

The Reasons for a Multi-Presbytery Network

Why is a multi-presbytery church planting network beneficial in the western US context? Asked in a different way: why would churches in *any particular* region within the West want to join a church planting network focused on the *entire* West? Isn't the geography too big to be effective? With such a large area, isn't it a fallacy to assume it shares enough in common culturally and religiously to make coaching and "best practices" relevant? Won't the resources be spread too thin to make a difference in my particular region? Won't many churches in multiple presbyteries diffuse my voice and contribution to the direction of the network?

These are all legitimate questions. We hope to demonstrate that these concerns are off-set by the advantages of a multi-presbytery network for church planting in the western US context. To do so, we will address, first, the value of a church planting network uniquely tailored to the issues of the West, and, secondly, we will suggest that a multi-presbytery network can more effectively deliver these resources over (a) traditional presbytery MNA committees and (b) smaller regional networks focused specifically on a city or even a state. Finally, we will identify challenges that a multi-presbytery network poses and what can be done to address those challenges in order to make this a workable solution.

I. The Critical Value of Network Resources in the West

A. Shared Resources

One of the problems in the Western US is the lack of indigenous planters and local financial resources. Therefore, resources and planters have largely come from areas where the PCA is stronger.¹ Couple this with the traditionally difficult nature of church planting² in the Western context and many have realized that success in the West will depend upon thinking and acting locally. For long-term sustainability we must develop indigenous planters and local resources.³ Additionally, quite apart from the practical issues of recruiting, funding, and support structures, this is simply a missiological imperative that we have learned from

¹ Historically, we have sought to recruit planters and to raise funds from areas where the PCA is stronger. Because the PCA was/is largely a southeastern denomination, this was obviously where we had to begin and where we must continue to some extent. Continuing to seek planters and resources from outside, however, presents unique hurdles: 1) Time for acclimation. No matter how much a couple might like the West it will take them years to really begin to understand the Western context (much like foreign missionaries). For a number of reasons some eventually return home (e.g., they don't acclimate, they are recruited back to their home region, etc.). This is not only financially costly, it can be devastating if it happens with new works. Even when it occurs after years of faithful service on the field, it removes leadership from the region. 2) Local perception. Much like the problems that occur when missionary strategies don't incorporate indigenous leadership, similar problems develop in church planting movements without indigenous leadership. In the West, it is easy to be suspicious of a movement whose leaders are all Southern. Over time, we must figure out how to develop indigenous leaders. Indigenous leaders are the best leaders. 3) Dependence upon outside resources is not sustainable over time, as traditional outside funders inevitably eventually redirect their funding to other or newer projects.

² Western church plants usually take more than twice as long to become financially self-supporting. Exceptions include larger cities where a population of evangelicals exists who are displaced from other parts of the country.

³ "Indigenous" is somewhat of a relative term. "The West" is far from monolithic—the Colorado Front Range, Wyoming, Montana, the dominate Mormon culture of Utah, and the Pacific Northwest are all very different places. And yet they have much more in common than they do with the Southeast or Eastern Seaboard. As will be argued below, a multi-presbytery network may be the best way, at least initially, to achieve "critical mass" with the availability of local resources and the Western context as a whole.

the foreign mission field. A healthy church planting movement is self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating, and self-theologizing.⁴ For a multitude of reasons, then, we cannot sustain church planting in the West primarily with Southern resources. We must find ways for those resources to arise out of the Western mission field. A Western network provides a structure for multiple Western mission fields, each of which is not yet self-sustaining, to partner together to achieve the critical mass of resources needed from a tighter geographical and cultural context than has been the traditional approach in the PCA.

B. Shepherding/Coaching

Due to the geographical expansiveness of the West, the lack of support and encouragement from Christian friends and mentors living nearby, and the long hours required of church planters, models of shepherding and coaching that work in other parts of the country simply do not work as well in the West. When church planters become discouraged or need advice they cannot simply go to a neighboring town and meet with a Christian leader or friends they have grown up with. They are not there. Furthermore, it is difficult for those who do not live and work in such settings to completely understand what the planter and his wife may be going through. Again, this is similar to what missionaries experience in foreign lands. Coaching/shepherding models tailored for the West cannot assume Christian culture. The lack of people and financial resources in the West often causes us to look to provide these resources ourselves. The most common tendency is some form of planters coaching other planters. This has proven to be a faulty model for three reasons: 1) A church planter means well but is simply too busy to give coaching/shepherding the attention it needs. Geography makes this even more challenging. 2) Colleagues don't tend to listen or submit themselves to one another. The spiritual gifts that make good church planters also leads to stubbornness. 3) Colleagues don't speak to one another with recognized expertise or spiritual authority. What is needed is shepherding/coaching resources from others who are familiar with the Western context and the unique challenges of planting in the West who are not merely peers.⁵

