



Coaching Planters in a Commuter Setting

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Redefining Success for the Planter

While the beginning stages of a plant may feel exciting, it *could* take years before the plant gets off the ground. True planters tend to be enthusiastic visionaries—encouragement to “shoot for the moon” is a great exhortation! But over time, the enthusiastic planter may become discouraged when he or she compares the numerical size of the plant to that of a four-year residential chapter plant. Hence, the coach needs to continually point out and celebrate small successes along the way.

Many factors come into play—the size of the commuter school (3,000 versus 35,000), involvement of local churches and other parachurch ministries, how Christianized the population of students and faculty is already, the setting (urban or suburban), ethnic diversity or homogeneity of the student and faculty body, and more. It is important to define what realistic numerical goals may look like for each stage at this particular commuter campus. Here is the 4-Stage Launch in five different contexts:

Chapter Plant Stage Progression Chart (numbers of core students or faculty needed)

| | Stage 1 | Stage 2 | Stage 3 | Stage 4 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Residential Chapter Plant | 10-20 | 20-30 | 40-60 | 60-80 |
| Commuter Chapter Plant | 10-20 | 20-30 | 30-40 | 40-60 |
| Faculty Chapter Plant | 5-10 | 10-15 | 15-25 | 25-30 |
| Ethnic Specific Chapter Plant | 10-20 | 20-30 | 40-60 | 60-80 |
| Academic Discipline, e.g., NCF, Art | 5-10 | 10-15 | 15-25 | 25-30 |

While Stages 1 and 2 do not differ numerically for residential and commuter plants, maintaining numerical stability (as well as depth and maturity of the group) may prove to be more challenging in the commuter context. Encourage the planter to record and celebrate untraditional “marks of success.” Vikki Rubens, campus staff worker in Oregon, suggests the following:

- Number of students passing their classes
- Number of students who take a major step of success in his/her life
- Number of students invited to small group
- Number of students evangelizing or learning to share the gospel (not necessarily the number of participants in GIGs)
- Number of students changing their lifestyle for the better (leaving a life of prostitution, staying out of trouble with gangs or the law, etc.)

Also, it is helpful to adjust catalytic events to fit the size and scope of the commuter campus, especially at the end of the quarter when students tend to drop out. Week long campus-wide missions may be difficult to attend and pull off for students who are not on campus full-time.

Dealing with Dissonance, Isolation and Feelings of Loneliness

Even the most adaptable and gifted people at crossing cultures grow weary over time. If a planter is experiencing significant displacement, he or she will experience some measure of dissonance. Adjusting from a college schedule to a loosely defined job, moving from a familiar geographical location to a new community, doing urban work and leading community adds transition upon transition upon transition and greater degrees of suffering that affect people differently. Some

planters are like a rock and handle this type of adversity well. They find ways to get into the Word, build community and pray, and they are able to quickly step back into the front lines. The Apostle Paul in Derbe was able to move from city to city and adversity to adversity. Other planters have a different type of fortitude and may struggle with singleness or marital issues, periods of loneliness, depression and the challenges of fundraising. As a coach, be very aware of the need to counsel, consult with the planter's supervisor and pray against spiritual attack. Spiritual warfare should be expected, particularly when a planter is advancing ministry in a place Satan has had a foothold.

Individual Planter or Team?

Expanding the planting team from an individual to a team can be a blessing, but does not always solve the problem of loneliness or sense of isolation. While a team that is committed to the mission and dedicated to working out personal conflicts can be a very rewarding ministry context as well as a healthy community model for students, a team with poor relational dynamics can derail the mission and accentuate the sense of feeling alone. And although God never promises happiness, what we do know is that *God can and will meet the planter during this period of challenge. In fact, it may be the best thing for him or her—to remove false dependencies and grow in dependence upon God for identity, security, a sense of call and mission. Simultaneously, the planter needs to grow in interdependence upon his or her community, prayer partners and staff colleagues.*

Seven Strategic Preventative Health Measures for the Planter:

- 1. Pray for and build an intercessory team.** It is essential for the plant and the planters to have people on whom they can call at a moment's notice for intercessory support and prayer ministry. Having an email prayer team with whom they can share weekly or bi-monthly prayer requests is critical for ongoing growth and sustaining of the ministry.
- 2. Build community and staff team connections.** Encourage the planter to make building networks a priority rather than only spending time with students. These can be with his or her church, donor and local community networks as well as area, division and regional team partnerships. Different benefits and stresses come with the type of church a new young staff worker chooses to attend, particularly if they are moving to an urban setting to do ministry. If he or she chooses a small church plant, whether it is an ethnic-specific church or a church intentionally pursuing multiethnicity, there may be inherent funding challenges that do not come with a larger church with a greater white-collar professional congregation whose members might financially contribute to the ministry. Megachurches whose mission is highly outreach oriented are often partial to funding internal programs rather than domestic missions. The downside of attending a church with fewer ethnic faces is that an urban staff worker may feel the tension of not feeling comfortable bringing his or her students to that church.
- 3. Provide pastoral support.** It is beneficial to have someone pastorally gifted who can shepherd the planter or planting team because planters will experience many things, from the excitement of Jesus moving on campus to, all of a sudden, famine. Some plants may take years to get off the ground.
- 4. Encourage road trips.** If a planter does not have a staff partner or planting team, encourage him or her to take periodic trips to visit other planters, friends and staff workers. A short reprieve from the work can be life giving as well as offer a change in perspective when a planter gets stuck in a rut.
- 5. Combine training opportunities.** Many commuter campuses opt to combine local training and fall conference opportunities in order to give students a sense of being part of something bigger, even if it means doing some translating back on campus. Some regions have taken this opportunity to work together on issues of justice, which naturally attracts a diverse group of students.
- 6. Share staff ministry gifts.** For the planter to feel connected to the larger area, divisional or regional team, it is also important that the planter has ample opportunity to use his or her gifts outside of the plant. Speaking or teaching at an area conference or on a campus where a ministry is better established can be energizing. Their speaking gifts may be a blessing to the larger staff team, and the honorariums do help!

- 7. Share the financial burden.** Many students on commuter campuses work in order to put themselves through school, and so it is not uncommon for the planter to have the additional burden of raising scholarship money (often full scholarships) in order to help students afford training conferences. Given this added burden and the fact that there are no inherited alumni networks, being a good networker among the community of churches in the area is critical. It is also helpful to have the partnership of fellow staff who serve in more established student work, who can encourage their students to “tithe to the plant” in order to help establish a ministry budget or scholarship fund. For younger staff who are single and have a sole income, managing finances can be particularly emotionally burdensome. If the area, division or region agrees to share networks and financial resources, this can be a great encouragement to the planter as well as build a sense of mission in the larger staff team.

Ideas contributed by Brad Arnold (pastor and former InterVarsity staff in So. California), Jason Gaboury (area director for New York City), Vikki Rubens (CSM in Portland, Oregon and part of Chapter Planting Cohort 1) and Marcia Wang (associate director of Multiethnic Ministries, former NI/NI Divisional Director).

[Coaching Planters in a Commuter Setting](#) is posted on the [Collegiate Ministries website](#) with related resources for InterVarsity staff and student leaders.