

The What and Why of Assessment

Selecting the right person for the right place at the right time with the right plan is an essential component of the foundation for a successful new church start. The process of assessment and selection is a critical for both the prospective planter and the sponsoring organization. Appropriate assessment and selection will save months or years of disappointment and frustration. It is better to take additional time for a comprehensive assessment, selection and training process than to hurry through the process and make unnecessary mistakes.

Assessment of the prospective planter involves both the planter and the sponsoring organization learning more about the strengths and interests of the planter and the needs and make-up of the planting context. Not every person can plant with equal success in all areas nor are all areas equally good selections for every kind of new church start. The assessment process helps to increase the probability that a successful match will be made.

Most people are not called or gifted to be pastors. This is a statement which would receive little opposition. Most pastors are not called or gifted to be church planters. This statement tends to raise greater opposition. It is a premise of this author that selection is critically important for this very fact: selecting church planters is not the process of finding a place for a pastor to serve. It is, rather, identifying the relatively small percentage of pastors who are most likely to be successful in planting a church and matching them to a context in which they are most likely to be successful.

Assessment comes in a wide variety of forms. While it is a process that involves both art and science, experience has shown that some forms tend to be both more reliable and more predictive of success in a given planting situation. Whether conducted in-house or outsourced to a person or an organization that specializes in assessment, whether the assessor comes to you or those being assessed attend an assessment workshop or center, most reliable assessment processes include one or more of the following forms of assessment:

- Behaviorally-based personality/action inventories
- Leadership style inventories
- Structured behavioral interviews

Sponsoring organizations need to clearly think through and develop their own particular set of items that are non-negotiable with regard to selection of a church planter. It is usually the responsibility of the sponsoring organization to screen prospective planters for these items. These non-negotiable items could include:

- Alignment with the theological beliefs of the sponsoring organization
- Alignment with the polity/rules of the sponsoring organization
- Specific character traits and the presence or absence of specific actions

Since assessment of church planters has to do with predicting future action and performance, it is important to gain insight into the action patterns of the prospective planter. Past performance is often a reliable predictor of future performance. People can say anything they want but their actions demonstrate their true priorities, tendencies, values and habits. It is for this reason that behavioral assessments are preferred over statements of what a prospective planter wants to do or a self-assessment of spiritual gifts.

All of these instruments can help provide insight about the planting situation and enhance the self-awareness of the planter. It is most helpful, obviously, to conduct assessment prior to assigning a planter to a planting situation. Assessment is not, however, only useful for the selection and assignment of a church planter. The information gleaned in the assessment process can be used throughout the planting project in a variety of ways including recognizing strengths and weaknesses of the planter, anticipating potential (or even probable) challenges, developing a planting team, coaching leaders, creating a realistic time-line and developing a plan for learning and professional growth.

Assessment highlights the strengths and potential blind-spots of the planter. Every person has a number of strengths and everyone has a number of non-strengths. People are usually most effective when they can work in their areas of strength. A church planter who is aware of his or her strengths can design an approach to planting that accentuates those strengths. Knowledge of areas that are not as strong help the planter to make good choices and not make their performance in one of those areas critical to the success of the church plant. For instance, if a planter is a dynamic speaker but not a great organizer he or she might be more effective in starting a church that features the Sunday morning service instead of one formed around small groups.

Every planter encounters problems and difficulties. Some of these problems are more predictable than others. Thorough assessment can often anticipate these issues and assist the planter to act proactively instead of reactively. Thorough assessment also assists the coach in their work and interaction with the planter.

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