

This paper is presented for discussion among PCA key leaders in the advancement of the Gospel and church planting in North America. Mission to North America welcomes all feedback on content. Please send comments to Fred Marsh: fmarsh@pcanet.org

Mission to North America
Ministering Among the Changing Cultures of North America
October 13, 2005

“Working Together To Transform North America”
“Striving Together for the Faith of the Gospel” (Philippians 1:27)

Introduction: So [you think] you want to call a church planter?

The conversation occurs so often that an MNA staff member can recite it in his sleep. The opening question is, “Where can we find a Hispanic church planter?” (Or it may be African American church planter, or a church planter for a more specific Latino ethnic group, or a church planter for any of a host of other ethnic groups who are now growing in North America. Most often in the PCA, it is either a Hispanic or African American church planter.)

The conversation continues along these lines:

“What is it that has brought you to the point of looking for a Hispanic church planter?”
“There’s a big Hispanic population in our town now, and it’s growing rapidly. We need to get a church started.”

“Do you know anything about the people of this community?”

“Well, they’re mostly Mexicans, but there are some Nicaraguans and Venezuelans as well. Some are real transient, stay here awhile and move on to other cities. Others get jobs and stay here.”

“And what is it specifically that leads you to want to plant a church?”

“Well, there’s no reformed church in their community.”

“Are there any churches in their community?”

“There are a few small ones; seem to be mostly Pentecostal.”

“Have you explored what ministries they are doing that you might participate in?”

“Oh, we just wouldn’t be able to do that; their theology is really out there, and their worship – well – you know what that’s like!”

“Have you visited any of these churches?”

“No.”

“Have you spent time with any of their pastors, to see what God is doing through them?”

“No.”

“Do you know any of their pastors – have you met any of them?”

45 “No.”

46 “Do you know anyone in this community?”

47 “No. A few of our members have conversations with them at work. A few of them work
48 for some of our members’ businesses.”

49
50 This conversation brings into focus a host of factors as we address the challenge of
51 church planting in North America. This paper is devoted to setting forth some of the key
52 issues that we believe should be considered as we seek to minister in the changing culture
53 of North America. In summary:

- 54 • The North American culture is rapidly and constantly changing and will continue to
55 do so for the foreseeable future. There is no reason to believe we will arrive at a
56 point where the changes stabilize and we begin to experience a relatively
57 homogeneous or stable culture once again; in fact, all signs point to an acceleration of
58 the extent and longevity of constant cultural change.
- 59 • Ministry in such a context is an entirely new experience for the PCA, indeed for all of
60 the evangelical church in North America. It may sound grandiose, but it is
61 nevertheless true: never before in the history of the world has a culture become what
62 North America is and is becoming, and it presents truly unique challenges for the
63 advancement of the Gospel – for which there is no previous experience that supplies
64 ready answers.
- 65 • Ministry must begin and go forward through relationship building. God’s blessing of
66 the PCA in our world missions endeavors leads us naturally to think we should
67 approach newly arrived immigrants (as well as African Americans) by calling in the
68 professionals, sending in church planters to an unfamiliar community in our midst,
69 just as we send missionaries to a foreign country. While church planting is the
70 ultimate goal and the only means through which God ultimately advances His
71 Kingdom in this age, even our church planting methods will be very different in many
72 instances from those to which we are accustomed.

73
74 So hang on for the ride as we explore some issues together in this paper. At the
75 beginning, jettison your desire to grab a church planter from somewhere who can pass a
76 presbytery exam, speaks the language and seems enough like that group of unfamiliar
77 people over there that maybe he can get a church started – and the further desire to then
78 push him off the pier to sink or swim in the uncharted waters (very deep and shark-
79 infested, we might add!) of church planting.

80
81 In her short history, the PCA has tried this method many times, and it has failed more
82 often than not. And when it fails, the consequences are devastating. The church planter
83 and other families involved, in most cases, are wounded permanently. The majority of
84 the pastors who have this negative experience leave the ministry or at least the PCA, and
85 if they remain in the PCA, they harbor hard feelings, in many cases for the rest of their
86 lives. Members of the core group or others from that people group who know of the
87 situation become offended and discouraged with the PCA, and this also can affect future
88 relationships and what otherwise might be good potential opportunities for a very long
89 time. A further result is that PCA leaders often conclude, “I guess we can’t make it

among ethnic groups; maybe the PCA is only for the kind of people we are already mostly made up of – middle and upper economic, highly educated white folks.”

