

How to Build a Launch Team

Priority One

There are hundreds of tasks to complete when planting a church. Recently a planter told me, “I got so much done today, but then I looked at how much I had left and felt like I was eating the proverbial elephant.” Toward the end of the conversation I asked how many people were on his launch team. He replied, “The same as last month. I need to get some people around me.”

I have seen church planters start churches with many of the “tasks” incomplete. I’ve seen churches start with limited budgets, borrowed and begged for equipment, no staff, and even heard of a church that started in a park because they had no facility. Many of these churches overcome these obstacles and become a healthy congregation. However, I’ve never seen a church start without people. A church planter’s worst nightmare is opening Sunday arrives and the only people in the congregation are his spouse, 2 kids and mom.

Priority one for the church planter is to build and develop a launch team. So what constitutes a launch team? A launch team, is a group of people committed to helping start the church.

These are not attendees or pew sitters. Warm bodies do not count. The best way to tell if someone is on the launch team is to ask yourself what area of service they are responsible for.

If the answer is none, they are not on the launch team. This definition does not exclude non-Christians. You should encourage non-Christians to join the team. They will likely join the team not because of their love for the church, but because of their friendship with you. I’m often asked, do kids count? My answer is no. They need to be people who can fill a ministry role. At times you will have high caliber teens who will be able to assist in key ministry roles, but even though your kids will be moving chairs and preparing communion, I wouldn’t count them.

Note: You don’t have to tell the kids that. In fact, I’d give them all titles and let them have responsibility as well. Just realize that they are kids.

Launch teams also have a definitive end. The purpose of the team is to start the church. Once that mission is complete, it is important for the team to disband. Otherwise, you quickly create an insider culture within the new church. I encourage church planters to set a time limit of approximately six months after opening Sunday. This let’s them know when their job is complete. Some of your launch team will come from other churches and this will let them know when it’s ok for them to return to their congregation. For non-Christians, it let’s them know when they can start sleeping in again on Sundays. Remember that many of them will come out of a relationship with you or someone else on the launch team. The ideal is that during the time they serve, they will come to know Jesus. But, if they do not, release them at the end of their commitment. Don’t guilt them into staying or you will damage the relationship.

How big should a launch team be?

To answer this question about launch teams you have to begin with the end in mind. One exercise I work through with each church planter is to explore what their expectations are for opening Sunday. First, estimate how many people will be in attendance on opening Sunday. This is a tough one. Often times church planters will push back and say that its God that grows the church and how can they possibly know. I affirm that theology. However, for planning purposes you need to have a picture of where we are going. What's the vision? There are some facts that can help. Churches that are started following the best practices of assessment, training and coaching are more likely to survive and thrive. In terms of dollars, it is typical that for each \$1000 spent during the pre-launch you can expect approximately 1 person in attendance. NOTE: This is a general rule. Thus if your budget is \$300,000 you should plan for at least 300 in regular attendance at launch. It's very typical for a church planter to dream big. The most common number I here for opening attendance is 500. Here is the key to determining what you really think attendance will be. Sit down and do a budget for the new church. You will need to project how much will come in for local offerings. The way I figure this is take the expected attendance multiplies by the expected dollars per head. It's normal for new churches to be in the \$10 – \$12 a head figure for the first year. It varies widely on location and target audience. What I often see is that church planters who dream and say there will be 500 on opening Sunday will adjust that number down to about 250 when budgeting. You want to be realistic. Take into consideration how much funding you have, whether or not you have a group of people starting the church with you from day one, the amount of staff you will have, etc.

Second, create a list of all the different ministry teams that the new church will have on opening day. Be sure to think through every area such as set up and tear down, communion prep, offering count, A/V team, community service team, small groups, etc. For each of those ministry teams, list out each role involved and how many people will be needed for the team to be effective. You will quickly see that there are a lot of people needed to support your vision.

The number of people that should be on the launch team is a number big enough to support that vision. C. Peter Wagner wrote that a minimum of 50 is needed for a healthy launch of a new church.

