second challenge to their engagement with the SWCPN, namely, a loss of aspirational leadership. Concerns with the decision-making process, lack of financial transparency, aimless meetings, unqualified coaches and mentors, outsourced church planter assessments, and a resistance to change are evidence for this challenge. Ford acknowledges his preference for environments with strong leadership and clear opportunities to contribute.

If there isn't good leadership in a room, then I don't really want to be around that. Or if you're not asking me to help or lead and there isn't a clear path, then I just kind of go, well, I'll do something else.

Ford desires to be in a room with strong leaders who value mission clarity and contributions from others to drive the decision-making process. He expresses a tendency to step away from situations that do not meet these criteria in order to seek other endeavors.

Chris likewise emphasizes the need for clear and decisive leadership within the organization. He believes that a clearer vision and direction will enable network leadership and member churches to focus time and resources more effectively.

## **Concerns with the Decision-Making Process**

Some network pastors express concern about the decision-making process among the network leaders. Chris recalls a time when a church planter was neither qualified nor a good fit for the target area. Yet, despite several leaders' strong concerns, the vote passed, the church planter was approved, and money was allocated. With sadness, Chris recounts that the church plant later closed. He perceives the network leadership's attempt to satisfy all stakeholders as being what led to a series of poor decisions.

Other pastors saw that the lack of direct pastoral or church planting experience sometimes resulted in the network's weak decision-making. One pastor "felt like one of the weaknesses, as amazing as a leader as [the network leader] was... he had never served as a pastor." Another shares his admirations for network leadership but recounts,

[One leader] comes in and somehow was able to make the transition from business to church life, which is very different...But because he had never pastored a church or planted a church, I think at times his instincts were not as clear as to who he was working with...we put people in place that I feel like weren't very healthy.

As someone who had not previously served as a pastor or participated in church planting, one pastor felt that his instincts regarding the individuals he was collaborating with were occasionally unclear. Consequently, there were instances where individuals who may not have been emotionally or spiritually healthy were allowed to plant churches.

Kevin reflects on a time when a new leader wanted to bring to positive changes to the network. While Kevin acknowledges that this leader's approach seemed to be on the right track, he felt it may have been too forceful. Kevin mentions the resulting drama that developed within the network, which, combined with challenges in his own presbytery, was disheartening. He highlights the complexity of leading the network, especially when there are conflicting visions for engaging member churches.

Alongside Kevin's line of thought, Chris reflects on his challenges and interactions with network leaders. For example, one leader "wanted to do too much, and so he thinned everything out." When expressing interest to plant a church on the other side of his city, Chris recounts that the leader told him to go for it. In Chris' words,

"Go plant that church"...when I should have been told 'no'. And frankly, I had no business doing that. And then when I started going out there, it was really kind of without a plan. The church here started out so easily, I just thought that one would too and it didn't...But [he] would never say 'no'.

Chris mentions the leader's reluctance to say 'no' contributed to decisions that were not well-executed, such as seeking financial support for a satellite church concept that did not align with Chris' church's philosophy of ministry. Chris likens his first church planting process from his existing church to the metaphor of "the kids running a school" due to lack of oversight. Yet he is grateful that the church is now thriving despite the slower start compared to his parent church.

Other pastors recall times when a leader's decision-making process went outside the network's standing rules. They felt like this leadership decision led to a bad use of network resources. These situations result in pastors losing trust in network leadership.

Theo reflects on one time a network leader's decision led to a loss of his trust in leadership.

Where it got maddening, some of my worst experiences where you'd be at presbytery and you're the [church plant committee] chairman, and [the network leader] gets there 15 minutes before the meeting and says, Hey, I've got, I got a new church planter candidate today. You have never met this person. Just trust me. We're going for it. No one in your presbytery has met this person. You haven't done any kind of [assessment, and] it was like, "Okay!?"

The leader pressed a committee to support a new church planter candidate, despite the lack of prior acquaintance or proper evaluation. This experience made it difficult for Theo to support future leadership decisions.

### **Perception of the Lack of Financial Transparency**

In addition to lax decision-making processes, the network diminished member churches' trust through a lack of transparency and financial accountability. One pastor recalls a time when he was in a leadership position and did not receive the requested account spreadsheet detailing expenses.

There just wasn't any accountability. I don't remember ever really getting an account spreadsheet of 'this is what we spent on what.' I don't remember ever getting that. I asked for it every meeting. And that caused some distrust.

This lack of financial accountability contributed to his sense of distrust. He further expresses frustration with certain coaches on the network payroll, whom he believes "were funding their retirement" through the network by taking on coaching and other responsibilities that they were not suited for or knowledgeable about.

### **Meetings Lacked Substance**

Ford, Chris, and Kevin were united in their belief that the network meetings began to lose practical import and value over time. Ford admitted that eventually meetings within the SWCPN lacked the substance and inspiration that he was hoping for. He asserts that it felt more like a presbytery meeting rather than a gathering that truly uplifted and supported church planters. He was seeking valuable content, inspirational



preaching, and leadership resources, but these valuable components seemed to be missing.

Additionally, Chris asserts the importance of having experienced leaders in church planting in charge of the SWCPN meetings. He suggests that practical knowledge is crucial for addressing the specific needs and challenges church planters face. In his experience, the meetings he personally conducts have been the most effective. He strives to provide practical advice and encouragement that resonates with fellow planters.

Ford suggests that practical equipping at meetings is key. He feels that incorporating training from respected leaders in the field would have greatly benefited him. “It’s not just about reports and updates,” according to Ford, but about receiving guidance and inspiration from those who have walked the path before his generation of church planters.

Kevin also hoped for more practical content. As his workload increased, he found himself getting bored with the meetings. “They didn’t seem as engaging anymore,” he recalls. He said that it is crucial for these gatherings to evolve and adapt to meet the changing needs of church planters. He says that church planters need meetings that truly inspire and equip church planters with the resources and support their calling requires.

Ford went so far as to join another network because “they excelled in what I was longing for in our network, which was really pouring into the planters with great content and inspirational preaching, inspirational leadership stuff.” He asserts that it’s important to find a network that can meet those needs, whether within the SWCPN or by exploring other CPN options.

Chris understands this desire to seek out other networks in search of the support and inspiration. He, too, says that he craves it. But he also mentions that it's important to remember that joining a new network can introduce its own set of challenges. His church was also once part of another network, but like with the SWCPN, they are no longer members. Chris warns that church planters should carefully consider their options and ensure that they find a network that aligns with their needs and values.

In their reflections, Ford, Chris, and Kevin express their shared dissatisfaction with the lack of inspiration and practicality in the SWCPN meetings. They strongly believed that their suggestions for updating the meetings with changing content more suited to the shifting needs of church planters would help to keep the meetings fresh, engaging, and eminently practical. These pastors encourage finding a network that meets the pastor's needs, whether within the current network or by exploring other options.

### **Coaches and Mentors Seem Unqualified**

Another challenge pastors mention is having an unqualified coach assigned to him by the SWCPN. "I have to be honest, Chris says, "the coaching provided by the network didn't really understand the intricacies of church planting." He believes this lack of understanding was due to the coach's lack of experience in church planting and being a senior pastor in a nearby town. He also had a mentor that never checked in on him or offered the emotional and spiritual support he felt he needed. While he knew his assigned mentor had good intentions, Chris felt extremely lonely during those initial years of church planting.

Kevin, however, discovered that sometimes what can be perceived as a lack of qualifications can actually turn out to be a strength. He had a mentor who was

administrative, a skill Kevin admits he lacked. While Kevin disliked him at first, this mentor became a trusted coach.

The best thing that I ever did was chose [him] to be my mentor. I chose him because he was the opposite of the person I would've chosen because I was like... I already know others. I know these guys. I'm already in relationship with them, so I want to pick the hard [one].

Kevin's willingness to choose a mentor that had a different set of skills than he had resulted in a valuable relationship he would otherwise never have experienced. Kevin recalls a time when this mentor emphasized the need to put everything on paper and demonstrate the viability of the church plant to potential donors. Kevin thought it was overkill. But the mentor's insights proved invaluable.

Chris laments that he didn't have someone coaching him who "tell me what to do," "understand my goals," and "provide week-to-week guidance." Chris believes having a mentor he truly admired would have made a significant impact.

To address this concern, Chris tried to steer the SWCPN towards investing more in coaching and building relationships with organizations who specialize in gospel coaching. Kevin agrees that this could have made a significant difference and asserts that it is important to recognize the business aspect of pastoring and church planting, just as other professions do. Chris believes it is about finding that balance between the spiritual and practical aspects of church planting, with supportive and well-trained coaches.

### **Outsourced Assessment Weakened the Unity of Network Plants**

When asked about his initial church planting readiness assessment by the network, Chris shares another unique challenge. Chris states that he did not really go through an assessment process when joining the SWCPN. He underwent a more general

assessment, and network leadership had access to his assessment report. During the interview, he was questioned, and the committee discussed this assessment report, but Chris was disappointed that there was not a comprehensive assessment and evaluation by the leaders of the network.

Chris expresses the frustration he felt later after joining network leadership, when the network approved church planters whom he believed would likely fail. He was deeply concerned about the potential negative impact on the planter, his family, and the wasted resources. This challenge is the main reason Chris no longer engages with the network.

Kevin focuses his concerns on the inherent risks involved in the partnership between the network and church planters. He highlights the entrepreneurial nature of church planting and the potential narcissism that comes with the vision for creating a unique and innovative church. Kevin emphasizes the importance of assessing the track record of the church planter, looking specifically for tangible results and accomplishments. He also considers personal aspects such as a potential church planter's marriage and overall well-being, and places greater emphasis on previous successes in building organizations.

### **Cultural Resistance to Change**

Theo and Chris have observed a resistance to change within the network that creates challenges to further engagement. Theo says that the network's tendency is to plant small, under-resourced churches that primarily serve existing Christians. Instead, he suggests that a more balanced approach is needed to effectively reach and engage non-believers. He believes churches are not started in a way that prioritizes evangelism due to a need to raise financial support from committed Christians.

Chris agrees, and in an effort to address this concern, he relates that his attempt to steer the network towards investing more in coaching and establishing relationships with coaching organizations was met with resistance. Seeing that he could not lead the organization toward change, Chris eventually stepped down from network leadership. He says leaders “before me faced the same stuff,” implying they faced similar challenges.

### *Church Planting Malaise*

Half the participants mentioned a growing lack of excitement for church planting among parishioners is a major challenge. Ford suggests:

Post COVID, things have changed. And it’s not that people don’t love each other and unify, but there just isn’t the same unity that once existed or those same [church planting] dynamics, interestingly.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, the sense of unity that once existed and the dynamics of church planting have changed.

Ford also mentions the challenge of the lack of qualified church planting candidates, even among seminary students and existing pastors, for church planting roles. As a result, Ford questions the effectiveness of church planting today. However, Ford does say that he believes church planting can still be successful with long-term support. He emphasizes the need for adaptability and a willingness to adjust expectations to accommodate the current landscape of church planting in an increasingly secularized society.

Additionally, study participants attribute this trend in decreasing interest in church planting to external factors such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressure of the cancel culture, social media, and general societal trends contrary to valuing church.