Can God advance the Gospel through the PCA among the ever-growing variety of people groups in North America? At Mission to North America, we believe He will – as we trust Him to guide us through the very challenging process of discovering how He can work through us by His Spirit. And that He will work through us as we are willing to discover how He will use some of the distinctives and gifts He’s given us to do His work – if we are at the same time willing to let go of some things we cherish but which may not be essential to the building up of the Church, and ignore, accommodate or even celebrate and enjoy the non-sinful and even God-created differences that easily divide us.

The constantly changing cultures of North America

Consider the changes taking place culturally in North America. Most of those reading this paper will live to see the day when people of so-called minority ethnic backgrounds comprise more than 50% of the United States population. The majority of these people will be new immigrants who have no background in the Christian faith. What will be required for the PCA to be a growing and vibrant church in this kind of culture?

This reality presents a great opportunity for the Church, as noted in papers presented by the Maclellan Foundation:

Samuel Escobar writes, “migrants are people in transition” who are experiencing a loss of roots and a sense of homelessness. Because of this transitory state, “such people in transition are open to become believers, ready to assume a faith in a personal way.” The Church has the opportunity and responsibility to evangelize these people as they seek to establish themselves in an alien land. One of the most striking phenomena involving migration is the revitalization of the Church in American and Europe through mission-minded immigrants. Often it is not the traditional church of the white man that is evangelizing communities, it is the migrant church. According to Jongeneel, “Christian migrants are more mission-minded than the members of established congregations and churches in Europe,” and Philip Jenkins makes note of the rising Protestant Hispanic presence as well as the increase in Asian Christianity in the United States. Jenkins also points out that there is a rise in non-English speaking worship services throughout the U.S. and Europe, reflecting this changing demographic of the Church due to migration. In short, migration presents both challenges for the traditional church as it adapts to the flux of immigrants and a great opportunity to see the gospel of Christ furthered in every tongue and nation. (from Maclellan Foundation papers; original source: Escobar, Samuel. “Migration: Avenue and Challenge to Mission.” *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1, (January 2003))

People who immigrate to North America begin forming new cultures upon their arrival in North America. These new cultures are very different from the cultures of their countries of origin. These new cultures will not remain static; they will change with each

136 generation and even within each generation. From one people group who arrives with a
137 homogeneous culture will come many new cultures within a very short time, often even
138 in the first generation of living in North America.

139
140 This is unlike any previous experience in the United States. North America has seen
141 significant periodic influxes of people groups in the past. With a few exceptions, these
142 people groups either settled into largely isolated cultural pockets, usually in the major
143 cities, or they assimilated into the mainstream without substantially affecting it. Today,
144 for the first time in history, there is a major ongoing influx of new people groups all
145 across North America who are impacting virtually every community in North America,
146 urban, suburban and rural.

147
148 Not only are new cultures being created by the presence of new people groups, but *these*
149 *new cultures will be constantly changing, and they will bring constant change even to the*
150 *dominant American culture.* Further, every indication is that they will not settle into
151 common and established cultures in the future, but that this kind of change will be
152 ongoing. While some other nations are currently experiencing similar changes, this is
153 unlike anything in the history of the world, for no other past nation or culture has
154 experienced an ongoing immigration of peoples from such a multitude of other cultures.

155
156 The result is that North America is becoming a new context for ministry altogether. *The*
157 *key to a vibrant future PCA in a changing culture is that we become highly skilled in the*
158 *contextualization of the Gospel in an ever changing and increasingly heterogeneous and*
159 *pluralistic American culture.*

160
161 Before we go further, let's note a couple of basic assumptions:

- 162 • The first has to do with language. A lexicographer or an anthropologist will cringe
163 quite a few times in reading this paper because of the way we use the word "culture."
164 For our purposes here, we're using that term to indicate the functional world in which
165 an individual lives. His or her ethnic background, education, the mix of people with
166 whom that person interacts, his or her working world, religious background, current
167 religious beliefs – we are using the word "culture" as the term to denote the milieu of
168 relationships and values in which someone lives on a daily basis. If we were being
169 more technical, other terms might properly be used in many places, and certainly the
170 word "subculture" would be more appropriate in many instances in which, for
171 convenience, we use the word "culture."
- 172 • The second is our belief that in the final analysis there are only two cultures: in Christ
173 and not in Christ. *Eph. 2:19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you*
174 *are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on*
175 *the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the*
176 *cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy*
177 *temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place*
178 *for God by the Spirit.* If that is true, then it seems that our task should be very simple:
179 everyone who is in Christ should form one culture. Unfortunately, it is not that
180 simple. For one thing, it is much more complicated because we are fallen, and that
181 fallenness causes sinful divisions. But even when the Church is gathered around the

throne in heaven, as prophesied in Revelation, ethnicities will still be distinguished. This implies that even in a perfect world, ethnic distinctives, at least, are still visible. The overriding concern, however, is this: Christ has called us to be one in Him, and it is toward that unity that we strive in this life and in this age, awaiting perfection and completion in the age to come.

