

12-1-1992

## Improving Our "Sink or Swim" Training Model for Church Planters

Tom A. Steffen

*Biola University*, [tom.steffen@biola.edu](mailto:tom.steffen@biola.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Steffen, T. A. (1992). Improving Our "Sink or Swim" Training Model for Church Planters. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 3(1), 33-38. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol3/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

## IMPROVING OUR "SINK OR SWIM" TRAINING MODEL FOR CHURCH PLANTERS

---

**Tom A. Steffen**

---

*Tom Steffen is professor of Inter-Cultural Studies at Biola University. He received a Diploma in Bible from New Tribes Bible Institute, Dallas, Texas (1968); B.S., Dallas Bible College, Dallas, Texas (1984); M.A., Biola University (1987); D.Miss., Biola University (1990).*

*He served as a missionary for New Tribes in the Philippines (1969-1989); church planting in the Philippines (1972-1986); church planting consultant in Philippines, Indonesia, PNG, Thailand, (1981-1986); and assessment centers for selecting church planters (1989-present).*

*He is member of North American Society for Church Growth and he has written articles for Evangelical Missions Quarterly and Global Church Growth.*

*Mailing address: Biola University, ICS  
13800 Biola Avenue  
La Mirada, California 90639  
(310)944-0351*

---

Recently, I received a notice in the mail written in eight different languages. Los Angeles is truly a microcosm of the world. What is true of Los Angeles is true of many other cities of the world -- we live in a global village. This can be intimidating, and rightly so, to many who are anticipating a church planting ministry. Even so, God continues to raise up church planters and send them into harvest fields around the world. Local churches send out church planters to

---

begin new churches in adjacent cities and towns. Mission agencies process applicants and assign them to distant places around the world.

Many of those sent out locally or internationally, however, have never planted a church or been involved in the process, (although some may have experience in church splits), worked on a team, or have been trained in cross-cultural studies. Some, however, have experience, with church splits. Yesterday I talked with an individual being sent out by a large church to plant an Asian-American church. He had none of the above training or experience. Should we not be sending out better prepared church planters? How can this be done? This paper argues that we can do a much better job of preparing our pioneers to extend God's reign by planting new churches in Satan's territory and suggests a model.

### **All Church Planting Is Cross-Cultural**

Whether members of a local congregation attempt to plant a daughter church in Philadelphia or missionaries of a mission agency initiate a church plant in the Philippines, both will find themselves working with people having differing values and expectations. This is because all church planting is cross-cultural. Let me explain. Whenever there are differences between genders, generations, geography, ages, socio-economic levels, ethnicity, one can expect to find differences in world views -- all of which impact church planting. Whether contextualizing the gospel message for babyboomers, babybusters or tribal animists, all church planters will need well honed contextual skills. Every attempt to plant a new church will carry cross-cultural implications.

The cultural distance between any two parties will determine the level of cultural skills necessary for effective communication. Some distances will be minimal while others will result in a wide chasm between the two parties. All, however, will require a certain sophistication in cross-cultural adaptability if effective communication is to result. The greater the cultural distance, of course, the greater the need for cross-cultural prowess.

### **Is the "Cross-Cultural" Gift Necessary?**

Most Christians believe that all believers should be testifying of their faith to nonbelievers even though they may not have the gift of evangelism. They recognize that when provided sufficient example and training, many believers can learn to share their faith effectively with others.

When it comes to cross-cultural church planting, however, we often hear another story -- the "missionary" or "cross-cultural" gift is necessary. Wagner defines this gift as "the special ability that God gives to certain members. . . . to



minister whatever other spiritual gifts they have in a second culture.<sup>1</sup> Without such a gift many would argue cross-cultural church planting should not be attempted. Cross-cultural ministry therefore becomes in the minds of many an activity for a select few.

But if all church planting is cross-cultural, is this a valid argument? One wonders that if adequate modeling and training were provided by proven cross-cultural workers, could individuals develop sufficient cross-cultural skills to have an effective ministry without necessarily having the gift, just as those who through training become capable witnesses even though they do not possess the gift of evangelism? Several steps can be taken to find this out before placing an individual in a church planting situation to find out if she/he will sink or swim.

### Assessment Provides Direction

Probably the best way to know if someone is capable of doing a particular task is to observe the individual active in actually planting a church. One way this can be accomplished is through assessment. My colleague, Dr. Tom Graham, director of the Center for Organizational and Ministry Development has developed individualized assessment centers for churches and mission agencies to help them select church planters.<sup>2</sup> To date, over 40 assessment centers have been conducted throughout the United States with approximately 1900 participating candidates. Candidates come to an assessment center to discover how well their gifts, skills, training and experience have prepared them for a church planting assignment.

