

Step 2

Define Church Planting Focus Group

“Now the Lord said to Abram: ‘I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Gen. 12:1,3, NKJV).

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matt. 28:18-20, NKJV).

“Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; For you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth’” (Rev. 5:8-10, NJKV).

Throughout the Scriptures, God declares His love and eternal purposes with a focus on identifiable groupings of people worldwide. In Genesis, God makes a covenant with the family of Abraham in order to bless all the families or clans of the earth. In Matthew, God commands His disciples to make disciples of all groups of people in the world. In Revelation, God reveals that heaven will be populated with people from every tribe, tongue, and people group. God created many cultures containing many ways for people to group themselves. These social structures allow the gospel of Jesus Christ

to move rapidly from group to group through natural and familiar relationships.

Effective church planters will focus on a specific group or segment of people; and, thereby, take advantage of God's design to grow His kingdom through engaging every significant grouping of people in every society. This process of focusing on a specific group of people is called defining your church planting focus group.

Segmenting the North American Mission Field

Defining a church planting focus group is an essential task for church planters. North America is a complex mission field consisting of many cultures, languages, and worldviews. All of these are constantly changing and interacting with one another to create a variety of church planting contexts. Three primary types of church planting focus groups exist within this mosaic of contexts.

People Groups

One type of church planting focus group emphasizes **ethnolinguistic groupings of people** found throughout North America. These groups of people are distinguished primarily by their race and language. A people group is a significantly large grouping of people who recognize a common affinity because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, occupation, residence, class, situation, or a combination of these things. An ethnolinguistic people group focuses upon a people group's race and language in order to more easily identify them for church planting.

Many of the ethnolinguistic people groups in North America are first-generation immigrants and retain many of the beliefs and customs they followed while in their home countries. Some second- and third-generation immigrants maintain their ethnic distinctives to such an extent that they too can best be engaged for church planting by distinguishing them as a separate people group.

Population Segments

A second type of church planting focus group is referred to as a **population segment**. A population segment is a smaller grouping of people than an ethnolinguistic people group. Population segments are grouped according to a variety of factors. Larger categories such as language, worldview, and ethnicity, which are critical for identifying ethnolinguistic people groups, are also important elements in grouping population segments. However, population segments are further segmented from people groups with criteria relating to things such as

lifestyle preferences, generational identities, values, and socioeconomic factors. Peer and association groupings based on shared interests and activities can be significant enough to warrant separate church planting strategies. College students, lawyers, entertainers, postmoderns, cowboys, migrant workers, artists, and resort workers exemplify the wide range of categories possible for population segments. Cowboy churches, migrant churches, postmodern churches, coffeehouse churches, skydiver churches, and biker churches are designed to reach specific population segments.

Population segments usually overlap due to the variety of categories possible for grouping. Members of a biker church will also be part of other population segments that are defined by vocation, residence, or other categories. It is important not to allow all the possible ways of grouping people to cloud the primary reason for people segmentation in church planting. The purpose for identifying population segments is to discover how people best relate to one another in order to introduce the gospel to that group. This allows the gospel to move to others in the group with the least possible amount of resistance. Population segments then become strategic bridges for starting more churches among the larger people group within which the population segment is found.

Environments

The third type of church planting focus group highlights special types of **locales or environments where people groups and population segments live and interact**. Environments such as multihousing units, colleges and universities, entertainment venues, and various workplaces present church planters with unique locations for starting new churches.

These environments identify more than location. In some cases, the environment may be a critical influencing factor for determining a population segment. People living in places like prisons and nursing homes have so many commonalities that they form a population segment as a result of the place in which they live. Sometimes these environments function like an airport terminal, temporarily housing various people groups or population segments. Colleges and multihousing environments in particular can house a variety of peoples. In both cases, these distinct locations require church planters to use methodologies appropriate to the specific environment.

Obviously, all three types of church planting focus groups are to some extent interdependent in the North American mosaic. Such interdependence illustrates the importance of defining your focus group clearly in order to develop people-

focused church planting strategies. Lack of a clearly defined church planting focus group inevitably leads to shotgun evangelism and church planting approaches that are rarely effective.