Ministry in a constantly changing culture

Now let's go back to that conversation in the Introduction. What are some of the problems that it highlights?

In the PCA, our experience in North America and with international missions (and our suburban Anglo-majority church planting, for that matter) has so shaped us that we are accustomed to only two primary approaches to ministry. The first approach, which shapes most of our ministry in North America, is that we believe we can reach only people like the majority of our current membership. With some exceptions (thankfully!), the PCA has ministered effectively mostly among people groups in North America who have the following characteristics: Anglo, educated and middle to upper income. And when we seek to develop new ministry among them, what do we do? We send in the professional to plant a church. In the culture of the Anglo-majority suburbs (note that Anglo-majority suburbs are a diminishing demographic because of the major influx of new immigrants into the suburbs), the professional can work pretty much in isolation and form a self-supporting church in a relatively short time.

The second concept, which shapes most of our international ministry, is that we send missionaries from our majority North American culture to do cross-cultural ministry in another culture that is different from the majority PCA culture in North America. Increasingly, we also focus on the training of nationals in other nations. In the international context, we expect to minister effectively among people very different from us in terms of ethnicity, education and income levels.

As an aside, isn't it a strange inconsistency that we have sent Anglo men to plant churches in other countries as the primary missions strategy for decades, but in North America we almost never do this – all church planting efforts stay on hold while we search for a church planter who is from that non-Anglo ethnic group? Rarely, if ever, does the querying person in our Introductory conversation picture an Anglo church planter as the answer to his quest, or actively seek out Anglo candidates.

But let's get back on our main track here. Given our international experience, and our experience even in much of our North American church planting, our approach to ministry in North America seems simple: as the nations come to us and North America is increasingly filled with people groups among whom we have ministered in other nations, let's just apply the same missionary methods in North America.

227 Taking this approach, we usually try to identify church planters from the new people
228 group in our community, with the purpose of planting homogeneous churches comprised
229 mainly or entirely of that people group. Our assumption and plan (we often don't feel we
230 even need to ask people in the ethnic group because we already know) is that these
231 churches will prefer to use the language of the country of origin of the people group. So,
232 if they are from a Spanish speaking country, they will want their church and any ministry
233 among them to be in Spanish, their heart language.

234
235 This is the presumed method that drives us to the question, Where can we find a church
236 planter? On the surface, this approach appears to be a sound one. This is the most
237 common experience of the PCA, and it usually does result in failure. It fails or has
238 limited results because it fails to understand the complexity and uniqueness of the
239 changing North American culture. And it will fail for perhaps an even more basic reason:
240 *our plan is to send a church planter in to labor alone, to start from scratch, in relative*
241 *isolation. Effective ministry, effective church planting cannot be done that way in today's*
242 *complex and changing culture.*

243
244 The Gospel is the same in every age. The reformed tradition guides our interpretation of
245 the Scriptures. But our ways of forming relationships, planting churches and ministering
246 among the people of an ever-changing North American culture will be different from our
247 past ways and also different from historic missionary endeavor. There is no blue print.
248 And if we are successful in this endeavor, all bets are off. We will be called to give
249 much, sacrifice much and change much in order to see people come to Christ, and join
250 together in God-centered God-honoring and biblically directed worship and ministry.

251
252 The methods which we are accustomed to using fail because the new immigrants for the
253 most part do not form pockets of homogeneous culture similar to that of their experience
254 in their countries of origin. Neither do they assimilate uniformly into American culture,
255 forming a simple and easily defined third culture.

256
257 Our natural inclination is to address most vigorously the need for the advancement of the
258 Gospel among the first generation of new immigrants. They are highly visible to us,
259 because their language and customs are different. But David Moran makes this
260 observation, which most of us do not readily see: "...the fastest growing – and for
261 ministry most neglected because they are not as visible – are second or third generation,
262 English dominant, and suburban [non-Anglo ethnic groups]."

263
264 There was a day when newly arrived immigrants gathered mostly in our major port cities
265 and remained for generations in cultural ghettos. Today, even the newest immigrants
266 move into the suburbs, small towns and even rural villages all across North America, and
267 very quickly they and their children are assimilating into all aspects of the local way of
268 life and are increasingly functioning in the English-speaking world.

269
270 Especially, as children grow up speaking English and making their own changes to the
271 cultural milieu in which they find themselves, the second and third generations do not
272 remain loyal to first generation language-of-the-country-of-origin churches. Therefore,

ministry must be oriented toward the first, second and succeeding generations, all at the same time.