### *Summary of Challenges of Involvement in Church Planting Networks*

This second research question aims to explore the challenges faced by senior pastors in their involvement with CPNs. The analysis of the data revealed three primary challenges. Firstly, there is a notable loss of relational connection among the members of the network once their churches were established, which hinders ongoing collaboration and support. Secondly, there is a perceived loss of aspirational leadership, characterized by unclear decision-making processes, a lack of transparency, and inadequate mentorship. Lastly, there is an overall sense of church planting malaise, marked by a lack of enthusiasm, limited qualified candidates, and external societal pressures. These challenges highlight the need for addressing relational connections, fostering effective leadership, and revitalizing the passion for church planting within network churches.

### **How Senior Pastors Overcome Challenges of Church Planting Networks**

The third research question pursued how senior pastors overcame the challenges they faced in their involvement with CPNs. The participant pastors seemed to employ just one strategy to navigate these challenges. Those pastors who stayed in the network prioritized loyalty to the network over personal benefit, recognizing the value of collective strength and collaboration. Other participant pastors described how they made the difficult decision to leave the network or to join other networks when challenges seemed insurmountable.

### *Institutional Loyalty*

Some pastors express deep loyalty to network leadership and their denomination, emphasizing their deep love for their colleagues. Despite any complaints or frustrations voiced, they remain dedicated to the SWCPN.

Theo says that he finds it amusing that some would even consider leaving the network. “I couldn’t have conceived of that,” he asserts. He goes on to say with passion, “If I was ever frustrated about what the network was or wasn’t doing in our part of the world, go have a conversation and try to make it better!” When it comes to leadership, he emphasizes loyalty and values it highly. Rather than abandon the network, he believes that actively participating in the network helps it become the kind of network in which he aspires to belong.

Ford’s perspective on loyalty even extends to those who hold to a different philosophy of ministry within the network. Despite having theological and ministry philosophy differences with some of the network and presbytery church plants, he says, “I get behind works in my presbytery all the time that I personally wouldn’t necessarily want to be a part of, but let’s fund that. Let’s do that. We’re supportive... I can get behind that.” He maintains patience and support for a diversity of churches, even though he is far “more inspired to...plant [certain] kind of churches.” Ford’s belief in the collective strength of the SWCPN allows him to navigate difficult seasons and maintain his commitment to the network, even in the face of personal differences.

### *Relational Loyalty*

Despite the challenges faced within the network, some network pastors say that the support and encouragement they received when they were church planters serves as a source of inspiration to cherish the camaraderie and to maintain relationships.

Kevin says that his perception is that the network has grown even more supportive through the years, with the “underlying message being, ‘We are here to encourage you.’” For Kevin the relational connections override any frustrations he has had with the network. He says, “Your Southwest Church Planting Network, are your church planting dudes... your guys!” He says that the meetings, “almost always felt beneficial.” He says that overcoming the challenges wasn’t hard, and he does not want to overstate the difficulty of remaining involved in something so beneficial.

### *Affiliate With Other Networks*

Some pastors say another way they overcame the challenges was by joining another CPN, which met their need for coaching, training, and fellowship that they did not receive in the SWCPN. One pastor who joined another network said, “their meetings were very much designed to encourage and train... basically gave me what I missed from the network.” He continues, “and it helped that it was a free week in Vail and then a free week in Newport Beach. Good heavens!” He continues, “it was just great to rub elbows with people doing the same things. It was so opposite of everything Presbyterian and so fun.”

In short, joining other CPNs provides pastors with valuable and enriching experiences that met their need for training and coaching, which they believed the SWCPN did not adequately provide. The other network meetings offered encouragement



and training in refreshing context. The interactions and teachings during these gatherings helped fill a void in pastors' personal and professional development.

### *Summary of How Senior Pastors Overcame Challenges to Their Involvement with Church Planting Networks*

The third research question sought to explore strategies employed by senior pastors to overcome the challenges they encountered with church planting networks. Only one effective strategy seemed to be used by all those who stayed in the network. They chose the prioritization of loyalty to the network over personal benefit. Pastors recognize the collective strength and collaborative potential that comes from remaining committed to the network's mission and vision. They understand that their loyalty contributes to the overall success and impact of the network.

However, it is important to acknowledge that participants faced instances where the challenges seemed insurmountable. Some pastors made the difficult decision to leave the network. This decision was driven by their desires to find alternative paths that better align with their goals and aspirations.

### **Hopes Senior Pastors Have for Involvement in Church Planting Networks**

The fourth research question explored the hopes senior pastors have for their involvement with CPNs. When posed with the question, "What hopes do you have for a church planting network if money were no object?" Pastors find themselves momentarily speechless before generating ideas. Those ideas coalesce into ten aspirations for their CPN involvement: a devotion to prayer, a compelling rationale for contemporary church planting, a unified philosophy of ministry, clear measures of success, new models of

church planting, sustainable financial packages, dedicated network leadership, quality training and strategic coaching, tiered gatherings, and continual learning from best practices outside of the network.

### *Devotion to Prayer*

Pastors hope a CPN prioritizes prayer. They encourage churches to actively pray for church plants and seek God's guidance in their own church planting endeavors. Ford hopes to see leaders continue to host "prayer retreats, getting away, really diving deep in relationship" in a beautiful environment. Seth says that it means to start with prayer and "integrate prayer into every aspect" of the vision. He would challenge those in the network with these words,

How often are y'all praying for this? From the front in worship? In Colossians, the Lord says, "Devote yourselves to prayer. Be watchful and thankful." Let's watch and be thankful. Let's watch and see what he does.... We pray for the church plants, and we pray for God to open doors and do things, but I don't know that every church is thinking, God, would you want us to plant a church in the next five years?

Ford and Seth imagine a CPN that prioritizes personal prayer, and actively prays for church plants, seeking God's guidance and intervention.

### *Compelling Rationale for Contemporary Church Planting*

In an increasingly secular age, pastors hope a CPN can articulate a compelling rationale for its existence. Ford is typical of half the pastors interviewed. They emphasize the importance of assessing the relevance of church planting to determine the role and significance of networks built around that purpose. Ford says that a strong apologetic is

needed for the network to “recruit hesitant churches” to become part of “something bigger for the kingdom.”

### *Unifying Philosophy of Ministry*

Pastors hope the CPN has a unified philosophy of ministry centered on an “evangelistic,” “gospel-centered,” “outward facing,” “spiritually formative,” “covenantal and reformed” churches. One pastor hopes that the network reinforces its distinctives through “shared best practices.” Another pastor says that he believes that, as a church planter, he is called to “embrace and embody the distinctives” of the denomination while presenting the “gospel in word and deed” in a way that “welcomes the stranger and challenges the stagnant” with the “beauty of the gospel” in his community.

### *Clear Measures of Success*

Pastors desire networks to articulate clear measures of success. They agree that numbers are not the sole measure of success and recognize the importance of healthy growth and evangelism in church planting. Seth’s view is typical of the pastors interviewed. He reflects on the complexity of determining success for church plants, comparing it to raising children. Just as he wouldn’t define success for his own children based on specific material or societal markers, churches also have their own unique life cycles and trajectories.

Ford agrees and hopes that networks understand that “success is slippery” and “contextual” in church planting. Factors such as “self-sustainability” and “local leadership” play a role. Tony ponders a scenario where success looks different in different contexts,

“Is a church healthy with 90 members in a city of six million? On the other hand, in a rural area where the big churches have 100 people and a network church has 90, the conversation would be different.”

Pastors believe establishing criteria for a healthy church is important but requires careful consideration and a personal understanding of each unique situation. “Rather than aspire to be a megachurch,” most pastors say that a clear measure of success in church planting is “healthy spiritual formation,” “clear gospel-centered preaching and the sacraments,” and “developing a church planting ecosystem.”

The participant pastors generally agree there may be ways to offer support and guidance to churches in a more intentional manner. Yet, pastors say it can be challenging to determine the appropriate timing for intervention when a church plant is struggling. Still, they express the belief that simply allowing a church plant to continue until it can no longer sustain itself is not a healthy approach. Pastors hope for clear network guidance and resources to help churches measure their growth and development.

### *The Need for New Models in This Cultural Moment*

Pastors hope CPNs would seek to build “flourishing,” “healthier,” and “reproducing” churches. Pastors observe that the “current tendency is to plant small, under-resourced churches” that “primarily serve existing Christians” and are “not truly evangelistic and fruitful.” One pastor likens this to a “catch-22 situation, because churches are not started in a way that prioritizes evangelism.” Instead, pastors suggest that a more balanced approach is needed to effectively reach and engage with non-believers in today’s culture. One pastor articulates the challenge this way,

We are moving into more and more of a post-Christian world and we are part of that world. If we don’t learn that, if we don’t gain those muscles [of ministering to today’s secular world], if we don’t learn that heavy

lifting, we are not going to even be able to hardly be in the game. Because once we really get past this generation, there is very little residual Christendom left... a million covenant children a year are leaving the church.

Pastors find themselves in an increasingly post-Christian world, and say that it is imperative that networks recognize and adapt to this reality. If networks fail to develop the necessary skills and understanding to minister effectively in this secular environment, senior pastors in CPNs believe the network will struggle to remain relevant. According to pastors, it is crucial that the network equip church planters with the tools and knowledge to engage with the world as it is today.

### **New Models Imagined**

Pastors hope to see at least four models for church planting through networks today. These can be described as apostolic, anchored, propertied, and micro-networks.

#### *Apostolic*

A few of the pastors propose a solution of launching “apostolic” plants, which would require a minimum 10-year commitment. This “shift in approach could lead to [the establishment of] more evangelistic churches.” In this model, the network deploys the church planter, along with a planting team and a cluster of individuals, to a specific location. These individuals would likely need to engage in tent-making as they receive external network support. Their primary focus would be on prayer, active participation in existing worshiping communities, and embracing evangelism as a way of life. One pastor imagines this model being able to capably start Spanish speaking congregations. The goal of this model is to initiate the process of discipling converts and discern if God is raising

up a church from these efforts. Pastors see this approach fostering a more evangelistic mindset to nurture organic church growth.

### *Anchored*

A second approach is to identify “very adept leaders at a national level and train them, equip them, and fund them” to plant “anchored” churches, giving people in that region a compelling reason to engage. Dreaming about this model, one pastor says,

Plant true flagship churches that we think could get anywhere from 250 to a thousand people that then could actually start replicating themselves in their geographic region.... I could get very excited about that.

He is filled with enthusiasm at the prospect of establishing flagship churches that have the potential to attract a significant number of people, and subsequently reproduce themselves in their respective geographic regions.

Another pastor reflects on a church planter from his church who is an example of this “anchored” model. His planter was provided with ample resources, including a hundred people and financial support, along with the backing of the network. He mentions that the church planter is now leading 300 members and the church is thriving.

### *Propertied*

This third model is an offshoot of the anchored model. The financial strategy for this model is mentioned above. Several pastors interviewed hope networks will creatively reach cities by purchasing property and then sending in the planter. A third of the pastors recalled how many millions they had to raise to build or purchase their first buildings. One pastor said, “Can you imagine how much easier it might be, if we bought these old

mainline buildings in the center of town, and gave them to skilled church planters to start [new congregations]?”

Several pastors reflect the optimistic assumptions made by the PCA when it was first established in the 1970’s, emphasizing that the “cultural climate back then was vastly different compared to now.” Tony, for example, challenges the notion that new denominations can “easily leave behind established institutions and schools and just start again,” pointing out the accumulated generational wealth and resources of mainline churches that cannot be easily replicated. He says,

Church planting is not what it was in the seventies, eighties, or nineties. And I just wonder if there was a lack of a truly robust kingdom theology that understands that institutions, and how things like physical structure and rootedness and permanence are a part of the life of the church.