There is no perfect science. However, I can tell you from experience that you do not want to start a church without the support of a launch team. A small launch team will result in sacrifices to your vision. When we started LifePointe in Charlotte, we did not have a launch team of 50. Though God blessed us greatly with an opening day attendance of 288, it was a big stress on the staff and launch team to support a congregation of that size. Fortunately for us, many new people stepped up to the plate over the next year to help keep us sane. There were things that dropped through the cracks though. If you are building a launch team, my encouragement to you is pour the majority of your effort into it. Don't spend 9 months during pre-launch planning your first worship service. Spend 9 month during pre-launch connecting with people and inviting them into the unfolding of God's story within your community.

Who should be excluded from the launch team?

In this post, we take a look at who should be included and excluded from the launch team. Some of you may be saying, wait did you say exclude? I thought we wanted big launch teams. The answer is yes, you do want a big launch team, but without a few important filters you won't have a launch team, you'll have a group of disconnected people with their own agenda as to what the church should be.

Filter #1 Beliefs

While I don't think you need to publish a thesis of doctrinal beliefs, it's important to hit the highlights and have an understanding where you stand on the typical beliefs we fight over. Where does the church stand on baptism? Is it by immersion or sprinkling, essential or non-essential? What role can women have in the church? Do you practice gifts of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues. People all across the spectrum of beliefs can get excited about a new church. In fact, new churches seem to attract those with doctrinal agendas. I suggest developing a clear and concise summary of your beliefs and walking new people to the community through them. They don't have to agree with every single one of them, but they do have to support them. For example, if they believe in the gift of tongues and you don't, you need them to understand that they must practice that at home and not in the corporate gathering. They must also understand that they are not to recruit people to their doctrinal belief. If they can't agree to your beliefs, help them find a different team.

Filter #2 Values

I worked with a church planter who regularly turned away Christians from his team. He had a value of community service. He knew that people first wanted a worship service, then Bible studies and later they might make time occasionally for service. So he flipped the model around. In the early days, if you wanted to be on the team you had to serve. Many would immediately ask, well when are we going to start worship services. He'd politely say that they would have worship services later, but to be a part of the church now, you had to serve. Many chose not to join. While I don't recommend this approach for everyone, the point is clear. If you really care about your values, you will build a team that also cares about them. If you just take warm bodies you may still have a big church, but I guarantee you won't like it.

Filter #3 Willingness to play in the game.

Launch teams filled with bench players don't do well. Early on the church planter should develop a list of every ministry team and each role that needs to be filled for that team to thrive. ALL launch team members must be willing to take on a role or two or three...

A word about non-Christians. I think every launch team should have non-Christians on it. While it may be difficult to see how they pass through the beliefs filter, it's simply that they do not have an agenda against that set of beliefs. They should be open to the beliefs even if they can't affirm them in their life yet. Many will gladly latch on to your values and play on the team. DO NOT make being a Christian one of your filters.

So how do you work the filters? Early on I suggest one on one with each person. Later, you may want to have group meetings where you go through these areas. By the way, I suggest doing this after launch as well. I'd also suggest a launch team covenant. Clearly spell out expectations and the time commitment for being on the team and get them to sign on the line.

I had a couple of comments from earlier posts I'd like to address here. Thanks for the questions and keep them coming.

If someone says they have prayed and fasted and are excited to be part of the team, do we take them – even if we have doubts about their readiness and maturity?

My assumption is you are praying and fasting about your team members as well. Remember, Jesus prayed for his launch team (Luke 6). So who do you trust more? Your own insight from prayer or theirs? I personally wouldn't worry about their readiness or maturity. Let everyone play despite their maturity. You just don't put them in a leadership role, yet. Stick them with an apprentice/mentor and let them learn. I'd also say that most church planters aren't ready to plant, let alone lay team members. If you need to tell someone no, do it gently and help them to either find a new team to connect with.

If I, as the church planter want someone to go with me, and they too want to go with me, but my sending church doesn't want them to go with me – what do we do?

How much money is the sending church giving? 😊 That's a tough one. You need to play within the agreed upon rules with the sending church. I think its best to define those rules up front before vision casting and recruitment begin. You can't force someone to go to church at a particular place, so if someone really wants to go, they will. I would talk to the leadership of the sending church and let them know that person's wishes. Let them know that you support their decision, but have been approached by this person and would like their blessing.

