

Chapter Planting in Graduate and Faculty Ministry

Written by Hans Franzen



Introduction

This draft document is based on the assumptions that the reader both understands well the chapter planting material in its entirety and is beginning to wrestle with its implications for the graduate student context. This is not a finished document, but a work in progress whose purpose is to drive further development and a robust conversation as we seek to develop witnessing communities of graduate students on campus. This document is a broad overview of learning and reflection, and not meant as a manual for GFM planting staff. In the near future, GFM planting practitioners will need to gather to exchange stories and develop more specifics on best practices. Let's "stay in the game" together as we learn and share ideas of how to steward this gift God has given to InterVarsity in the growth initiatives (planting and building). This draft paper will address the context of chapter planting, the opportunity it creates for GFM, very broad differences in the practice of planting GFM groups compared with undergraduate groups, brief modeling differences in each of the four stages in the GFM context, and finally, a few next steps in developing planting in the GFM context.

Historically, chapter planting has been at the core of InterVarsity's work on campus. Obviously, every chapter across the U.S. has, at one time, been planted. While many have been planted over the years, many more have not survived, and still more often suffer from a bit of stagnancy and an unfocused sense of mission and purpose. The chapter planting material seeks to address this issue, and is a culling of best practices in InterVarsity towards planting missional chapters that are sustainable over multiple generations of students. The material is indeed a strategy or framework with waypoints and markers, but is not a program. The material puts words to the practices that we, as staff, often value intuitively: bringing mission-minded students together on campus, developing a witnessing community for the sake of reaching lost students on campus, developing prayer and spiritual formation practices that develop students as Christ-followers on campus and into their personal lives, practicing evangelism together.

In this matter, we must also acknowledge that there are many graduate fellowships across the U.S. that are wonderful models of missional communities, both large and small, engaging the campus in remarkable ways. Graduates are entering careers with a strong value to be missional persons wherever God places them. Christ is first above all in their lives. The language used to describe these groups, and the developmental path these groups have taken over the years may be different from what is found in the planting material, and in this we must continue to get behind the Spirit's movement among graduate students.

While InterVarsity has a vision to plant student chapters with excellence, it must be made clear that planting is not the only work staff are called to do. There are many other parts of our job with students that we need to remain mindful of. Indeed, we assume we robustly seek to engage in all four core values of GFM in our work with students. Therein lies the tension with which we must continue to wrestle: planting and developing witnessing graduate fellowships while calling graduate students to a lifetime of discipleship, integration and witness. The planting material is about methodology, structure and framework and not intended nor designed to show us how to disciple and develop graduate students.

Finally, as many have wrestled with this planting model, the dynamics and complexities of planting faculty ministry have emerged as unique. This calls for a more unique path of development. This paper will not address faculty ministry directly. In addition, more work needs to be done in addressing the particular needs of planning in Professional Programs (MBA, Law, MFA, MD, etc.), and 1-2 year Masters programs. Regardless, though graduate student, professional student and faculty ministries present some unique challenges to planting new fellowships, we believe the current chapter planting model is applicable when thoughtfully nuanced in all these contexts.

Why the Chapter Planting Model is Filled with Opportunity for GFM

- Rejects False Choices
 - The planting material is actually sparse in nature. It is not prescriptive, but is a basic framework in which staff can place the values they hold most dear: spiritual formation, intellectual engagement, discipleship, etc. For most staff, these are the very reasons they joined InterVarsity. The planting material allows staff to reject the false choices between discipleship and evangelism, quality and quantity, spirit-driven and strategic, growth and depth. Instead, staff can continue to develop students who can integrate all these tensions and values together in to a theologically accurate and missional lifestyle wherever they may end up after graduate school. In mastering the planting material, staff who are practitioners in the planting material see that it provides a helpful framework in which all these tensions can nest, if uncomfortably at times.
- Integration and Evangelism
 - The planting model is based on developing a community of students who practice mission together, in their departments, in their schools. GFM's core value of integration of faith and practice provides greater access to conversations about faith among grads and faculty. Integration of faith and practice, at its core, is what propels evangelism and the compelling nature of the gospel for the academy, as integration is, in some sense, an invitation to allow Jesus into all areas of our lives, study, practice and work.
- Spiritual Formation and Intercession
 - As one of its core essentials, the planting model calls students and faculty to a greater practice of spiritual formation, worship, and prayer, out of which the sense of mission flows. We are creating a place of worship in the academy setting, and calling grads and faculty to join us in worshipping God. Yet, we are calling students so practice these things for life. Graduate school is a training ground for making these practices permanent.