Tony says that the nature of church planting has evolved over the years, and it is crucial to acknowledge that a comprehensive kingdom theology should encompass the significance of institutions, physical structures, rootedness, and permanence in the life of the church. He wonders, “I just don’t know if we as a denomination—I have no idea, again, I wasn’t [there]—but would we make the same decisions now that we made then, knowing what it is that we face right now?”

Pastors express excitement about cultivating the creativity required for this “propertied” model because it would “support generations of church planting.” Allowing planters to start with a building, a “place to call home” and foster community, from day one would be a significant tool for church planting and mission in our secular age. Pastors hope networks will consider integrating this approach into their larger vision.

### *Micro-Networks*

Other pastors think individual church plants “may not be sufficient anymore,” and instead focus on “micro-networks.” In this model, the network supports regional leaders to lead networks in their regional areas and serve as coaches and mentors for the network.

Most pastors believe these regional network leaders working under the network director would need to be full-time. Ford points out that simply offering a part-time salary may not necessarily free up more time for senior pastors who already “have a full plate,” occupied with other responsibilities to serve in this role. “The money would be nice, but there’s no way to make 25 hours in a day,” one pastor says. “While the idea of a higher paycheck is appealing” to potential leaders of these regional micro-networks, senior pastors say that a stipend does not address the issue of time availability.

One pastor shares an example from his town where he is working in concert with regional pastors to build a micro-network. He says, “the collective support for a local area shifts mindsets,” allowing new churches to onboard. Because these micro-networks focus on one area, this pastor hopes they might be able to develop untapped local funding sources to extend the vision of the larger network.

### **Develop the Pipeline**

Pastors hope networks excel at identifying future leaders by developing a pipeline of talent, and charting locations for future church plants. Pastors desire networks to be able to both “train the right guy, send him out” or “find the right location and send a group of people with a planter to that place.” Pastors desire networks that have numerous approaches to reaching out and identifying individuals whom God may be gathering for



church planting purposes. They emphasize the importance of “casting nets widely” to “attract and connect with potential church planters.” One pastor acknowledges that as God works in “mysterious ways,” so also “by utilizing various methods” networks may discern and gather those called to participate in the mission.

### *Targeted Recruiting*

Several pastors acknowledge a unique challenge within the PCA when it comes to recruiting church planters. Ford says it this way, “There’s a lack of pilots and pastors in the world right now... And I believe finding church planters is even more difficult.” Pastors generally recognize that the PCA’s “strength is in our theology and in intellectual training and biblical training,” and they are “so glad for that.” However, they also note that “our guys are weak on practical stuff that the [non-denominational] guys get either through business or through... conferences or whatever most of our guys are not drawn to.” To address this challenge, pastors desire CPNs to find individuals who have the hard-skills of being “good preachers with good theology” and soft-skills of “organizing and leading churches” with “tenderness of heart and skillfulness of hands.”

### **Youth, Colleges, and Seminaries**

To further develop the pipeline, pastors also hope that a CPN focuses on developing leaders at “a younger age, even junior high” by investing in the “development of potential leaders.” From an early stage, the network can cultivate a “new generation” of skilled and passionate individuals who are prepared to take on the “highs and lows” of church planting and pastoral ministry. This “proactive approach” to leadership development means taking “the network to [youth] and [college] conferences” to “help students imagine how they will be involved in church planting.”

Additionally, a few pastors believe the recruiting process involves actively engaging with bible colleges and seminaries. These pastors suggest several approaches, including “visiting colleges and seminaries, and asking local churches” to identify individuals who may have a calling for church planting. One pastor highlights the impact of his own pastor inspiring and equipping him to pursue ministry. “I am the product of a pastor who poured into me in college,” he says.

Seth reflects on his personal experience as a seminary student and hopes a network can help others with a common misconception he had at that time. He admits to being unfamiliar with the PCA. “The idea of church planting was foreign to me,” he says.

When I was a seminary student, I was so unfamiliar with PCA that I remember not ever asking questions. I said, “I don’t want to plant a church! The idea that I would have to start a church every three or four years and leave and start another one, I don’t want to do that!” And they looked at me and go, “What are you talking about? But you don’t have to start a new church every four years if you’re a church planter?”

Seth acknowledges that his perception did not align with the reality of church planting. He expresses gratitude for the opportunity the network gave him to explore his own interest in church planting and hopes all CPNs do the same.

Senior pastors hope networks identify those with the hard and soft skills of ministry leadership. Additionally, by being involved with youth groups, colleges, and seminaries, pastors hope the network might provide guidance, support, and resources to those who are contemplating a calling to church planting. This involvement allows for the opportunity to share insights, experiences, and strategies related to successful churches. By nurturing these connections, pastors hope networks inspire and equip future church planters to fulfill their calling and contribute to the growth and impact of the network.

### Church Planter Assessment

Pastors hope networks excel at identifying church planters who possess the necessary skills and abilities to connect with individuals who are not familiar with Reformed theology. Pastors say that church planters who “really care about just discipling people in reformed theology” are not going to be able “to plant a church in most cities” because there are not enough “Calvinists around to want to be a part of that!” And so, “unless you can find someone that can relate to people that aren’t yet PCA, let alone win them to Christ,” you don’t have a viable church planter.

Pastors hope for a network that can train qualifying church planters to “lead a church from something to nothing,” “not be a total *prima donna* or an Enneagram eight jerk,” who are “healthy enough not to destroy sheep and staff,” and can “pastor fellow pastors.” Pastors say it requires careful assessment and discernment to find the right individuals amidst the many strengths of the denomination. “You kind of have to weed through a lot of other strengths,” one pastor says, “to find a good [church planter].”

Another pastor hopes the assessment process will become more strenuous than it has been, “more thorough and take time even to slow down.” He prefers for networks to give funding and take more time to conduct a more comprehensive assessment. Another pastor agrees by saying he hopes for networks to slow down their assessment process, “allocating more resources and time into planting few, better churches.”

A few participant pastors also believe that selecting an appropriate and strategic location for the assessment process is helpful for its effectiveness and accuracy in recruiting and assessing. They highlight the significance of a location where experienced church planters in the area and those undergoing the assessment can interact and “enjoy fellowship.” Additionally, pastors say factors such as a comfortable and confidential

space, access to necessary resources, and proximity to the individuals being assessed are important to consider.

### *Candidates*

Several pastors hope networks aspire to be better at identifying the entrepreneurial church planters who possesses the necessary gifts to lead a church from its inception to a healthy state of growth, while also demonstrating humility, emotional intelligence, people skills, teachability, “alignment with the philosophy of ministry,” and “deep understanding of the context” of the candidate’s potential church location. Some pastors used additional phrases to describe the network’s assessment including “assessing their spiritual formation,” counseling, and “soul care.”

Other pastors add the importance of a network assessment to begin by looking for a track record of “building stuff from scratch.” Kevin elaborates on this perspective: “Obviously, I want the person to be doing well and have a good marriage and all that stuff,” but he says the most important things is to show the entrepreneurial track record. “I always want to know, ‘What have you built before this?’” Pastors share Kevin’s perspective, saying that they want to know if the candidate can create and innovate, and if he has experience in “doing something with few resources.”

A few pastors also hope the network assessment excels at assessing the wife’s fitness for church planting. Chris recalls, “More than once we’ve seen churches fail because the wife destroyed relationships in the church.” He says when this happens, it “puts the pastor in an impossible position.” So, the network needs to skillfully evaluate her, “and that’s really hard to do because she is not the one being hired.”

### *Apprenticeships*

Participating pastors also place value on having a period of growth and development for individuals, who “are not yet ready but have potential,” or who may be deemed “too young in their faith” for church planting. They say this could involve assigning them to “work alongside an experienced church planter” or be mentored for a designated period, during which they can “hone their gifts,” mature, and “humbly serve the church” as they “go and grow” and “develop and learn personally and spiritually.”

Other participating pastors hope to see a “mutually selected experienced church planter accompany the apprentice” from the early stages of their apprenticeship. Following this period, one pastors says that “a reassessment could be conducted to evaluate their progress and readiness for church planting.”

Additionally, pastors mention the importance of addressing the post-assessment phase. They suggest that there may be additional components or follow-up activities that can “enhance the accuracy of the assessment.” By filling these learning gaps with an apprenticeship during the post-assessment process, pastors believes that a more “accurate evaluation of the candidate” can be achieved.

Pastors hope that funding for an apprentice position in church planting would be available from multiple sources, such as “the network, the presbytery, or the host church.” They express that the allocation of funding is a “context dependent question” that requires careful consideration and collaboration.

### *Assessing Sites for New Plants*

A few participating pastors express their desire for CPNs to foster a “culture of active prayer” with “good communication” between existing churches in the area. Pastors

say that it is important to be “pastorally sensitive but bold in dealing with” churches who are “hesitant to embrace church planting.” Assessing locations for new church plants requires “prayer and intentional communication with all stakeholders.”

### *Sustainable Financial Packages*

Most participating pastors say the details of the network’s financial commitments are “secondary to the network’s vision and culture.” These pastors hope that “business-minded” men and women will help establish the most sustainable model with their consultation. Yet when posed with a scenario where money is no object, all participating pastors share hopes for their preferred financial arrangements to support church planting through the network. They emphasize the importance of financial commitments to hold churches accountable, and the need for sustainable models. Additionally, pastors hope for generous support and “sustained funding for longer periods” to ensure success and the development of “gifted pastors from diverse backgrounds.”

### **Financial Requirements for Network Membership**

Participating pastors offered three financial arrangements for churches to be members of a CPN: “common percentage,” “pay-to-play,” and “grassroots.”

Several pastors hope for a “common percentage” from every network church. The existing structure of the SWCPN is an example. These pastors say that this approach has worked beautifully in the past and see no reason to change it. They say requiring a giving percentage, such as “1%, 2.5% or 2.75% or whatever,” is necessary for the sustainability of the network, but concede that the network should be “understanding for those churches who are only able to give 1% or less.”

A few participating pastors prefer a “pay to play” approach where there is a tiered percentage for involvement with commensurate member privileges. This allows churches to participate at various levels according to their leadership’s discretion. One pastor says that while “anyone can participate in network meetings, being on the board requires full participation and commitment.” Another pastor says that the inclusion of this “requirement is intended to address the issue of larger churches becoming disengaged” and eventually leaving the network due to feeling like “they were not receiving enough in return for their investment.” On the other hand, he emphasizes that “small churches can fully participate and be involved in church planting,” regardless of their size.

One participating pastor argues for a “grassroots” approach where churches are encouraged to give generously, but their privileges of membership are not tied to the amount they give. Rather than mandating a specific percentage, he encourages churches to give according to what they believe God is calling them to give. He says that just as he would ask his congregation to “give over and beyond their tithe,” he emphasizes the concept of sacrificial giving for churches, acknowledging that the level of sacrifice will vary for each congregation.

### **The Conditions of Network Support Packages for Qualified Church Plants**

Several participating pastors say that they hope the network generously supports church plants as “specific conditions” are met. These conditions should be “time-tested” and “able to meet the new needs of ministry” in this secular age. One pastor says, “A lot of guys spend way too much time on things they think are important, but don’t matter...to anyone but them. I want to help them avoid my mistakes.” The collective wisdom of the network, one pastors says, can help planters today “avoid pitfalls.”