Contextual Church Planters

North American church planters in the twenty-first century must be contextual to be effective. The number of non-Christians representing worldviews and lifestyles that are far removed from the Christian worldview continue to increase. It is therefore increasingly important for church planters to think in terms of planting churches across cultural barriers.

Two kinds of contextual church planters are apostolic and founding-pastor. Apostolic church planters follow the apostle Paul's example of starting many new churches and raising up local leaders for those churches. Founding-pastor church planters go to an area to start one church and become the pastor of that church. Both should be contextual church planters.

What does it mean to be a contextual church planter? Contextual church planters recognize missional contexts and adapt their church planting approaches to fit the language, culture, and worldview of their church planting focus group. They are not content to transfer their own church forms to the church planting focus group. Instead, they seek to do whatever it takes to clearly communicate the gospel in a manner that addresses the context and worldviews of the focus group.

The goal of contextual church planters is to further the kingdom of God by making disciples who transform their communities as they make other disciples. Church forms are not the issue. Making disciples is the focus. Therefore, whether the church planter intends to start one church and pastor it or start many churches and pastor none of them, the goal is the same—reproducing followers of Christ who transform their communities in the power of the Holy Spirit. When this happens, church multiplication will surely follow.

Indigenous Churches: Living or Dead?

Typically, indigenous churches are defined as self-governing, self-expressing, self-supporting, self-teaching, and self-propagating. Many Southern Baptist churches fit all five of these criteria and are indigenous to a culture, a language, and a worldview. Unfortunately, many of these churches are not reproducing themselves in terms of church planting. Nor are they reproducing themselves evangelistically among peoples different from the membership of their congre-

gations. Normally, the existing conversion growth occurs only among people of their own kind or within their own biological families.

Many churches in North America today can be classified as indigenous but not reproducing themselves. Seventy percent of evangelical churches either are plateaued or dying, and it is commonly agreed among researchers that U.S. churches have failed to gain an additional 2 percent of the American population in the past 50 years.

Indigenous, yes; reproducing, no! Indigenous churches can be dead churches. The level of a church's indigenousness does not ensure its reproductive health. Churches can become so indigenous that they also resemble their culture and lose the ability to function as salt and light in their communities.

However, some indigenous churches have the same five criteria and are reproducing themselves outside of their churches through evangelism and church planting. What accounts for this difference? Living indigenous churches maintain their focus on a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. They refuse to allow their human culture or an institutional church culture to take the place of engaging the lostness of their communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. They have a kingdom perspective and a transformational purpose rather than an institutional perspective and a maintenance purpose.

Churches and church planters today must think and act contextually with the lost people groups, population segments, and environments that surround them in order to impact them with the gospel. Contextual thinking and contextual church planting strategies, if submitted to and founded upon the leadership of the Holy Spirit, will lead to healthy, reproducing, indigenous churches, rather than unhealthy, dying, indigenous churches.

Identifying Your Church Planting Focus Group

1. *Has God already revealed to you a specific group?* Sometimes when God calls a church planter to start a new church He simultaneously reveals the group of people for whom to start the church. The call may focus you upon a general category of people like the most unreached ethnolinguistic people group in North America, or a population segment that closely resembles your cultural background and lifestyle. At other times, your call can focus you upon a place without a specific group of people in mind. For example, it might be a city, a college campus, or a cluster of multihousing units to which you believe God is leading. The issue here is to examine your calling

and vision and determine whether or not God has already shown you a church planting focus group. If He hasn't, then the following questions will give further assistance in determining your church planting focus group.