What We are Learning about Differences in Planting in the Graduate Context

The chapter planting material was developed based on the most common of contexts within InterVarsity: traditional four-year residential undergraduate schools. The work GFM needs to do is to apply where needed and translate where necessary the core essentials of chapter planting to the GFM context. Following are a few broad differences.

Fellowships with at least 50% Ph.D. students adapt most easily to this model. The most notable difference for this group is that the timeline may be extended where each stage may take up to a year or more to complete.

A second difference is that weekly large group meetings will probably not be the goal. There are a number of different models for what a graduate fellowship may look like and time should be spent considering which model will be most appropriate for the particular campus to which the planter is assigned.

A third difference is that the number of students involved may look more comparable to an undergraduate commuter campus than a four-year residential campus. Much of this depends upon

the number of graduate students on a given campus and the number of Ph.D. students versus Master's students.

While the planting material is structured and laid out in a linear fashion, GFM chapter planters need to be prepared to enter recursively back into stages already traversed, while also looking to the next stage.

The development of missional activity and the definition of "a missional graduate student or faculty" looks different than in the undergraduate context ([see Recognizing and Awakening Missional Christians on Campus](#)). Graduate students often think of their school or department as their arena of influence and engagement rather than the campus as a whole due to how and where they spend their time.

One key component to planting a fellowship involves developing a core of missional students or faculty who "practice the mission" together. This will look very different given the work of most graduate students in this life stage. For graduate students in most fields and for faculty, the context translates more into practicing the mission in the workplace rather than the university public square. For grad students and post-docs, it is the workplace at the outset of a new job.

One-year Master's programs are generally very intensive, so much so that students do not have time to help build a fellowship. Additionally it is often difficult to identify leaders who can get plugged in before they finish their program. Hence, inordinate amounts of time ought not to be spent in developing a group around these students. Rather, invite them to already existing fellowships. In a given year there may be enough people from a particular program to sustain a program-specific small group, but it may be difficult to sustain such a group over multiple years.

Two-year Master's programs have greater potential for sustaining a fellowship as long as there is careful attention to leadership selection. A group is always one year away from extinction. Whenever possible it is best to combine Master's students with Ph.D. students in a single fellowship. When this is not possible, the planter will primarily be the one who identifies and invites students into leadership. It also tends to work better if leadership terms run from January to January at semester schools and April to April for quarter schools. The implication of this is that leaders must be identified quickly and given opportunities to show leadership potential early in their programs. Each professional school program has its own set of opportunities and challenges.

Suggested Missional Core and Overall GFM Numbers for Each Planting Stage

	Stage 1*	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
	Core Group Gathering	Preview Gathering	Chapter Launch	Mission Launch
<i>Missional Core</i>	<i>5-10</i>	<i>8-20</i>	<i>18-30</i>	<i>25-45</i>
Graduate Students	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-60
MBA				
Law				
Medical				
Faculty	5-10	10-15	15-20	20-25
2 or 4 Year Commuter	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-60
4 Year Residential	10-20	20-30	40-60	60-80

* Note each stage may take up to 1 year in the GFM context.