Another pastor explains that “laying out specifics for their involvement with the network” organization “builds a strong [relational] foundation.” He says that this is important for reasons of “philosophy of ministry, trust, integrity.” Still another pastor says that the planter needs to spend the first year “immersing himself in the local culture” to learn “its longings,” and “report back to the network” on how he meets the needs of those longings in his philosophy of ministry and teaching. If there is a particular need for outreach through English as a Second Language, mercy, community outreach to MOPS (mothers of preschoolers), or youth, then network pastors say they want to put planters in touch with the “right folks for training.”

A few pastors say that the success of gathering like-minded individuals would determine the next steps, such as the possibility of “holding Sunday night meetings.” As conditions such as these are met, pastors hope the network “provides a longer runway” than networks have in the past. Tony’s words represent the way several pastors spoke about this “longer runway” approach the challenges of support and funding:

I’ve seen multiple church plants [close]...the [old model says]...all we have to do is get a charismatic guy, get a handful of core group members, give him a big bag of money and send him out, and he’s gonna be fine. And, before too long, he’ll have a great church...but church planting is not what it was in the seventies, eighties, or nineties.

Pastors agree with Tony in saying things like “church planting is getting harder post-COVID,” and “we have to better care for the planters.” One pastor feels strongly that it is crucial to “have at least two years of funding secured” before a planter starts. This allows the development of “gifted pastors” who come from “less privileged backgrounds” who don’t have as many connections to support his plant.

One pastor believes in giving much more to each plant. He says,



I get more excited about investing in something over a longer period of time with a lot more money, in a more healthy way than the, like, “We’re going to plant a lot and we’re going to throw a hundred thousand dollars and it’ll be great.” ...But if you give \$500,000 to something, you’re going to care a whole lot more and you’re going to really slow down and think about it a lot more.

He highlights the significance of investing a substantial resource in a more focused and intentional manner. He argues that such a significant investment would naturally lead to a greater level of care, attention, and deliberation. He says that this approach would ensure a more “thoughtful and thorough” assessment process.

### **Financial Strategy for Acquiring Property**

Several participating pastors hope CPNs value obtaining “beautiful buildings” for church plants to “not to have to set up each week in a school,” although they acknowledge that creative and “agile” approaches are needed to fulfill that mission.

Pastors express how important buildings are to church planting in these ways: “I just think that there’s...a lot of our ministry philosophy and approach that doesn’t take into account...how important having a [permanent] place is.” “I feel like we really began to minister to the community once we got into a building. New folks told me they didn’t know we existed when we met in the school.” “People don’t see church plants as a real church until they have a building.”

One pastor compares the lack of a permanent church homes to the socioeconomic challenges faced by families who are constantly renting and unable to buy a house, hindering their ability to fully integrate into their communities. “That need for a place,” another pastor says, “goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden.”

Seth believes that “this is not limited to owning property.” He believes “rented spaces can serve as meeting space for worship,” although the duration of the rental may impact the “sense of community and the ability to adapt to changes.” Ford acknowledges that while it may not always be necessary to own, having a “permanent, dedicated space for worship without doing much to set up and tear down” is “just categorically different” in that it provides an access point for people to engage and develop roots into the community, and provide lasting presence.

Chris suggests sending people with real estate experience to work out the business plan. These individuals engage with planters to understand the church’s preferred location and space requirements. He shares an example of a property that was initially listed for a price beyond a church’s reach. However, through creative solutions this church was able to make the acquisition financially viable.

Pastors suggest that a network “establish a foundation for church buildings” by providing “massive amounts of money to buy property for churches.” Another suggests creating “church property endowments” where church planters and churches can apply for funds to purchase property. Another strategy that pastors mention is to focus on purchasing and planting churches in existing “empty mainline buildings” and “repurpose these properties.”

### *Dedicated Network Leadership*

Most pastors advocate for a democratic approach in the network, where the board is elected by member churches, ensuring “representation.” Pastors also express a preference for “three-year terms for board members with a break” period “after serving consecutive terms.”

## **Leadership Meetings**

A few pastors shared the same hope about leadership meetings themselves, namely, to “blend business-related discussions with intentional moments for prayer.” One pastor draws parallels to his session meetings, where specific matters are addressed, and important questions are discussed, “bathed in prayer,” so they can “actively respond to what God is doing.”

## **Leadership Meeting Locations**

Several pastors did express their hope that networks would hold their leadership meetings in the cities where other network leaders could host them and “let us see what he is doing” in his ministry context. Seth suggests that holding network leadership meetings in network cities give the host church the opportunity to “create a warm and inviting atmosphere,” and have “a nice dinner together.” Seth envisions hosting the leadership team at “his place, praying for his church and people” on location together.

Pastors say that this approach would allow the leadership team members to gain firsthand insights “into the worlds of our brothers,” fostering “stronger connections,” greater “familiarity and intimacy,” akin to having someone “in your own home.” One pastor highlights the way hosting allows for relational connections to be formed through “seeing pictures of each other’s families” or “getting to know each other’s pets.” One pastor acknowledged the importance of rest and encouragement for the senior pastors involved in such meetings, and they are mindful of time constraints in implementing such measures.

## **Network Leader's Role**

A few pastors in this study say that the network should be led by a full-time network leader who can effectively communicate the vision and goals of the network. Pastors say that it is the responsibility of the network leader to strategically “share the success stories” of church planting and testify to the “transformative work of Jesus through the network.”

Seth describes his hopes for this leader in this way,

The director would come on [board] and see it as an indefinite calling. They wouldn't be thinking in a three-year increment, five-year increment. They would be like, “I'm going to be here until God calls me away, but I can see the work and it's going to take me a while to do this. So let's lean in heavy.”

He hopes the director's perspective is one of viewing their role as an indefinite calling.

Pastors also say that the network director should work with a “committee or a team on goals for the years one, three, and five,” and to develop a clear and “compelling approach to connecting with every church in the region.” This approach should include a commitment to “travel a lot,” “go to mission conferences,” and “actively engage with churches over the course of the year.”

While pastors express a willingness to support the director “traveling as much as possible,” they also acknowledge the need for practical considerations such as family commitments, and leading staff in the network office.

## ***Quality Training, Care, and Strategic Coaching***

The significance of providing a safe space where church planters and their spouses can openly share their challenges, celebrations, and struggles without fear of negative consequences from higher church authorities is something pastors aspire

networks to provide them. Pastors desire a wholistic approach to spiritual formation and skills for planters and an exclusive environment of safety for the members of the network.

### **Holistic Approach to Spiritual Formation & Skills Development**

Pastors hope networks provide pathways for planters and pastors to receive “holistic care” for “spiritual formation” and “skill development.” They envision this looking like “getting away to retreat centers,” or “bringing in counselors and other people to love on our wives and as couples” and “developing a more holistic mentality.”

One pastor expresses his desire for the network to provide resources and support this way:

I would love it if we had resources for the planters on the practical stuff, and then also spiritual care, whether it’s through a website or through therapy and counseling or whatever it is, but some kind of continual care for them.

He suggests the creation of resources that address practical issues commonly faced by planters, as well as resources for ongoing spiritual care. These resources could be made available through a dedicated website or through avenues such as therapy and counseling.

### *Cohorts*

Most participating pastors say that they hope networks place planters in “cohorts where they really have safety to be real, but also can work on challenges together and get help.” One pastor imagines a “comprehensive program” that focuses on personal growth, “soft skills,” and includes retreats, counseling, and support for both planters, his wife, and his children.

### *Required Coaching*

A few participating pastors emphasize the importance of offering coaching and resources to help fill any gaps and enhance the effectiveness of church planters and pastors within the network. These pastors say that they hope the network requires planters to be “coached” by skilled “coaches who are coached.”

Pastors observe a recurring “pattern of a lack of self-awareness” among church planting candidates and hope that qualified and trained coaches are required to help each network member “identify gaps and help him develop a stronger foundation” by “shoring up the basics” like “soul care,” conducting session meetings, building trust with elders, and managing a staff. By investing into coaching, one pastor says that the network could develop into a “college of ministers,” through which ongoing support could be available to the pastors even after they have a physical building.

### *Tiered, Safe Gatherings*

Amid ministry and family demands, most participating pastors imagine the network hosting national, regional, and local “gatherings” to drive the network’s vision that are “a blast” to attend. Ford speaks like most of the participants when he says,

There have to be meetings, but there also seems to be a need for moments of retreat and care that actually would be inspiring enough that people would be like, I want to be there! And where my wife actually wants to be there in spite of the fact we have to get daycare for our kids for three or four days.

He says that it is essential to have regular meetings, but there is also a need for moments of retreat and care that are truly inspiring and compelling. Pastors emphasize the

importance of creating an atmosphere where church planters can freely share their experiences, seek support, and receive guidance without fear of negative consequences.

Ford cares that network meetings provide an “amount of safety where a planter and a planter’s wife could be actually very real about where they’re at in their marriage, where they’re at in their plant, what are the challenges, what are they celebrating.”

Another pastor hopes for the meetings not to carry “presbytery level consequences.” “If a guy says, ‘we’re really struggling in our marriage.’ All right, well, let’s not wound you for that,” he imagines.

### **National Gathering for Camaraderie, Encouragement, and Worship**

Even if it requires planning for childcare or other logistical challenges, one pastors says, “This meeting should be the one event that people want to go to.”

Chris believes that gathering all the leaders together for a week or a few days to discuss various aspects of church, family, and life would “just make the network more attractive.” As an example, they mention the importance of teaching pastors how to “develop skills in preaching grace,” which they believe could be highly encouraging for pastors.

Other pastors imagine making these national gatherings appealing to the senior pastors of anchor churches. Tony says he hopes influential church pastors would “step into the leadership role their church demands” and “host the annual gatherings for the network,” expressing a personal willingness to attend and “take a keynote” spot. Another pastor emphasizes the importance of addressing both practical aspects, such as “training elders” or “navigating the process of renting a building,” as well as providing “spiritual care and support through the modules.”

## **Regional Gatherings**

Pastors imagine regional gatherings as a means of follow-up to the annual gathering. Pastors say the programming of the meetings ought to be centered around the question, “What does the planter need?” Pastors say the content should be “way less information, but more opportunity to retreat and actually care for people” in a way that would be able to provide “some good experience,” whether that’s worship or a “time of retreat or soul care,” or “bringing in an expert on spiritual formation to take us through some spiritual exercises” and praying together.

At these regional meetings, pastors imagine the “experienced guys asking church planters about their outreach initiatives in the first year,” and considering how they “model prayer and invite their congregation to walk with Jesus.” One pastor draws inspiration from Jesus’ approach to his disciples, where he “served, nurtured, spoke with, challenged, and pushed them” toward understanding His profound love. The regional gatherings would, in the words of one pastor, “embody this love and nurture planters with new skills.”

## **Local Gatherings**

Pastors emphasize the value of cohort-style gatherings at the local level that provide a platform for sharing important information and understanding each participant’s progress in their church planting journey. The focus is on coaching and support, with the intention of helping church planters do things like “achieve their goals and metrics for the year” and “evaluate their annual preaching plan.” The local meetings, pastors say, can also be a time of “focused prayer for the contexts” of each church planter.



### *Continual Learning from Best Practices Outside of the Network*

Several pastors imagine the network convening a gathering of church planting experts, “primarily from the PCA but potentially from other sources as well.” The purpose of this gathering would be to “explore the question of how to identify and determine what makes a good church planter.” They believe that by bringing together a diverse group of experts, valuable insights and perspectives can be shared to shed light on this important topic. One pastor notes that it is important for the network’s leadership to stay up on the latest church planting research in order to “think several steps ahead.”