Thus our method requires multiple approaches to multiple and ever-changing cultures within each people group. This is highly complicated and there is no missiological manual already written; the North American Church must write that manual (today, other denominations are ahead of the PCA in this), and the manual's content will be ever-changing.

David Moran makes this further observation regarding the Hispanic experience specifically, which applies to most other people groups also, "My view is that Hispanic-American culture is not best described as bicultural or synthesis, but rather as an extremely dynamic culture, not static, which has been forged and continues to be forged by its reaction to other cultures and its own migratory history. As such, Hispanic cultures in the United States possess their own unique identity." (Moran, p. 8).

Some immigrants lose much of their cultural identity even within a generation or two. Others retain language and cultural distinctives for generations. Some retain cultural distinctives but not language. The core issue for ministry is that there is no uniform or unchanging pattern.

Such cultural flux means that successful ministry will understand – and love – the people of the particular community or people group among whom we are called to minister and will deliver ministry through highly relational methods appropriate to that culture. Harvey Conn and Manny Ortiz note that the response of the North American Church (including but not exclusively the PCA) has not always been positive in light of such cultural change. The evangelical church's past flight from the city is a case in point: For its first three hundred years beyond the coming of Christ, the church saw cities as gifts of God, royal routes to the evangelization of the world. Now the picture is not so bright. In the western world the church moves to the outer edges of the city, fearful of what it perceives as emerging urban patterns. (p. 79).

Conn and Ortiz also summarize the positive call:

When conditions change – such as when the makeup of the community shifts – we must make ministry changes that are appropriate for the new context. This does not mean that we change our understanding of biblical absolutes regarding the church. But our programs and methods may need to be evaluated in light of the new context. The church needs to ask, "How do we speak to the culture and condition of the people in our community without compromising the gospel?"

... Since we are serving people who live in a reality that is both dynamic and concrete, we must be willing to take on the posture of a servant (I Cor. 4:1), seeking to know the people and serve them with integrity.

Too often our desire for control leads us to suppress change. We want life to move in a straight line; the future should be like the past, everything predictable

and sure. This is not the reality of like. ...given the inevitability and rapidity of change in our society, we must be fluid enough to discern and accommodate. (pp. 270-271)

PCA experience, even though limited, illustrates this complexity

PCA Korean churches illustrate the complexity of cultural change between first, second and succeeding generations. In the first generation, almost all Koreans immigrants gather in Korean language churches. Since there even are pastors in the first generation who do not learn English, the Korean language presbyteries were formed in the PCA to accommodate this reality. But in the second generation, these different church cultures are observable in the PCA (this list is only a sample; there are many more):

- Homogeneous second generation Korean English language congregation whose church life is governed and hosted by the first generation Korean language church (the English language church is a member of a Korean language presbytery)
- Homogeneous second generation Korean English language congregation whose church life is independent of a host church (church may be a member of either English language or Korean language presbytery)
- Majority multi-ethnic Asian English speaking congregation, led by second generation Korean pastor
- Majority Anglo congregation, joined by a significant percentage of second generation Korean and other Asian members, led by Anglo pastor
- Majority Anglo congregation, joined by a significant percentage of second generation Korean and other Asian members, led by second generation Korean pastor

Historically, African Americans have belonged mostly to homogeneous African American churches in North America. However, in more recent years there has been a growing variety of church experience among African Americans. PCA churches or mission churches include African Americans in these cultural/ethnic combinations:

- Homogeneous African American church
- African American and Anglo combination, led by African American pastor
- African American and Anglo combination, led by Anglo pastor
- Multi-ethnic majority mix led by African American pastor
- Predominantly and historically Anglo congregation led by Anglo pastor, with growing number of African Americans joining.

This variety illustrates our central point: there are a growing variety of cultures developing. The church can minister effectively among all of them, but must adapt to each distinct culture in order to minister effectively. No two churches are going to look alike, and no two are going to do things the same way in terms of cultural customs.

PCA experience among Korean Americans and African Americans is complex but it is relatively simple compared to the complexity that the Hispanic cultural assimilation will bring. Among Hispanics, the complexity is far greater due to such factors as the rapid growth of great numbers of immigrants, the movement of significant numbers of

immigrants to all sizes of population centers all across North America, the readiness of the first generation to learn English and the variety of nations and cultures from which Hispanic people come.