Planting Stages in the GFM Context

Pre-Stage 1: Spying out the Land

In the GFM context planters need ask, “Where is God at work on this campus?” On larger campuses with many graduate programs there is potential for multiple GFM chapters. But these often cannot be planted simultaneously. Hence, asking where God is already at work and where planting should begin is a critical question.

Additional questions to consider in the GFM context:

- How many Master’s students are there? How long are their programs? Which programs are the largest?
- How many Ph.D. students are there? Which programs are the largest?
- Are most of the students full-time? Are they working full-time and taking evening classes?
- Are there any churches or other campus ministries targeting graduate students?
- How many faculty are there? Are there any Christian faculty gatherings on campus already?
- What professional programs are on this campus? How many students in each? Are there other professional school ministries in existence?
- Are there particular churches that seem to attract more faculty and graduate students?
- Is there any graduate student or faculty housing on campus?
- Where do my gifts best fit with where God is already working?
- What GFM model of ministry will best fit this campus and my gifts?

Stage 1: Gathering the Core

The best time and place to meet graduate students is in the beginning of the year at the new graduate student orientation. Many campuses sponsor these events a couple of weeks before the semester or quarter begins and allow groups to set up tables at or near these events. Another event to consider is a picnic for new graduate students and local pastors. Churches that have a vision for ministry to the campus are often excited to participate and may even help supply the food. It is a great way to emphasize the importance of the local church to students and highlight to pastors InterVarsity’s commitment to the local church.

Part of the reason the timeline is expanded is that it is difficult to identify new students throughout the semester or quarter. This makes the month before and the month after classes commence a critical time in the life of the plant. It is important to keep track of all contacts and to follow up quickly with a phone call or a face-to-face meeting, if possible (these do not need to be one-on-one meetings). E-mail should not be the only form of follow-up, as it is very easy to ignore. It is strategic to follow-up contacts who do not become involved in the first semester or quarter in the second semester, quarter or even in the second year. In some programs, the first year can be so demanding that new graduate students may hesitate to commit. But students may be more open to commit after they see that they can maintain their workload.

It is also important to find ways to connect with the friends and colleagues of students who become involved. One successful way to do this is to ask a student if you may host lunch with her and one of her colleagues. A simple sack lunch may open the door to deeper conversations.

Developing the Missional Core

It is critical to gather the missional core of graduate students early on in the life of the plant. The momentum of gathering a core of missional students prevents stagnation in the early stages of a plant, while propelling the plant forward into stage 2 and beyond. We need to be clear that this is not an exclusive group. The door is always open for graduate students to join the growing fellowship, as our goal is that the core continues to grow and grow. The defining characteristic of the core is that these are students who are actively praying for the mission on campus and eager to join with the staff in practicing the mission in their departments and in their schools (see [Recognizing and Awakening Missional Christian Graduate Students on Campus](#)).

Critically, the GFM planter has to make some choices in weighing their limited time and resources towards those students who are interested in the vision of evangelism and witness in the academy. Yet because our work is to meet and serve a wide range of graduate students, we need to remain open and eager for grads and faculty to continue to develop into mission-minded and mission-practicing people on campus. This is no small tension: how do we serve non-missional Christians and potential missional Christians we meet on campus? How do we help not-yet missional Christians become missional?

Stage 2: Preview Gatherings

In a nut shell, stage 2 is all about building momentum and “previewing” a picture of what the group could structurally look like in the future as a way to build vision and excitement among students. In the traditional context, this would mean pulling off a great one-time large group meeting. In GFM, this may not be our goal. One of the larger questions we need to answer in GFM is “What is it in stage 2 that we are previewing?” For instance, it is more likely that a once or twice per semester whole group gather could be a workable structure in most GFM plants.

Stage 2 timing will be elongated in GFM. Using the stage 2 wave (in the [Chapter Planting Manual](#)), GFM planters move between core group gatherings, whole group gatherings, and ideally, some type of outreach event. The timing is the key. Gathering a core group of missional students two times a month to plan and pray for an outreach event may be enough. One time per month may be a good cycle of gathering everyone involved in the GFM fellowship.