### *Summary of Hopes Senior Pastors Have for Involvement in Church Planting Networks*

The fourth research question aimed to uncover the hopes that senior pastors hold for their involvement in CPNs. The analysis revealed ten key aspirations in their engagement. These aspirations include a deep devotion to prayer, a compelling rationale for contemporary church planting, a clear and well-defined philosophy of ministry, the establishment of clear measures of success, exploration of new and innovative models of church planting, the provision of sustainable financial packages, the presence of dedicated and visionary network leadership, the availability of high-quality training and strategic coaching, the implementation of tiered gatherings, and a commitment to continuous learning from best practices outside of the network. Senior pastors recognize the importance of intentionally designing these networks not only to meet the spiritual needs of individuals but also to equip church planters and church leaders to effectively engage their broader cultural context. By embracing this approach, senior pastors believe

that CPNs can continue to appeal to other pastors like themselves who hope to plant flourishing churches by God's Spirit in this modern era.

### **Summary of Findings**

This chapter explored the engagement of senior pastors with CPNs, focusing on their perspectives regarding the benefits, challenges, ways to navigate those challenges, and their hopes for these networks. The research findings indicate that pastors primarily view camaraderie in ministry, a compelling vision, and access to capital funds as benefits for their involvement in CPNs.

Pastors also acknowledged several challenges, including the gradual loss of relational connection among members, the absence of aspirational leadership, and a sense of complacency and lack of enthusiasm in church planting efforts. To navigate these challenges, pastors employed just one approach, namely, prioritizing institutional or relational loyalty to the network over personal benefit.

Looking ahead, pastors express their hopes for CPNs, envisioning a devotion to prayer, the development of a compelling rationale for contemporary church planting, the promotion of a unifying philosophy of ministry, the establishment of clear measures of success, the exploration of new models suitable for the current cultural context, sustainable financial packages, dedicated network leadership; high-quality training, care, and strategic coaching; tiered and safe gatherings; and a commitment to continual learning from best practices outside of the network.

In the next chapter, the conclusions drawn from this research will be shared, providing insights and implications for the future of CPNs.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how senior pastors engage with church planting networks (CPN). It is hoped that by this study new insights can be drawn to develop resilient CPNs which strengthen pastors as they plant new churches to become healthy, established congregations. There were two assumptions in this study. First, at a time when forty million people report leaving the church in the past twenty-five years—and more churches shutter their doors than new ones open—church planting is getting harder.<sup>485</sup> Secondly, pastors who have planted a church in a CPN and lead that church into maturity with strong leadership and permanent property, offer key insights into how CPNs function to strengthen their ministry.

In post-Christian America, the pre-Christian context of the Book of Acts offers valuable principles for effectively contextualizing the gospel message and shaping the structure of contemporary CPNs. In chapter two, the review of literature sheds insight on the positive contributions of the book of Acts to contemporary CPNs, and the challenges in using Acts for CPN development. In additions, current research on best practices for networking reveal significant applications. By examining these areas, this study aims to uncover the benefits for pastors' involvement in CPNs and their aspirations for future networks.

The following research questions guided the research.

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<sup>485</sup> Davis, Graham, and Burge, *The Great Dechurching*, 3; Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time."

1. What benefits do senior pastors experience when they engage with church-planting networks?
2. What challenges do senior pastors face when they engage with church-planting networks?
3. How do senior pastors navigate the challenges they face when they engage with church-planting networks?
4. What are senior pastors' hopes for engagement with church-planting networks?

### **Summary of the Study and Findings**

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from six Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) teaching elders who were senior pastors who planted a church in the Southwest Church Planting (SWCPN), remained involved in the SWCPN for at least ten years, and planted at least one church out of their congregation.

The literature review has shown that numerous benefits can be derived from the book of Acts when developing strategies for contemporary CPNs. Acts provides valuable insights into the shifts in missional practices across time. Acts offers guidance on for structure and accountability of CPNs. Acts also explores the importance of regional hubs within networks and delves into the roles of network churches. Further, Acts addresses crucial considerations for organic church planting situations, such as the motives behind planting, the willingness to sacrifice and relinquish control, and the unwavering confidence in God's providence. Additionally, Acts considers the timing of church planting, recognizing factors like rapid growth and population migration.

Moreover, a study of Acts can provide valuable insights into understanding crisis, defiant, and reluctant church planting. Acts demonstrates the significance of population centers when deciding where to plant new churches. The book offers insights into different types of churches to plant, including pioneering church plants and household church plants.

Acts also offers significant guidance on CPN leadership. It explores how CPNs can foster meaningful relationships, equip leaders to effectively mobilize people, and provide training on conflict resolution. Additionally, the book includes insightful case studies on network dynamics in cities such as Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth.

Lastly, Acts provides valuable guidance on network training topics, covering areas such as prayer, preaching, discipleship and teaching, liturgy design, encouragement for bi-vocational ministry, evangelism, stewardship, and diaconal ministries. These benefits derived from the book of Acts showcase a wealth of insight for contemporary CPNs.

However, it is important to acknowledge that challenges may arise when utilizing Acts for the development of today's CPNs. One of these challenges is discerning general principles from the narrative. Scholars generally agree that Luke's account in Acts takes more of a descriptive approach rather than a prescriptive one, making it crucial to carefully interpret and apply in a contemporary context. It can be difficult to extract universal principles from the descriptive accounts found in Acts.

Another challenge is the limited explicit application to church planting in commentaries and scholarly works. While Acts provides rich narratives and accounts of

early church planting, there is little application toward CPNs in the available commentaries.

Therefore, it is important to approach the text of Acts with discernment, recognizing the challenges in deriving general principles and the limited explicit application found in commentaries. The book of Acts can serve as a helpful resource, but additional sources and considerations are necessary for developing effective CPN strategies in the modern context.

In addition, extensive research conducted in the field of network dynamics within organizational hierarchies has provided valuable insights for team building. These findings have significantly contributed to our understanding of effective collaboration, knowledge utilization, and network performance. The literature highlights several best practices that CPN leaders should consider.

First and foremost, building trust is crucial. Trust serves as the foundation of successful network dynamics, creating a safe and supportive environment where team members feel comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns. It fosters openness and mutual respect, which are essential for effective teamwork.

Alignment is another important best practice emphasized in the literature. Ensuring that team members are aligned in terms of vision, goals, expectations, and roles is critical for fostering effective teamwork. When everyone is working towards a common purpose, it enhances coordination and efficiency, and ultimately improves team performance.

Maintaining psychological safety is also highlighted as a key aspect of successful teams. When team members feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to take risks,

express their perspectives, and engage in constructive dialogue. This psychological safety encourages innovation and creativity within the team.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in team dynamics and performance. Effective leaders inspire, motivate, and guide their teams towards achieving shared goals. They encourage open communication, promote reflexive learning, and provide support and guidance when needed.

Furthermore, the research offers valuable insights into various aspects of team learning, including stakeholder collaboration, network structure, timing of team activities, and the power of reflexive learning. These insights have practical implications for leaders, emphasizing the importance of fostering a culture that values teamwork, leveraging the power of collaboration, and creating an inclusive environment where team members can openly communicate, share ideas, and take risks. By adopting a dynamic perspective on team learning, leaders can optimize team performance, drive innovation, and effectively navigate the challenges posed by uncertain contexts and hierarchical structures.

This body of research serves as a valuable resource for leaders of innovative networks, providing practical strategies for enhancing performance, achieving ambidexterity, and ultimately driving successful network outcomes.

The interviews revealed senior pastors' perspectives on the benefits, challenges, and strategies to navigate those challenges, and their aspirations for these networks. The research findings reveal that pastors primarily perceive camaraderie in ministry, compelling vision, and access to capital funds as key benefits in their involvement in CPNs.

However, pastors also identify several challenges in their engagement with CPNs. These challenges include the gradual loss of relational connection, the loss of aspirational leadership, and a sense of complacency and lack of enthusiasm in church planting efforts. To overcome these challenges, pastors adopt a singular approach, prioritizing institutional or relational loyalty to the network over personal benefit.

Looking ahead, pastors express their hopes for their involvement with CPNs. These include a devotion to prayer, the development of a compelling rationale for contemporary church planting, the promotion of a unifying philosophy of ministry, the establishment of clear measures of success, the exploration of new models suitable for the current cultural context, sustainable financial packages, dedicated network leadership, high-quality training and strategic coaching, tiered gatherings, and a commitment to continual learning from best practices outside of the network.

By considering these perspectives, pastors can contribute to the ongoing enhancement and development of CPNs, ensuring that the next generation of network leaders are equipped to meet the evolving needs and challenges of ministry.

## **Discussion of Findings**

In this section, the literature and interview research are compared to identify how senior pastors engage with CPNs. The research questions will be addressed in light of these findings.



## *The Benefit of CPNs to Pastors*

The first research question explores the benefits that senior pastors derive from their involvement in CPNs. Most pastors highlight three significant benefits: camaraderie, compelling leadership, and access to capital.

### **Camaraderie Sustains Pastors in CPNs**

Camaraderie plays a crucial role in sustaining pastors in CPNs. The fellowship and friendship found within the network are a source of immense encouragement for pastors like Chris, who describes the *esprit de corps* as a lifeline in the often-lonely early years of church planting. Seth emphasizes the value of working together as a team, knowing that he is not alone in their journey. This sense of community and shared purpose reinforces the importance of horizontal connections within the network, as highlighted by renowned sociologist Manuel Castells.<sup>486</sup>

The importance of building trust and learning as a team in creating and sustaining camaraderie in networks is highlighted in the literature.<sup>487</sup> Kuhn and Galloway argue that as trust develops among peers within a network, various benefits arise.<sup>488</sup> This aligns with the experiences of pastors in CPNs, who benefit from the camaraderie and support provided by their fellow pastors.

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<sup>486</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 176.

<sup>487</sup> Bennett and Ramsden, "The Contribution of Business Associations to SMEs"; Besser and Miller, "The Structural"; Godino, Molina, and Martí, "Coffee and Cigarettes in Industrial Relations"; Kuhn and Galloway, "With a Little Help from My Competitors."

<sup>488</sup> Kuhn and Galloway, "With a Little Help from My Competitors."

Harvey et al. explain that in network learning, team members actively engage in exchanging information, experiences, and perspectives.<sup>489</sup> They collectively make sense of new information and apply it to their work. This process of network learning resonates with the pastors' experiences in CPNs, where they actively engage with their peers, share insights, and collectively grow in their understanding and application of new knowledge.

Participants in CPNs shared various examples of collaboration, such as working together to build core groups, discussing staff issues in a psychologically safe environment, hosting visiting network families, coaching one another through different seasons of ministry, and sharing liturgy resources. These examples illustrate the concept of teaming, which was developed by Amy C. Edmondson, the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School.<sup>490</sup>

Edmondson emphasizes that temporary networks or teams thrive when they collaborate across existing boundaries, learn together, and adapt in complex and uncertain environments. The collaboration and collective learning experienced by the pastors in CPNs align with Edmondson's research, highlighting the effectiveness of teaming in achieving shared goals and navigating challenges.

By actively collaborating and learning together, the pastors in CPNs not only foster camaraderie but also enhance their collective capabilities. Through shared experiences and insights, they can tap into a wealth of knowledge and expertise within the network. This collective learning allows them to stay informed about emerging trends

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<sup>489</sup> Harvey et al., "The Dynamics of Team Learning," "The Dynamics of Team Learning."

<sup>490</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 12–15.

and best practices, enabling them to effectively respond to the dynamic nature of ministry in their local contexts.