C. "Synod-like" Denominational Representation

Because the PCA is still largely a Southeastern led denomination, the West is often overlooked in denominational forums. There are simply too few churches in each of the Western regions to have much of a voice separately. The cooperation that could be built through joint church planting efforts in the West could provide the camaraderie, communication, relationships, and joint vision necessary for the West to be better represented in denominational conversations that address everything from models for church planting and RUF to issues that are affected by cultural/contextual considerations.

Additionally, pooled resources in the West make having Western Regional Assessment Centers and similar church planting infrastructure possible. While this infrastructure *could* happen apart from forming a geographically large Western network, both the likelihood of it actually happening and the effectiveness of these resources would seem to be greater if our churches had more points of contact with one another by working together more broadly on church planting issues.

⁴ By self-theologizing, we do not mean that the historic foundations of the faith are not relevant. Rather, there is appropriate theological reflection that must arise out of local contexts to relate the historic faith to the dominate thought patterns of any local culture. Tim Keller's writing for world class cities is an example of this. PCA thinkers and practitioners in the West will have opportunity to theologize about the relationship between the gospel and Mormon culture, Indian culture, Western individualism and isolation, and many other issues prominent in the West that affect our ministries and the way we plant churches. This is theological reflection for contextualization.

⁵ Peer mentoring is appropriate and helpful; it is simply not sufficient by itself for the reasons cited above.

II. The Advantages Over Smaller Structures

A. Advantages Over MNA Committees

1. Attention to Detail

Traditionally, presbytery MNA committees aren't structured to carry out the myriads of details that need to be accomplished for a successful church planting movement. MNA committees function more as judicial bodies that exercise oversight and vote on decisions two or three times a year. Meanwhile, the details of church planting must go on—praying, recruiting, placing, coaching, etc. Profiles of potential target sites and planters must be developed, and a growing body of shared missional expertise developed. Although this kind of focus is needed in every context, it is realized more acutely in regions where the soil is hard and the Church is weak. A church planting network is structured and staffed in such a way that these functions are more likely to be done successfully.

2. Shared Vision

Cooperation for church planting has sometimes been hindered at the presbytery level due to different philosophies and priorities for what kinds of churches should be planted, who should be funded, how planters are recruited, and other details of vision and administration. When this has occurred, individual churches or donors have worked around the MNA Committee in order to accomplish their purposes. A church planting network has the advantage of stating clear vision, purpose, and procedures that individual churches can voluntarily submit to. Those that do have the advantage of cooperating with other like-minded churches without being distracted by ongoing conversations about the philosophy and direction of the movement.

B. Potential Advantages Over Smaller Regional Networks

Some have recognized the need for church planting networks in the West and formed networks that have faithfully set themselves to the task of church planting and establishing RUF in a city or statewide region. These smaller geographic networks have clear advantages for being indigenous and focusing available resources on a tightly targeted area. They may, in fact, be ideal for their purposes. We would pose the following questions, however, to consider if it may be even more advantageous to cooperate on a broader scale to accomplish the same purpose:

- Does the network have the resources to pay a director to focus attention on the direction and administration of the network? If not, is the network any more effective than the traditional MNA structure?⁶
- If a director is paid, would it be more efficient and effective to combine resources committed to administration/overhead across more churches rather than duplicate those resources across smaller networks?
- Are there sufficient financial resources present among the members of the smaller network to fund the work of church planting, or is the smaller network dependent upon ongoing funding from the Southeast?

⁶ The founding churches of the WCPN experimented with a number of structures for oversight, coaching, and administration that did not entail paid staff. In every case, they discovered a significant gap between good intentions and actual follow-through.

- Is there sufficient and effective coaching expertise within the smaller network, or would those churches benefit from collaboration with others also ministering in Western contexts?
- Is there sufficient synergy and forward momentum within the smaller network to sustain a church planting movement?
- Are there sufficient success stories to point to in order to continually cast vision and offset the discouragement to local giving and cooperation in light of the longer timetable to establish churches and from the inevitable disappointments from occasional failed plants?
- Would potential differences of opinion that often arise when a handful of leaders try to work together be diffused by a larger network membership and greater diversity while still maintaining the overall shared vision and philosophy of church planting?
- Would member churches benefit from the shared expertise, best practices, missiological reflection, and overall input provided by a larger network of likeminded partners?