2. *What if God has not yet shown me a specific group?* Many times the call to plant a church comes before knowing exactly among whom you will plant. If this is the case, you need to first determine whether or not God wants you to plant a church where you live or in another area. After deciding the general area, you will need to gather basic demographic information to discover the unreached people in the area. This information will enable you to see the big picture of lostness in the area where God is leading you to plant a church. At this point, you are ready to begin narrowing your search to a few potential groups.
3. *Where is God working?* Often, God is working in areas that churches have not discovered. Spend time with non-Christians in your target area to see whether or not they demonstrate interest and openness to the things of God. Your goal is to determine who exactly the lost people are and their level of gospel receptivity. Also, find out which Christian groups are represented in the target area and what they are doing to evangelize and plant churches among the unreached. Maintain a kingdom mind-set and work together with other kingdom-minded churches to reach the unreached with the gospel.
4. *Is God leading me to an ethnolinguistic people group, population segment, or environment?* As discussed earlier, many different church planting contexts exist throughout North America. Clarifying your church planting focus group in terms of a people group, population segment, or environment enables you to zoom in on the details of your focus group. A clear understanding of your focus group lays the foundation for developing contextual church planting strategies later.
5. *Where does the focus group live?* By now you probably have a good general idea where the focus group lives. But you need to specifically identify where the people live in terms of census tracts, city blocks, neighborhood ZIP codes, landmarks, housing types, and their gathering places.
6. *What is the focus group's spiritual condition?* Many have noted that spirituality in North America today is on the increase. However, much of this spirituality is not focused on the revelation of the Bible. Rather, it is an eclectic

spirituality reflective of America's love of choice regarding even their religious beliefs. Certainly, this approach to spirituality opens many people up to demonic influences. The wise church planter realizes that the battle for nonbelievers' souls in church planting is a spiritual battle. Therefore, defining the spiritual condition of the focus group's previous religious involvements and members' current belief systems is fundamental to starting a new church among them.

7. *What barriers stand between the focus group and the gospel?* Common barriers between unreached focus groups and you, the church planter, include language, culture, and worldview. All non-Christians are not equally distant from the gospel. For example, a non-Christian adult raised in a devout, evangelical Christian home is much closer to understanding the gospel than an immigrant Somali Muslim who was raised in a devout Islamic home. The culture, worldview, and languages of the Somali are greater barriers to communicating the gospel than those of the person from a Christian background. The purpose for identifying the existing barriers is to help the church planter understand which issues of the focus group must be dealt with in order to present the gospel and start the church in a contextual manner.
8. *What bridges lie between the focus group and the gospel?* No matter how distant the focus group is culturally and linguistically from the church planter, and no matter how distant the focus group's worldview is from Christianity, significant bridges for gospel communication exist for the church planter. The key is for the church planter to study his focus group and discover the points of contact for communicating the gospel that lie in the focus group's worldview. The felt needs of a focus group can also provide the church planter significant bridges for gospel communication and church planting.
9. *What are your spiritual gifts and talents?* Every effective church planter has a call from God to church planting. But not every church planter has the same spiritual gifts, talents, and cultural background. When selecting your church planting focus group, it is important to understand your unique, God-given design, and how you fit or do not fit with the variety of groups needing a church planter. Determining which groups fit best with your gifts, cultural identity, and interests will help you reduce the number of possible church planting focus groups from which to choose. Several tools exist that can assist you in assessing your church planter gift mix. They are listed at the end of this chapter.

10. *Writing your initial church planting focus group profile.* A practical way to pull this information together is to write a church planting focus group profile. This profile is a summary of your answers to the nine questions listed above. Be sure to include in your profile the following information:
- a. What God has revealed to you about a church planting focus group.
 - b. A description of the geographic area to which God is leading you and the basic demographics of that area.
 - c. Where and with whom you see God working.
 - d. Your specific ethnolinguistic people group, population segment, or environment.
 - e. The specific location of the church planting focus group.
 - f. The spiritual condition of the church planting focus group.
 - g. The barriers to the gospel among the church planting focus group.
 - h. The bridges for the gospel to spread among the church planting focus group.
 - i. Your spiritual gifts and talents.

Additional resources for “Define Church Planting Focus Group” can be found at www.churchplantingvillage.net.

Books for Further Reading

Bennett, Shane, Kim Felder and Steve Hawthorne. *Exploring the Land*. Littleton, Colo.: Caleb Project, 1995.

Clegg, Tom, and Warren Bird. *Lost in America: How You and Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door*. Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, 2001.

Robb, John D. *Focus! The Power of People Group Thinking*. Monrovia, Calif.: MARC Publications, 1994.