An assessment center lasts for four days and can be held wherever adequate facilities exist to handle 20 to 30 candidates and 10-15 assessors. Candidates participate in the exercises, assessors look for 10-14 criteria determined previously by the church or agency as key components of a church planter's profile. Some of the criteria would include: flexibility, leadership, followership, spiritual maturity, contextual skills, evangelism, discipleship, psychological maturity, and family relationships. A team of experienced assessors rates each candidate after every exercise and continues to observe them during free time.

The simulation exercises are done in groups to see how candidates interact with each other. It soon becomes obvious who initiates leadership, who delegates, who follows, who are the negotiators, who can conduct long range and short range planning, who demonstrates spiritual depth, and how candidates

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books. 1983. p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Organizational and Ministry Development, 120 E. La Habra Blvd., Suite 203, La Habra, CA 90631. Phone: (310) 697-6144; Fax: (310) 691-2081  
Published by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange, 1993

handle conflict. Candidates also are involved in two personal interviews and take evaluation instruments to determine their work and leadership style preferences and personality profile. Teaching modules are interspersed throughout the exercises to provide practical application of the exercise to church planting.

On the last day of the assessment, each candidate receives a final feedback interview outlining the assessors' findings. Assessors inform candidates as to their effectiveness potential for church planting, ways to use their gifts and skills more effectively, and what can be done to improve any personal weaknesses that may have been observed. Even though assessment centers tend to be intense times for the candidates, the majority give high marks for the process on the evaluation form.<sup>3</sup>

While assessment centers provide a much better picture of an individual's ability to plant churches than those activities most commonly relied on by churches and mission agencies to evaluate personnel, namely personal interviews and references, there is a second step that can be taken.

### **Practice Makes Perfect**

Moving from simulated exercises related to church planting (assessment centers) to participating in a church plant under the auspices of a home church *before* being assigned to plant a church locally or internationally seems like a logical step in a candidate's training process. Such a step would allow church leaders to gain further insights into a candidate's potential while the candidate gains practical, hands-on experience. Most importantly, it would help to stop the placement of unqualified personnel in situations where they appear to be doomed to failure. But how could this work out practically?

A local church or coalition of churches who wish to plant churches at home and/or abroad should take the responsibility to see that their candidates are properly equipped before commissioning them for such ministry. Church planting among people of similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds (CP-1), those having minimal differences (CP-2), or those having major differences (CP-3) will determine the depth of training and tutelage necessary. If all church planting is cross-cultural, cross-cultural principles will have to be addressed for all three types of church planting.

Providing candidates cross-cultural training and veteran church planters to model the task does not have to be a problem for a church or churches wishing to plant churches locally and/or globally. Church leaders can seek outside assistance from mission agencies and schools specializing in cross-cultural training to meet the need of personnel to train and assist in the project. Such

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas M. Graham, "How to Select the Best Church Planters." . 23 (1): 70-79.  
<https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol3/iss1/6>



a joint effort could provide candidates an effective model of teamwork while at the same time meet the church's goal of planting new churches with qualified church planters (see Figure 1).

For such a joint effort to work smoothly, well defined guidelines would have to be drawn up for all three parties. For example, the church or churches would be responsible to provide personnel, finances, and long-term commitment to their community. Mission agencies and training schools would work under the church or churches to provide expertise, example, and personnel (e.g., veteran missionaries and students participating in church planting practicums).

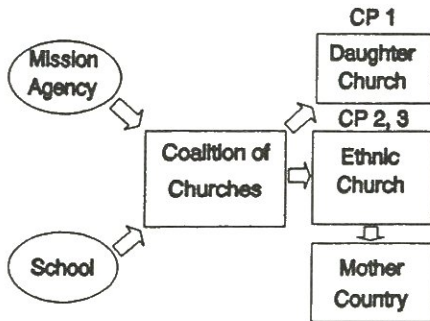


Figure 1. Collaboration to reach a common goal

Candidates would be responsible for taking a certain amount of training and commit themselves to one of the church's new plants for a specific amount of time. Standards would be drawn up to evaluate the candidate's abilities in such disciplines as demographics, evangelism, discipleship, leadership development, contextual skills, ability to work on a team and so forth. Once a candidate completes the internship successfully, they would be free to be assigned elsewhere.

Through the collaborative efforts of the three entities, all types of new churches will be planted (CP-1, CP-2, CP-3). Mission agencies and schools taking the initiative to assist local churches in fulfilling the Great Commission on the church's home turf will not only be providing valuable assistance, they will also be training a new generation of church planters. Some will join the agency or take further degrees at the participating school. Churches will receive the needed cross-cultural expertise and personnel from mission agencies and schools. The local community receives long-term commitment. Most importantly, a lost

**38 Tom A. Steffen**

---

world will receive proven church planters well equipped to show and tell their  
about a better way of life.