The core issue for the size of the church planting network seems to be balancing, on one hand, the collection of resources necessary to be self-sufficient, self-propagating, and self-theologizing while, on the other hand, being both indigenous and manageable. Smaller networks may accomplish the latter while not achieving the former. A multi-presbytery network may more easily accomplish the former, but will have built-in challenges to achieve the latter. We turn now to addressing those challenges.

III. Challenges for a Multi-Presbytery Structure

A. Geography & Culture

The immense geography of the West poses challenges to effective cooperation. Chief among them include (1) the difficulty for the network to gather (2) the fact that coaching will often need to be long-distance, and (3) the recognition that the West does not have a monolithic culture.

1. Network Gatherings

The WCPN Standing Rules require at least one Annual Meeting.⁷ The Executive Committee usually meets more frequently (as necessary), and the day-to-day operations are conducted by paid staff. Once churches from a second presbytery are added to the network it will be necessary to conduct a single Annual Meeting (much like GA), while encouraging more frequent regional gatherings⁸ (much like presbyteries). The contributions of at-large members can be made at the regional gatherings (which usually occur in some fashion already), and only issues that affect the network as a whole (budget, philosophy, direction, etc.) will be taken up at the Annual Meeting.

Travel outside of presbytery meetings to this Annual Meeting will be an added burden for some members. This cannot be avoided; it is one of the burdens of a larger network that we believe is offset by its advantages. Nevertheless, WCPN will look for ways to minimize this burden wherever possible. Possibilities include holding the Annual Meeting in conjunction with one of the presbytery meetings or in conjunction with the MNA Western Region Vision

⁷ To-date, the WCPN membership has met three times a year, in conjunction to meetings of the Rocky Mountain Presbytery. This has proved convenient, as most members travel for presbytery anyway. When additional presbyteries are added to the network this will likely prove to be untenable and the solution like the one described above will be necessary.

⁸ See a description of Regional Working Groups (RWGs) under "B. Distribution of Resources," below.

Gathering. This does not eliminate the burden for everyone, but it does minimize it for some. Other options may also be considered.

2. Long-distance Coaching

Where possible coaching will be conducted locally.⁹ In many instances, however, this is not possible for the reasons stated above. In those cases, the geographical challenge is no different from what currently exists. Regardless, coaching can be effectively conducted long-distance. The model for coaching currently includes face-to-face contact via an annual site visit and the planters & wives retreat, supplemented with monthly phone calls designed to address specific issues in the planter's life and stage of his work. This model has proven to be effective through coaching extended from Northern Colorado to planters in Montana.

3. Cultural Differences

Studies have shown that there are significant cultural differences within the Mountain West, and the Mountain West, northern California, and the Pacific Northwest all differ significantly from one another.¹⁰ Nevertheless, these same studies also recognize that these regions "hang together" and are distinct from other regions of the country.

Specific strategies for reaching these cultures and contextualizing the gospel will necessarily vary across these regions (and even within them!). WCPN is committed to the missiological sensitivities required by these differences. Regional Working Groups can strategize on a granular level the unique issues within each region while also benefiting from the missiological/contextual sensitivities exhibited by their brothers from other Western regions. Any long-distance coaches provided from outside the sub-regions will be required to become familiar with any suggested "seminal" reading on these issues suggested by those within the region they will be coaching. The site visits will also help bring these differences home for the coach. Beyond this, we believe the similarities of the larger Western region and the dynamics and difficulties for planting within it enable inter-regional coaching to still be effective.

B. Distribution of Resources

Three main questions arise when considering the distribution of resources:

1. How will member churches ensure that sites within their immediate region are appropriately targeted by the larger network?

WCPN encourages the formation of **Regional Working Groups** (RWG) to strategize, resource members and plants, and focus attention on their immediate region.¹¹ These RWGs are encouraged to collaborate in the following ways:

- Consider which sites within their region ought to be recognized as Principal, Target, and Extension Sites by WCPN and work up Site Profiles for the highest priority sites to facilitate WCPN recruitment and funding.¹²

⁹ WCPN coaches need to be trained and overseen by the WCPN Executive Director.

¹⁰ For example, *Religion and Public Life in the Mountain West* (2004) describes three sub-regions in the Mountain West (Arizona & New Mexico; Utah & Idaho; Colorado, Wyoming & Montana) with dramatically different settlement histories, cultures, and religious influences. Separate volumes in this series describe the Pacific Northwest and Pacific regions respectively.