Moreover, the collaborative efforts within CPNs create a supportive and encouraging atmosphere, providing pastors with the necessary resources and guidance to navigate challenges, and overcome obstacles. This sense of camaraderie strengthens their resilience in ministry.

Furthermore, the experiences shared by participants in CPNs align with the research of Chris Bruno, a pastor and executive director of the Antioch School Hawaii, and Matt Dirks, a pastor and church planter trainer. Bruno and Dirks highlight the collaboration between Paul and leaders from Ephesus, as well as churches throughout Macedonia and Greece, as depicted in Acts 19-20.<sup>491</sup> They argue that this interaction exemplifies Paul's strategic approach to building friendships, fostering cooperation, and strengthening a broader network of churches.

The pastors' experiences in CPNs resonate with Bruno and Dirks' research, as they also emphasize the importance of collaboration and building relationships within networks. The pastors in CPNs engage in similar strategic efforts, cultivating friendships and partnerships with other pastors and churches, ultimately strengthening the network, and expanding its impact.

By leveraging the principles of collaboration and strategic relationship-building, the pastors in CPNs enhance their own ministries and contribute to the growth and effectiveness of the broader network of churches.

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<sup>491</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 69–76.

According to my research, even when pastors in CPNs did not feel particularly close to other network pastors, the Descriptive Weak Ties Hypothesis proved to be true. A case in point is Tony, who shared that despite having only brief interactions with another senior pastor at SWCPN meetings, that pastor offered Tony a job interview for a church staff position. This experience aligns with the research conducted by Laura K. Gee, Jason Jeffrey Jones, and Moira Burk, experts in the fields of economics, sociology, and computational social science, respectively.

Gee, Jones, and Burk found that the Descriptive Weak Ties Hypothesis holds true in networking environments.<sup>492</sup> Their research reveals that most job opportunities arise from weak ties rather than strong ties. This means that even before pastors in CPNs develop close relationships within the network, they can benefit from the broader range of contacts and opportunities that weak ties provide.

By tapping into these weak ties within CPNs, pastors increase their chances of collaboration and discovering new insights and opportunities. The research by Gee, Jones, and Burk suggests that relationships between CPN participants ministering in different contexts may yield valuable connections and fresh perspectives more frequently.

This research underscores the importance of maintaining an open mindset and actively engaging with a diverse range of network participants. By doing so, pastors in CPNs can expand their knowledge, broaden their horizons, and seize new opportunities that arise from these weak ties within the network.

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<sup>492</sup> Gee, Jones, and Burke, “Social Networks and Labor Markets.”

## **Network Leadership is Crucial to Network Vision**

Being part of a compelling vision is another a significant benefit for pastors in CPNs. A compelling vision has the power to attract and motivate pastors, igniting their passion and inspiring them to be part of something greater than their immediate context. One pastor's statement exemplifies this when he said, "I was compelled by the big vision... wanting to be a part of something greater than just your immediate context. That's exciting!"

However, my research suggests that while a compelling vision attracts and motivates pastors, it is the network leadership that plays a crucial role in keeping them engaged. In fact, CPNs rise and fall on the effectiveness of their leadership. During my research, pastors expressed their enthusiasm for network leadership's ability to effectively communicate, promote, and defend the network's vision. This aspect of leadership garnered more enthusiastic responses than any other benefit mentioned.

For example, Seth mentioned that the leaders of the network are exceptional leaders who have had a significant impact on him. Another pastor, Ford, described the presence of "strong, godly visionaries" in the network as a "huge" and "refreshing" benefit. Pastors specifically noted the gifts of network leaders in preserving the SWCPN leadership culture. They expressed respect for these leaders, using phrases such as "excellent recruiter," "ability to adapt," "effective communication skills," "inspiring visionary," and "ability to attract and onboard new planters."

Effective network leadership ensures that the vision is not only communicated clearly but also consistently reinforced and defended. Network leaders guide and inspire pastors, creating an environment where the vision is embraced and actively pursued.

Their leadership keeps pastors engaged, motivated, and aligned with the collective purpose of the network.

One reason why network leadership is highly valued by these pastors is because they have witnessed excellent examples of leadership in action within the SWCPN. Pastors have shared experiences where older network leaders actively listened and learned from younger members, while younger members were encouraged and mentored by seasoned leaders. These dynamics foster a culture of mutual respect and collaboration within the network.

For instance, one pastor described a meeting where the network leadership identified several destinations for church plants and then invited input from everyone present on how to reach those goals. The leader facilitated the discussion by saying,

“These are the places that we’re trying to get to. What are y’all’s ideas about how to get there? If we’re going to try to do one new work next year, where do we want to go? How do we do this?”

This open and inclusive approach allowed pastors to feel a sense of ownership and collaboration within the network. It empowered them to actively contribute their ideas and perspectives, fostering a comprehensive and inclusive decision-making process.

The pastors’ experiences of this collaborative leadership in action align with the findings of scholars such as Castells, David Ehrlichman, Niall Ferguson, and Anne-Marie Slaughter.<sup>493</sup> These network experts have demonstrated through their research that effective leaders leverage the collective intelligence and diverse perspectives of their

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<sup>493</sup> Castells, *The Rise*, 176–78; Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 37; Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower*, 354; Slaughter, “How to Succeed in the Networked World,” 76–89.

members by tapping into networks. This enables them to find more innovative solutions and problem-solving approaches.

The collaborative decision-making process that pastors have experienced within the SWCPN not only fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment but also enhances engagement among members. This, in turn, leads to higher satisfaction and retention rates within the network. By embracing collaboration and actively seeking input from members, network leadership creates an environment where pastors feel valued, heard, and invested in the collective success of the network.

### **Financial Support Provides Security to Focus on Ministry**

The financial support provided by the SWCPN to church planters, a third significant benefit, offers a measure of security, allowing them to focus on critical aspects such as evangelism, preaching, and administration. This support enables pastors to devote their time and energy to these essential tasks without the added stress of marketplace workplace demands to make a living. Peyton Jones, a church planting trainer for the Southern Baptists' North American Mission Board, has conducted research on bivocational church planting in the book of Acts, and his insights, combined with the experiences shared by pastors in the interviews, shed light on the significance of financial support.<sup>494</sup>

Jones' research highlights that Paul's work as a tentmaker taught him how to engage with ordinary people from different walks of life. In contrast, the pastors interviewed expressed gratitude for the SWCPN support packages that allowed them to

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<sup>494</sup> Jones, *Church Plantology*, 363.

focus solely on their pastoral responsibilities. They appreciated not having to be bi-vocational, as it allowed them to evangelize more effectively and without the added pressure of balancing multiple roles.

However, Jones' research also reveals that Paul's bi-vocational provided him with unique advantages. It allowed him to establish relationships with his coworkers and demonstrate a faithful presence amid the workplace. This aspect of Paul's experience highlights the importance of being able to connect with people outside of the church context, fostering relationships and sharing the message of faith in a relatable and accessible manner. Jones' research helps CPN leaders acknowledge the advantages that bi-vocational opportunities can provide in terms of establishing connections and being a faithful presence in the wider community.

### *The Challenges of CPNs to Pastors*

The literature and interviews consistently highlight the importance of both hard trust and soft trust in sustaining camaraderie and vision within CPNs. Challenges for pastors in CPNs arise when hard trust is broken or diminished, which reinforces the research of Robert Bennett, Cambridge professor, and Mark Ramsden, Kings' College London sociologist.<sup>495</sup>

The loss of trust in network members leads to a loss of relational connection, aspirational leadership, and a sense of church planting malaise. When pastors lose confidence in the CPN's ability to effectively communicate, cast vision, and maintain structural integrity, the network's overall health and vitality are jeopardized. The

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<sup>495</sup> Bennett and Ramsden, "The Contribution of Business Associations to SMEs."



literature strongly emphasizes the importance of shared decision-making in networking, while the interviews reveal that the formation of hierarchies within networks, creating what one pastor describes as an “unbreakable” insider group, erodes trust. As this trust declines, so does the strength and effectiveness of the network.

Another challenge that the literature sheds light on is the issue of transparency and financial accountability. One pastor shared an experience of being in a leadership position and not receiving the requested account spreadsheet detailing expenses. This lack of financial accountability contributed to his sense of distrust. Bruno and Dinks’ research suggests that CPNs should prioritize cultivating an atmosphere of openness and accountability.<sup>496</sup> They emphasize the detrimental effects that financial mismanagement can have on a church or partnership and assert the crucial need for transparency and accountability. The example of the Apostle Paul is brought forth, highlighting his openness and transparency in handling finances within the Corinthian network. Paul took deliberate steps to involve trusted leaders, ensuring responsible management and accountability.

Another challenge is disillusionment with the return on investment in the CPN is understandable. Despite some churches giving significant financial contribution, no churches were planted in their cities. This lack of tangible results can be disheartening and can lead some pastors to question the effectiveness of the network.

The network’s defense, citing the challenges of planting churches in some cities, such as turf wars and a history of dysfunction among churches, adds another layer of complexity to the situation. It highlights the difficulties and complexities involved in

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<sup>496</sup> Bruno and Dirks, *Churches Partnering Together*, 125–26.

church planting, particularly in areas with preexisting issues and conflicts among churches.

These experiences raise important questions about the accountability and transparency of the network. It is crucial for the network to have clear communication and realistic expectations regarding the challenges and potential outcomes of church planting in different contexts. It is also important for the network to provide support and guidance to member churches, addressing the specific challenges they face and working together to overcome them.

With the increasing demands placed on pastors today, many find it challenging to address the various challenges they encounter within CPNs. These challenges are often seen as an additional burden on top of their congregational responsibilities, leaving pastors with limited energy and resources. To overcome these challenges, CPNs must prioritize transparency, accountability, and shared decision-making. By fostering an environment of trust and camaraderie among members, pastors can navigate the demands of their roles more effectively, contributing to the long-term success and growth of the network.

### *Pastors Need Tools to Overcome CPN Challenges*

When pastors in CPNs face challenges, my research shows a singular way by which pastors overcome network challenges, namely, to value organizational or relational loyalty above their concerns. A few pastors work with the network leadership to address their concerns, while some members simply leave the network when conflict escalates. Additionally, network leadership allowed some members to exit the network without following the bylaws, further eroding trust.

The research of Len Tang, director of Fuller Theological Seminary's church planting program, argues that rather than treating conflict as a failure or anomaly among God's people, pastors should normalize it and recognize its potential for growth.<sup>497</sup> On a positive note, some pastors embraced Tang's perspective and sought clarity with network leadership, working through their differences.

Tang points out that prominent figures in Acts, Barnabas and Paul parted ways due to a disagreement regarding John Mark (Acts 15:36-39). The literature and interviews reveal that conflicts are inevitable among talented individuals with strong visions and passions who are relatively new to each other, particularly when it comes to the mission and methods of a church plant. Despite the challenges, if pastors in CPNs view conflict as a normal and necessary part of building a sustainable network, it can be productive.

In addition to normalizing conflict, CPNs can proactively navigate it by utilizing a powerful relational tool known as "bridging," as suggested by Ehrlichman.<sup>498</sup> Bridging involves the intentional efforts of individuals called "bridgers" to connect different clusters within a network, preventing information from being confined within echo chambers where individuals simply reinforce each other's beliefs.

Bridgers play a crucial role in breaking down boundaries and facilitating the flow of information between like-minded communities within the network. By strengthening the connections of bridges, information can freely flow, and the negative effects of echo

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<sup>497</sup> Tang, "Leaders Mutually Formed," 118.