Is there something more concrete we can use to determine who should go with us, such as ???per cent of sending church?

Ralph Moore in his book, "How to Multiply Your Church", talked about how in the early days they would send 20% of the church to start a new one. His wife quickly identified the problem. Those who were excited about church planting, were the most committed, high caliber leaders. They were cannibalizing the sending church. Ralph met with a group of leaders from church planting churches that suggested sending 20 – 30. My advice is be careful. Only take those who pass through the filters. Otherwise you will have 20 – 30 people who want to create a clone and will wonder why you don't have a jr. high golfing ministry and why you keep asking them to serve.

Should I use a launch team covenant?

Launch Team Covenants (as well as membership covenants) are about one thing: Expectations. In part 3, I talked about filters for deciding who should be on the launch team. The first two filters were beliefs and values. Early on, beliefs and values are merely words on paper. Unless the staff, leadership team and launch team live out these beliefs and values they are meaningless.

Enter expectations. Expectations are simply the ways we live out what is really important to us. They are the actions that demonstrate our beliefs and values. Clear expectations are vital to a healthy launch team and later on a healthy membership. Expectations help create a clear path to spiritual growth and let everyone know that if they are on this team here is where they need to go.

Many church planters shy away from high expectations. The thought is if my expectations are too high, then I'll scare people away. Expectations reveal your desired picture of a disciple. If you have low expectations, then don't be surprised when you are frustrated that your church is full of spiritual infants. Consider some of the expectations Jesus had of us:

1. Matthew 5:48 "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
2. Mark 8:34 "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."
3. Luke 18:22 "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Those are high expectations. Expectations are not meant to be legalistic rules, but a desired picture of a disciple. When seekers and Christians alike come to the church, I believe they are let down by watered down expectations. If they don't have to change much they may go looking elsewhere.

To determine what expectations you will have look to your values. Will Mancini in his book, [Church Unique](#), encourages a healthy exercise. He says to take each value of the church and flesh it out with "as demonstrated by." For example, if you value relationships, how is that demonstrated in the life of the church? Then ask, how will we measure that because what you measure you value.

Now to answer the question. Should I Use a Launch Team Covenant? Maybe. You need to determine how signing a covenant will be received in your community. But if you don't use a covenant, you still need to communicate expectations. In lieu of a covenant, what will you do to communicate expectations? Thoughts?

How do I build momentum on my launch team?

I worked with a planter once who had 40 adults on his launch team from day one. Three months later the number of people on the team had shrunk to 25 adults. What happened? The team lost momentum. Let's start with the assumption that you will have at least 50 adults

on your launch team. Most church planters are great at building the team to about 20 people, or the size of a rather large small group. The problem is what's next? You may still be months away from holding services. So how do you build momentum? How do you keep the team growing?

The problem for many lies in the fact that they are trying to build the launch team on their own. The answer lies in turning those twenty adults in church planters. We are a consumer culture. Let's face it. As pastor's we sometimes feed into this cultural sin. As a church planter, if you are focused on building the team yourself you are really just creating a consumer culture where you are the product. At some point, those 20 adults must be commissioned and sent. They must see themselves as church planters and just as you have invested in them, they must in turn invest in those God has given them influence over.

When this happens, growth will naturally occur. And to be ready for it, you must have a plan in place. It's easy to meet in your living room crowding in 20 adults, but what happens when its 30 adults? What about 50? I don't think there is a right or wrong answer here. Some planters take a small group model to the launch team and reproduce groups. Others, move into a larger meeting facility as the team growth. Some do a hybrid of both. Some use service in the community to gather the group. Others focus more on marketing and fun events.

Here is my advice. Dream about what God is calling the church to become. How do you envision the discipleship happening? How do you envision leadership development happening? In order to build and keep momentum, use this vision as the foundation for what you do with the launch team now. Remember you are setting the DNA of the church. Church DNA is a lot like concrete. It might be wet now, but there is quickly a day coming when it will dry and then to change it you will have to chip away at it.