¹¹ These RWGs might take their names from a region or a previously existing network that chooses to come in under the WCPN umbrella (e.g., Metro Denver, Mission Utah, Mission Montana, Northern California, etc.).

- Gather together for fellowship, encouragement, prayer, and support as they deem appropriate. This function offers complementary resourcing and relationships to the larger WCPN structure (official coaching, planters & wives retreats, etc.). In this respect, many of the advantages of smaller networks are preserved alongside the advantages of a larger network.
2. How will members know that churches will be planted any faster within their region by contributing to a larger geographical network than they would be if those churches channeled all their money into their immediate region?

The larger network has the advantage of pooling resources among a larger number of member churches. If a smaller region already has many churches or a very large or very well-resourced church, then it is likely that they would be able to fund planting within their immediate region at a faster pace than would happen through WCPN. If, however, churches within a region are few in number or average in size (or smaller), they will have the advantage of seeing the resources contributed by larger sized churches and greater numbers of churches occasionally applied to their region. The regional representation built into the Executive Committee will ensure that each sub-regional has a voice for these decisions (see "Governance," below). The more churches that are planted by the network over time, the larger amount of resources are available at any given time, and therefore the likelihood of new works in each region at any given time will increase. Even initially, it is quite likely that new works can be initiated in each region *at least as quickly* through the network as they could be by churches within a smaller region on their own.

3. What about preexisting commitments to specific works, planters, &/or apprentices made by churches considering joining the network—how will these commitments be honored if giving must now be channeled through WCPN?

In general, designated giving to specific works or individuals is not allowed, as this has the potential to undermine policy and funding criteria; nevertheless, **WCPN will honor all preexisting commitments made by new members to the network.** The commitments made by these members to specific works will be officially recorded, and the WCPN budget will reflect a minimum financial pledge to each of these works equivalent to the preexisting commitments until those commitments are fully met.¹³

Furthermore, if member churches (new or otherwise) have historically given beyond the 2.0-2.75% of their general budget required by WCPN, these churches have the option of contributing beyond the required minimum to WCPN or channeling the surplus to specific works that they want to fund at higher levels.¹⁴

¹² Principal Sites represent cultural, economic, and political centers for a region; Target Sites are similarly important but do not carry the same cultural weight as Principal Sites; Extension Sites are potential sites for church plants in proximity to existing PCA churches, often targeted through daughter churches, "hive offs," or multi-site approaches. WCPN resources are prioritized toward Principal and Target sites. An official list of Strategic Sites is kept by WCN to guide strategic planning and the allocation of resources. Any WCPN member church may make a motion to designate a Principal, Target, or Extension Site at any WCPN meeting, along with the rationale behind the suggestion. A site will be designated and placed on the Strategic Sites list on the basis of a simple majority vote. See the "Approach to Church Planting" document for more information.

¹³ In the case of church planting apprentices, WCPN has policy that governs the transition from apprenticing to planting. Apprentices are not guaranteed approval or funding as planters; all apprentices who seek to plant will be evaluated based on the criteria in the policy for funding new church plants.

¹⁴ This is one of the ways member churches can contribute to planting Extension Sites, which are not likely to receive priority for funding within WCPN but are, nevertheless, important.

C. Governance/Representation

Some may be concerned that a larger network will make it harder for a specific church or individual to contribute to the direction of the network. The perceived “weight” of this possible challenge will vary, depending on whether one thinks more members and church planters adds to the collective wisdom and effectiveness of a network or detracts from it. Assuming more minds devoted to an issue adds to the resources of the network rather than detracts from it, there remains an issue of fair representation across the large geography and diverse cultures within the network.

The WCPN Standing Rules seeks to address this challenge in the following ways:

- All member churches may attend and vote at each WCPN meeting, ensuring representation in the collective decisions of the network.
- Regional interests are built into the Executive Committee. This committee consists of seven elected members¹⁵ and each presbytery’s MNA Chairman (or representative designated by him) that has at least one WCPN member church. Therefore, in addition to the regional representation from each presbytery’s MNA Chairman (or appointee), it would be prudent to have representatives from the major regions among the seven elected members, as well. In this way, every sub-region within the network would likely have a handful of representatives from their region serving on the Executive Committee with no single sub-region being more represented than the others.

Additionally, every member church and church planter can participate fully and frequently in any RWGs. This hands-on participation allows every member to make their contributions. As each region will be represented in the larger gatherings of the network, contributions made on the regional level will be voiced by representatives in the larger gatherings.

¹⁵ A Chairman, Vice-Chairman, and five at-large members.