<sup>498</sup> Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*, 22.

chambers can be mitigated. This approach promotes open dialogue, encourages diverse perspectives, and ultimately enhances the overall health and success of the network.

By embracing conflict as an opportunity for growth and leveraging the power of bridgers to foster information exchange, CPNs can effectively navigate challenges and build stronger, more sustainable networks. This approach promotes open dialogue and encourages diverse perspectives, ultimately enhancing the overall health and success of the network.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In light of the findings described above network leaders are advised to integrate eleven practices increase senior pastors' involvement within CPNs. These eleven initiatives are to prioritize prayer; consistently ask and answer the question, "Why church planting?"; unify around a philosophy of ministry; establish clear measures of success; encourage a variety of church planting models; develop the pipeline in younger generations; design sustainable financial packages that consider property acquisition; encourage board and micro network coordinators to lead together; require training, care, and strategic coaching; host national, regional, and local network gatherings; and integrate new research findings to improve best practices for CPNs. After I introduce these eleven recommended practices, I will offer three areas for networks to place their focus and provide a tool for assessing senior pastor's involvement in CPNs. This tool may be used by network leadership to evaluate member engagement.

### *Prioritize Prayer and Spiritual Formation*

The first recommended practice is to prioritize prayer and spiritual formation. This research reveals that CPNs pastors believe prayer needs to be a top priority for every CPN. Network leaders should encourage network churches to engage in active prayer for the success of church plants and to seek God's guidance in their own church planting endeavors. Networks may organize prayer retreats, teach on prayer, create opportunities to grow in spiritual formation in a beautiful environment. It might be possible for some churches to host a church-planting Sunday where the congregation sends prayer cards to church planters who are supported by the churches or the CPN.

The network leaders can also ask every church's session to consider if God is calling them to plant a church within the next five years, emphasizing the need to align their prayers and actions accordingly. By prioritizing prayer, pastors within the network seek to align themselves with God's will, trusting in His wisdom and direction for the growth and success of church plants out of their own churches and the network.

### *Consistently Ask and Answer, "Why Church Planting?"*

In the current secular climate it is important to repeatedly articulate a compelling rationale for the existence of CPNs. Assess the relevance of church planting and understand the role and significance of a networks built around this purpose. Strong apologetic is necessary to attract and recruit hesitant churches, convincing them that church planting is not in opposition to revitalization efforts, but a crucial component of it.

### *Unify Around a Philosophy of Ministry*

This research shows that unity is crucial to CPN health. Aspire to establish a unified philosophy of ministry that centers on specific core values. Envision churches within the network to be evangelistic, gospel-centered, outward-facing, spiritually formative, covenantal, and rooted in the reformed tradition. This shared philosophy of ministry serves as a guiding framework for the network's collective efforts and training regimens.

My research shows further shows that senior pastors in CPNs are capable leaders who are willing to reinforce these distinctives through shared best practices. By learning from one another and implementing proven strategies, the network can ensure consistency and coherence in its approach to training and resource development. This collaborative approach allows churches to benefit from each other's experiences and involve pastors at all stages of their ministry.

### *Establish Clear Measures of Success*

CPNs are advised to establish success markers that consider multiple factors, including things like the church planter's rhythm of pastoral work and rest, awareness of his need for the gospel, prayer for church planting, theological commitments, and the spiritual formation of his core group or leaders. While the growth of the church is up to the Lord's providence and wisdom, CPNs may evaluate evangelistic encounters, worship attendance, monthly giving, key leader contacts, number of trainings for discipleship groups, community outreach events, baptisms, first communion, and more. My research reveals that pastors in CPNs understand the complexity of defining success for church plants and desire to improve their pastoral skills as they depend upon God's Spirit. Clear

success markers help give confidence to the church planter and network leaders in order to supplement training.

### *Encourage a Variety of Church Planting Models*

A shift towards building flourishing, healthier, and reproducing churches in multiple ways is needed in our secular age. My research recommends four different models for church planting through CPNs.

The first model is the apostolic approach, which involves a minimum 10-year commitment. In this model, the network deploys the church planter, along with a planting team, to a specific location. The focus is on prayer, active participation in existing worshiping communities, and embracing evangelism as a way of life. The goal is to initiate the process of discipling converts and discern if a church can be formed from these efforts.

The second model is the anchored approach, where very adept leaders at a national level are identified, trained, equipped, and funded to plant churches that can attract significant numbers of people. These flagship churches would then reproduce congregations in their respective geographic regions.

The third model is the propertied approach, which builds on the anchored model. Networks can creatively reach cities by purchasing property and then sending in the church planter. This would provide a permanent location from day one, eliminate the challenges of set up and tear down, and free the core group up to build relationships.

The fourth model is the micro-network approach, where the network supports regional leaders to lead networks in their specific areas. These regional leaders serve as coaches and mentors for the network, focusing on a specific region, and developing

untapped local funding sources. The regional coordinators may also serve as bridgers—to use Ehrlichman’s term above—who connect groups and breakdown boundaries to enhance understanding among members.

Though not without significant challenges, these models have the potential to foster effective and sustainable church plants in this age. Expecting multiple models of church plants and multiple networks to emerge from a CPN allows network leadership to celebrate Kingdom advancement as its original vision extends with progressively localized strategy.

### *Develop Pipelines Among Younger Generations*

Another recommended practice is for network leaders to develop a strong pipeline by investing in church planters from a young age. Network leaders are advised to actively engage with youth groups, colleges, and seminaries. Presenting the rationale for church planting and explaining the support provided by CPNs, nurtures a new generation of skilled pastors and entrepreneurial church planters.

An additional way to develop the pipeline my research revealed is to be an excellent communicator to existing churches in the area. The network needs to be pastorally sensitive yet bold in dealing with churches that may be hesitant to embrace church planting. Beginning intentional relationship early will invite all stakeholders to provide their collective wisdom on candidates and future church planting locations.

This recommended practice is especially important for the PCA. Networks must excel in identifying church planters who possess the necessary skills to connect with Christians who are not familiar with Reformed theology, and non-Christians who have no experience with church. A thorough assessment of potential church planters should be



routinely evaluated to ensure it is identifying entrepreneurial church planters who can lead a church from its inception to a healthy state of growth. Attributes to be mindful of include the pastor's emotional intelligence, teachability, marital health, wife's emotional and spiritual health, and a deep understanding of the cultural values where the church plant will be located.

Network leaders may also emphasize the importance of apprenticeships for individuals who may not be ready for church planting but show potential. Assigning them to work alongside experienced church planters or providing mentors can help them develop their gifts, mature, and humbly serve the church. Post-apprenticeship, network leaders are encouraged to conduct a reassessment to evaluate the candidate's progress and readiness for church planting. Funding for apprenticeships can come from various sources, such as the network, presbytery, or host church.

Overall, networks should have high expectations for church planting candidates. By identifying and developing future leaders in younger generations, assessing potential church planters, and selecting strategic locations, networks will inspire future church planters and equip established pastors to collaborate in new church planting initiatives.

### *Design Sustainable Financial Packages that Consider Property Acquisition*

My research highlights three financially models to sustain the operations of CPNs. Those are fixed percentage, tiered, and at-will arrangements. Networks with an arrangement of all three models may allow the network to have the flexibility needed to remove obstacles and maximize church participation. Regardless of the financial structure, CPNs should establish a sustainable model with the consultation of business-minded individuals.

An important aspect of CPN financial support for church plants is the consideration of property acquisition. Having a dedicated place of worship is more important to pastors and congregations than it used to be. Physical presence helps integrate church plants into the life of the community and allows them to be recognized as a permanent presence in town. Worship space—whether rented or owned—allows the church plant to operate without the need for setup and teardown. Not having to set up and tear down significantly impacts the consistency of pastoral care. It is advised that CPN leaders consult individuals with real estate experience to develop a business plan tailored to the network’s preferences and requirements. The establishment of network foundations or endowments to provide substantial funding for church property acquisition should be explored. Additionally, repurposing existing empty mainline buildings could also be a viable strategy.

### *Encourage Board & Micro Network Coordinators to Lead Together*

This research suggests that network leadership is key to senior pastors’ continual involvement in CPNs. Networks with democratically elected boards allow for established pastors in different regions to represent the church planting vision of that presbytery or region. In order to prevent stagnation in leadership, three-year terms for board members with a break after serving consecutive terms is advised. This rotation allows for fresh perspectives and shared ownership.

Further, regional coordinators or leaders of micro networks may serve as *ex officio* board members. This allows for smooth coordination between networks while maintaining visions tailored to their focus area and access to capital to sustain micro network operations.

### *Require Training, Care, and Strategic Coaching*

Per the research, CPNs should aspire to create an exclusive environment of psychological safety, where there is no fear of negative consequences from full participation, and support for all members. Senior pastors desire a safe space within networks where church planters and their spouses can openly share their challenges, celebrations, and struggles without fear of negative consequences from higher church authorities.

In terms of spiritual formation and skills development, CPNs should offer pathways for planters and pastors to receive holistic care. This includes opportunities for retreats at dedicated centers, bringing in counselors and other supportive individuals to provide care for planters and their spouses, and fostering a more holistic mentality. These resources could be made accessible through a dedicated website or avenues such as therapy and counseling.

It is also advised to place church planters in cohorts where they can address challenges together. CPNs should develop or partner with another organization to lead cohorts through a comprehensive program that focuses on personal growth, soft skills, and includes retreats, counseling, and support for both planters and their families.

Furthermore, coaching enhances the effectiveness of church planters and pastors within the network. CPNs that require planters to be coached by qualified individuals will be attractive to senior pastors. By investing in coaching, the CPN establishes a college of ministers who provides ongoing support to one another through the network.

### *Host National, Regional, and Local Network Gatherings*

Host national, regional, and local gatherings that drive the network's vision and are enjoyable to attend. As this research shows, there is a desire among senior pastors to create moments of retreat and care that are inspiring and compelling, making network members and their spouses eager to participate. Hosting these gatherings in beautiful locations should be strongly considered.

CPNs can create supportive programming during these meetings, where church planters freely share their experiences, seek support, and receive guidance without fear of negative consequences. Tiered gatherings can provide an environment where planters and their spouses can be authentic about their marriages, their challenges, and their celebrations.

The national gatherings can be seen as opportunities for camaraderie, encouragement, and worship. Binging all members together for a few days to discuss various aspects of church, family, and life would make the network attractive. It would also be a recruiting event for new churches. Training pastors in the skills of grace-centered preaching, developing elder-training programs, or leading session meetings, would be highly encouraging for pastors according to this research. Influential church pastors should consider taking a leadership role in hosting the annual gatherings, making them appealing to senior pastors of other anchor churches.

Regional gatherings follow to the annual gathering, with programming centered around the question, "What do the planters need?" The focus at these events is less on information and more on rest and caring for people. This could include worship, time for retreat or soul care, and bringing in experts on spiritual formation to lead exercises and

prayer. These gatherings also provide time for church planters to seek out experienced pastors to ask questions.

At the local level, CPN's emphasize the value of cohort-style gatherings that focus on coaching and support. These meetings would provide a platform for sharing important information, evaluating progress in church planting journeys, and setting goals and metrics for the year. Local gatherings could also include focused prayer for the specific contexts of each church planter.