GFM fellowships may experience a recursive movement or energy back into stage 1 from stage 2. The process is not linear as it is laid out in the planting material. Due to scheduling, student projects, dissertation demands, the size of the missional core may shift and change. The critical point again, is that the core group of missional graduate students is always increasing in size and has “an open door”. We are always inviting grad students to become more mission-minded in their departments, schools and with their communities. While the missional core of graduate students is not exclusive in any way, it is clear that the core group is actively praying, discussing, learning and pushing into what it means to be involved in mission in the places God has placed them and encouraging the larger group of graduate students to consider God’s fuller purposes for them while in graduate school.

In stage 2, it will be critical for the GFM planter and core missional graduate students to address the following:

- What are the structural goals of the fellowship in the future? Monthly large group meetings? Bi-weekly small groups? The goal may not be a large group. The key is that the structures must serve the mission of the group, not the other way around.
- How should evangelism take shape in this graduate context? What is the shaper of evangelism in the academy? When we consider outreach in planting, there are a number of good evangelistic practices already outlined within GFM: Veritas, GIGs, speakers, dinner discussions, etc.

What is stage 2 not about? Stage 2 in the planting model is not about setting a student leadership team into place. This is the goal of stage 3. The core group can serve as a task-oriented group, but formal leadership structures need to be held back until stage 3.

Stage 3: Chapter Launch

It is in stage 3 where we have the more traditional structures associated with IVCF. By this point in the life of the plant, evangelism in the graduate context will be more embedded into the fellowship. The core has been praying and actively wrestling with the integration of faith and practice, evangelism and spiritual formation, both in terms of discipleship and also in terms of practice as graduate students in their departments and schools. Given this, there is a fair amount of latitude in what the stage 3 GFM structures look like, yet some generalities are important:

- Gathering points where graduate students are brought together for a united vision will continue to be critical to the life of the plant.
- The core of missional students continues to grow while the overall numbers also grow.
- The goal would be that some graduate students who are in the missional core of the fellowship become a “missional” leadership team – focusing on prayer, planning, leadership development, evangelism and discipleship.
- Both graduate students and the planting staff have collaborative relationship of developing the vision together.

Structurally, a GFM chapter plant may look very different than an undergraduate chapter plant. The bulk of the activity of the fellowship may feel dispersed across multiple smaller groups based on departments or areas of concentration. Smaller groups may meet on a weekly or bi-monthly basis and perhaps 1 or 2 whole group gatherings will occur during the semester. Outreach and evangelism need to happen on small scales, but also creatively as a whole fellowship (i.e. Veritas).

Stage 4: Mission Launch

These groups have deepened resources of prayer, discipleship practices, and have an articulate understanding of their place in the academic context. Students know what the group is about and why it exists. There are limited examples of missional stage 4 graduate groups. Yet, where they exist, these stage 4 GFM groups will be at a mature level to begin to engage the campus in a broader way than was possible in stage 2 and 3. Given this, there are a few questions that we need to address more fully. Where is the best place for evangelism to take place in the graduate student and faculty context? How can Veritas Conversations and Forums be used for evangelistic purposes? What mission/urban projects are appropriate in the graduate and faculty contexts?

Planting is a challenging endeavor in any context. But the fruit of building witnessing communities in places that never had them is everlasting.

Next Steps

- Gather GFM planting practitioners to cull examples and best practices in interpreting the planting strategy for graduate context.
- Consider the planting strategy’s integration in GFM development.
- Continue to expand and develop a GFM addendum to the chapter planting strategy.
- Begin to develop nuanced models for Faculty and Professional Schools Ministries.

[Chapter Planting in GFM](#) is posted on the [Collegiate Ministries website](#) with related resources for InterVarsity staff and student leaders.