

The Role of Networks in North America

Networks are reshaping leaders and churches in North America. Driven by a quest for peer-to-peer learning opportunities, relationships, and mission partnerships, planters and pastors alike are seeking networking opportunities to enhance their capacity to lead their churches and fulfill their callings. A growing number of leaders are willing to invest time and money in order to interact with their peers under the guidance of an individual who brings immediate help or has the ability to assist them in their journey. Regardless of whether they are paying for the service or if it's free, networks are becoming the venue of choice for equipping and consulting for many of our leaders. Today, I would like to introduce you to three types of networks. We will also look at some common characteristics found within them, as well as a brief outline of how to start a network in your community if there is not one available.

The majority of networks currently operating are designed for church planters, focusing on one of two distinct phases in the life of a church plant—pre-launch and post-launch. Consisting of 6-12 planters, these networks typically meet once a month, with each meeting lasting approximately six hours. Although the majority of these *church planter networks* are fairly fluid, we have identified a few basic components that seem to exist in the more productive networks. These components are: prayer, a topical discussion related to a common phase in the life of the church plants, a discussion on a book, and a discussion dealing with the current pressure points or needs of the participants.

Some networks offer additional support for their participants. For example, one network provides each participant with a life coach whom they meet with twice a month. Some require an additional meeting with a mentor, while others require that the participants form small groups and regularly meet outside of the scheduled network meeting for discussions relating to personal application of network topics. All are designed to connect the participant with an individual who takes what the network discussed and makes it personal for the planter. At the heart of the additional support is a desire to facilitate personal application and build accountability. For an example of a network committed to leadership development in the life of church planters and pastors, visit www.nextchurches.com.

Another type of network currently emerging in urban centers is the formation of *Community Transformation Networks*. Seeking to see the ramifications of the gospel become a reality in their cities and neighborhoods, these networks may focus on social justice issues, while others are a hybrid of social justice and church planting. In its simplest form, the desired outcome of community transformation networks is to see individual and societal transformation. Believing that the gospel has the power not only to redeem individuals and families but can indeed

change society, participants desire to be agents of God's transforming power in culture and people. Therefore, they network widely and across many lines to see this become a reality.

One such network is called "Surgance". They are an example of a growing type of network focused on community transformation. These networks do not have church planting as their primary emphasis. But rather, as stated on their Web site (www.surgance.com), they "exist to close the gap by channeling waves of people and resources toward real solutions. We're not inventing another institution, but advancing a movement that engages people from Business, Religious, Educational, Government, and Social/Cultural arenas with the initiatives that will transform their communities inside out." These networks seek to transform their communities through activities such as painting inner-city schools and homes, as well as providing sports camps and block parties in under-served neighborhoods where they're able to partner with different arenas to collectively work together towards community transformation. According to Brian Audia, President and CEO of Surgance, "Surgance programs focus on common ground issues like education, children under state care, refugee services, or serving the underprivileged."

While not a church planting network, Audia states: "While Surgance is not a religious organization or an organization that plants churches, we certainly believe that churches and church planters play a very large role in positive city transformation. We work with the faith-based communities all over the world and those that start churches are usually some of our strongest volunteer leaders and workers. We think it is because they care and they want to be relevant. Church planters usually have a strong desire to serve their cities and we think that is great. We love the churches we work with and as a follower of Christ myself, I thank God for them and their partnership in doing good. Many churches support us financially."¹

Another expression of networks is a group of churches collaborating or *partnering* together to assess their community and then to plant biblically faithful, culturally appropriate churches to reach the unreached peoples they have identified in their communities. Networks made up of existing churches seek to partner churches together to enhance their ability to fulfill the Great Commission in a specific region, community, or among a specific group of people. At the heart of the network's purpose is the identification of unreached peoples in their target audience or place, and to determine if there is a biblically faithful and culturally appropriate church pursuing them in their heart language with the gospel. Although the strengthening or establishment of new ministries within existing churches is critical to the fulfillment of the Great Commission and an outcome of the network, in many cases a new church will need to be planted in order to reach the identified unreached peoples.

These networks are built upon four convictions: First, that Scripture commands us to make disciples of all peoples; second, that North America is a mission field; third, that the church is God's chosen vehicle for taking the gospel to the nations; and finally, that the church's mission assignment is a God-sized task that can only be accomplished by His supernatural power and in cooperation with other Acts 1:8 partners. These convictions serve as the biblical basis for the formation of these networks. They are not exhaustive, but serve as a foundation for the network participant's journey together. Visit www.reproducingchurches.com for an example of a *partnering church network*.

Regardless of the network type, some common characteristics are emerging within these networks:

- ***They are driven by a sense of urgency.*** Something must be done now! Whether it is a church planter trying to keep his head above water or an individual with a passion for the lost in his community, productive networks are compelled to act now.
- ***They have a clear and compelling purpose.*** They know what's their business and what's none of their business.
- ***They are built upon relationships.*** It is the foundation that drives and influences the level of success the network attains. For a network to be successful, it must move from the formation of a work group or an alliance to the creation of an environment where members can be transparent and vulnerable—one that facilitates the building of healthy relationships among its participants.
- ***They have created an effective process for achieving their stated goals.*** Team synergy is developed in *how* the network fulfills its purpose, reaches conclusions, and makes decisions. The level of involvement, type and number of people engaged in the process, and how they take advantage of the collective I.Q. of the network all influence the outcome of the network.
- ***They understand that they cannot move any faster or any farther than their participant's ability to communicate with one another and with their heavenly Father.*** Healthy relationships between people cannot grow and develop apart from *open and honest communication*, nor can a group advance the kingdom of God apart from communication with their heavenly Father.

Urgency, clear purpose, healthy relationships, effective processes, and clear communication are the characteristics of healthy, productive networks. So at this time your mind is wondering, "Where can I find one of these networks to be a part of?" "What if I can't find one, how do I get a network started?" Let me make a few suggestions for you to consider:

- **Discover.** What is God doing through missional networks in your association or convention? Internet, word of mouth, e-mail, and personal visits will help you identify essential elements of successful networks in your environment. If you are not sure whom to call, send us an e-mail, and we will introduce you to someone in your area.
- **Dream.** If you cannot identify a network in your area, begin dreaming. “If God was going to birth a missional network in your area, what would it look like? What would your role be? Who would be the first person you would talk to about this? What would you want as a result of your network?” Pray.
- **Gather.** Resist the “Lone Ranger” mentality. God has placed people in your city that have the same interests and same vision as you. Find them. Send them this article. Then, gather and cultivate an informal network. Do lunch or breakfast. Work alongside them to accomplish more for God than you could possibly do alone.
- **Enlist.** Find a coach or a mentor who can help you work through the obstacles and create action plans. In many cases, someone from your state convention will have the experience and connections you will need to launch a network. Connect with others who are either hosting or are a part of an existing network. Learn from your peers.
- **Be optimistic.** What does God want? God will give you everything you need to do what He wants.

The *Missional Networks Team* of the North American Mission Board exists to aid in the formation and strengthening of all types of networks. Please contact John M. Bailey at JMBailey@namb.net, or call 770-410-6236 if we can help you begin a new network or connect to an existing network.

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¹ Brian Audia, e-mail message to author.