### *Integrate New Research Findings to Improve Best Practices for CPNs*

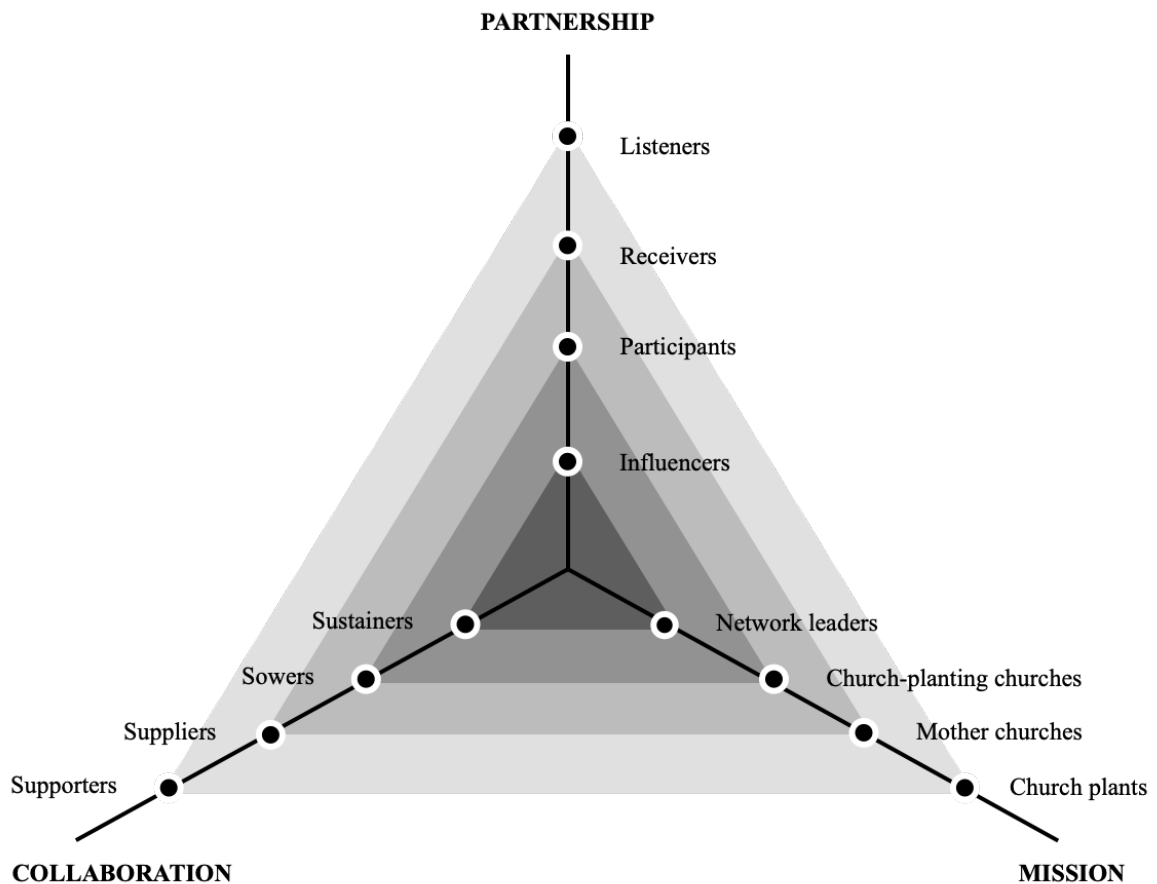
According to this research, regularly learning best practices from CPN experts will strengthen the network's ability to inspire senior pastors and to reach its objectives in our rapidly changing culture. Continuing education opportunities through the network are attractive to senior pastors and should be implemented whenever gatherings occur.

Staying up to date on the research takes concerted effort and board members may choose to delegate a committee to review the previous years' scholarship in this field. Presenting new research insights at the national or regional gathering would bring value.

### *Focus on Network Partnership, Collaboration, and Mission*

The discussion of findings highlights the importance of understanding the benefits, challenges, and aspirations of senior pastors involved in CPNs along three key areas: partnership, collaboration, and missional engagement. Partnership refers to a church's level of commitment. Collaboration refers to churches' shared resources to accomplish mutually beneficial goals. Mission refers to the church's demonstration of church planting. Focusing on these three areas will focus CPN's on integrating the above

mentioned eleven practices. It is crucial for CPNs to allow for flexibility and adaptability along these axes, recognizing that pastors go through different seasons in their ministry journeys. As trust increases along each axis, pastors experience greater benefits from their involvement in CPNs.<sup>499</sup> Figure 1 illustrates this progression along three axes.



**Figure 1: Network Involvement Assessment Tool**

Partnership refers to the level of commitment that a pastor or church has to the vision and structure of the CPN. It encompasses the hard trust necessary to create a

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<sup>499</sup> Edmondson, *Teaming*, 12–14; Harvey et al., “The Dynamics of Team Learning”; Hoosbeek and de Vries, “Stakeholder Influence”; Besser and Miller, “The Structural,” 113–33.

foundation for the growth of soft trust. The level of partnership answers the question, “How dedicated is the pastor or church to the organizational structure of the CPN?”

Collaboration, on the other hand, pertains to the general trust within the CPN. It reflects the depth of relationships that pastors have within the network. Levels of collaboration within fellowship allow for varying degrees of active involvement in the social dynamics of the network. The question that the level of fellowship seeks to answer is, “How strong are the relationships that pastors have within the CPN?”

Missional engagement focuses on the goals and objectives of the network. It encompasses the level of pastor’s readiness to plant a new church, lead the network, or initiate a micro-network. The level of multiplication within the missional axis answers the question, “How prepared is the pastor to take on these leadership roles within the network?”

Let’s consider these three axes more closely and see how they can be used as a tool to assess pastor’s involvement in CPNs.

### **Partnership Axis**

It is essential for CPNs to incorporate different levels of partnership to foster an environment that allows for flexibility and fluidity. Drawing inspiration from the model proposed by Neil Powell and John James, directors of a British CPN, implementing four levels of partnership enables dynamic interaction among network participants.<sup>500</sup> These four levels are listeners, receivers, participants, and influencers.

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<sup>500</sup> Powell and James, *Together for the City*, 162–69.

Listeners are individuals who are evaluating the value of the network and considering potential future participation. They demonstrate interest in the network's activities, keeping themselves informed about its progress and developments. While they may attend gatherings, they primarily observe from a distance, gathering insights and assessing the network's potential.

Receivers establish relational connections within the network and unofficially become a part of it. They engage in informal interactions and begin to weave relationships with other network members. This level of partnership signifies a deeper involvement and a growing sense of connection within the network.

Participants, on the other hand, are formal partners of the network who actively contribute to its functioning. They take on specific responsibilities and actively participate in the network's initiatives, projects, and decision-making processes. Participants are the ones who bear the weight of the CPN's activities and contribute to its overall success.

Lastly, influencers are individuals who generously offer their time, skills, and resources to strengthen and support the network. They leverage their influence to provide valuable contributions and enhance the capabilities and effectiveness of the network. Influencers are the ones who have the power to make waves within the network, as their shifts in involvement can influence others.

### **Collaboration Axis**

In the realm of network collaboration, pastors and churches come together to achieve outcomes that would be difficult to accomplish individually. Along the relationship axis, teamwork plays a vital role in fostering deeper connections as



participants engage in church planting initiatives. These collaborative models are based on the research conducted by Powell and James.<sup>501</sup> To facilitate high-quality collaboration, four common roles have been identified: supporters, suppliers, sowers, and sustainers.

Supporting churches are committed to providing vital resources such as prayer and encouragement to church plants. Although they may not be in a position to contribute members or other tangible resources at the moment, their unwavering support is invaluable.

Supplying churches, on the other hand, actively contribute either in terms of people or financial resources to support the establishment of new churches. Their active involvement plays a crucial role in resourcing and empowering these new ventures.

Sowing churches are actively engaged in planting new churches from their own congregations. They are at the forefront of church planting efforts, investing their time, energy, and resources to establish new faith communities.

Sustaining churches have already successfully planted at least one church and continue to actively support multiple church plants. They bring their experience and wisdom to the table, providing ongoing assistance and mentorship to new church plants, ensuring their long-term success.

### **Missional Axis**

Within the missional axis, network multiplication represents the collaborative efforts of churches working together to achieve the goal of planting flourishing churches

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<sup>501</sup> Powell and James, *Together for the City*, 155–62.

or establishing micro networks in specific geographic areas. This dynamic interplay aims to expand the reach and impact of the network. Four levels of multiplication can be identified: church plant, mother church, church-planting church and network leader.

A church plant refers to a newly established church that may not yet have indigenous elders or be financially self-sustaining. It may or may not have a permanent building. These churches are in the early stages of development and are supported by the network as they grow and become more self-sufficient.

The mother church is a church that has successfully started at least one new church from its own congregation. While they may or may not continue to provide financial support to the new church, they play a crucial role in nurturing and guiding the growth of these new faith communities.

The network leader is a church that has a proven track record of starting new churches and actively supports multiple churches within the network. These churches have the capacity and resources to collaborate with other churches in developing strategic plans to reach non-believers in specific localized areas. They take on a leadership role in guiding the network's efforts to expand its reach and impact.

By recognizing these different levels of multiplication along the missional axis, CPNs can strategically focus their efforts on planting and nurturing new churches. This approach allows for the growth and development of a network that is not only committed to its own expansion but also to the broader mission of reaching non-believers and making a positive impact in specific geographic areas.

The involvement of a church in a CPN can be visualized through these three key dimensions: partnership, collaboration, and missional engagement. To represent this

graphically, an equilateral triangle can be used, with each apex representing one of these dimensions. The levels of involvement can then be depicted by approaching the center of the triangle.

At one apex of the triangle, we have partnership. As a church's level of partnership increases, it approaches the center of the triangle, indicating a higher commitment to the vision and structure of the CPN. At another apex, we have collaboration. As a church's level of fellowship increases, it approaches the center of the triangle, indicating a deeper relational coordination with members in the network. Lastly, at the final apex, we have missional engagement. As a church's level of fellowship increases, it approaches the center of the triangle, indicating their participation in church planting. The levels of involvement for each dimension can vary for each church, so the positioning within the triangle will differ. Some churches may have a balanced involvement across all dimensions, while others may prioritize one dimension over the others.

By visualizing the church's involvement in this way, it becomes easier to assess and understand a church's overall engagement with the CPN. It also provides a framework for evaluating and adjusting the level of involvement in each dimension, ensuring a holistic and effective contribution to the network's mission.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study focused on exploring senior pastors' involvement with CPNs. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of any study and the extent of its research. Therefore, there are valuable areas of study that CPN leaders may consider pursuing to further enhance their understanding and effectiveness.

One area of potential research is the study of conflict resolution methods among pastors within CPNs. The current findings highlighted that pastors often rely on a singular approach to overcome challenges within the network. Further research on conflict resolution could provide insights into how CPNs can foster unity among network members throughout the various stages of a church's lifecycle. Understanding effective conflict resolution strategies can contribute to the overall health and cohesiveness of CPNs.

Moreover, while the research briefly touched upon the role of bi-vocational pastors, there is a lack of extensive research on their experiences within CPNs. Exploring the unique benefits that CPNs provide to bi-vocational or co-vocational pastors and understanding how church planting training can be adapted to meet their specific needs would be valuable. These pastors face distinct challenges and opportunities, and gaining insights into their experiences can inform the development of tailored support and resources within CPNs.

Furthermore, there is limited explicit application to church planting in existing commentaries and scholarly works. The development of new commentaries on Acts that provide practical applications for church planting could be beneficial. These commentaries would offer insights and guidance for CPN leaders, enabling them to apply biblical principles to their church planting efforts.

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