Here is a partial list of current Hispanic church formations in the PCA (note that all have ministries in English, at least for children):

- Spanish language congregation functioning independently
- Spanish language congregation sponsored and hosted by English language congregation, led by Hispanic pastor
- Spanish language congregation sponsored and hosted by English language congregation, led by Anglo pastor
- One church with shared leadership and some shared ministries, but with separate Spanish language and English language worship services
- One worship service in English (including some of the worship in Spanish), but with a separate meeting for adults for the sermon portion of worship, with sermons in Spanish and English
- Bible studies in Spanish with Bible study group members worshipping in English language worship service
- Majority Anglo congregation with worship entirely in English, seeking to draw second and succeeding generation Hispanics into participation
- Majority Anglo congregation, worshipping in English language, with first generation Hispanics participating; Spanish translation provided for some church functions

When people think of ministry to Hispanics, they often think only of forming a Spanish language church, as reflected in our Introductory conversation. In some cases, Hispanic pastors who cannot speak English have been called as a solo church planter. But some observers estimate that ministry exclusively in the Spanish language will reach only 10% of the Hispanic population, and that ministry exclusively in the Spanish language will reach less than half of even the first generation Hispanic population and will miss the children altogether. Therefore, if a ministry is conducted in Spanish only, it will miss many of the first generation altogether, and even those whom it attracts will move on quickly as they and their children move into the English speaking culture.

What, then, is the role of church planting, and how do we mentor church planters?

Planting churches through people coming to Christ is our ultimate goal in any community and among all people groups. The local church is the only ongoing stable base for ministry. Planting churches is always the ultimate goal in establishing ongoing ministry in any community or people group:

- The local church is God's ordained means of extending His Kingdom in this age.
- The local church is the base for permanent presence in a community or people group.
- Effective leadership can be developed only through the local church.

- More people come to Christ through new churches than through established churches; thus an ongoing practice of planting new churches will see many more people come to Christ.
- In communities in which there is no PCA presence, planting churches is the only way to begin to develop that presence.
- Much as an existing PCA church may have the desire theoretically, there may be factors that make it very difficult for the existing congregation to make the changes necessary to assimilate new people into the congregation. Thus, in some communities already served by PCA churches, the only way to reach new people in the community may be through planting new churches.

Our critique of the Introductory conversation should not be taken to mean that we are in any way diminishing the value of church planting. Nor should it be taken as in any way discouraging the seeking and mentoring of church planters. On the contrary, we should constantly seek to find or train church planters from every people group among whom we seek to develop ministry, both to work within their own ethnic groups and to work among other ethnic groups. Where may potential church planter candidates be found, or where may good candidates for mentoring be identified?

- Men trained and experienced as pastors in their country of origin.
- Men trained and experienced as pastors serving in their respective people group in North America.
- Men from the people group among whom we seek to develop ministry who are trained in North American seminaries. Recruiting and provision of scholarships are essential if this is to happen in any numbers.
- Men from the people group among whom we seek to develop ministry who are mentored and trained by PCA pastors and elders, as they live and minister in their current cultural context. MNA's Leadership and Ministry Preparation (LAMP), under the direction of Brian Kelso, provides an effective way to offer this mentoring.
- Experienced pastors, including missionaries, from any cultural or ethnic background, who may or may not have direct experience in ministry in another culture, but who are committed to developing ministry in a culture different from their own. This speaks to our point earlier, emphasizing here that we should urge more Anglo men to answer God's call to work with other ethnic groups in North America.

A strong caution must be noted here: pastors who have ministered effectively in another country are not necessarily equipped to minister in the changing culture of North America, even in a community primarily made of people from the country in which they formerly ministered. This is true whatever their ethnicity and however effective they may have been in leadership in that other country. Their experience may actually work against them, in that they may expect ministry to be led and developed in ways too similar to their previous experience. They must have the ability to adapt to an entirely new and – we believe we cannot overemphasize – constantly changing cultural environment.

If the country in which they have previous experience has a dominant language other than English, they must be bilingual and able to develop ministry in the English speaking

context as well as the other language. But language is only one issue, and actually one of the simplest to address. The far greater cultural issues are the simple realities that life is very different in every way for people who are newly arrived and assimilating into the North American culture, and the church planter must be capable of ministering in these new and uncharted waters.

There is one further aspect of seeking and mentoring church planters that we must frankly address because it is the reason for many of the failures. The simple reality is this: because we do have a godly desire to plant churches and reach people with the Gospel, and because seemingly there are so few candidates for church planters to address the new and changing cultures, too often we act in desperation, calling men who may be well equipped to lead in established situations, but who do not have the gifts and experience required for church planting.

Participants in MNA Assessment Centers have actually said, “Well, he doesn’t seem like he has very much leadership ability to me, but maybe that’s just cultural. Maybe among his people group, he would be ok.” And because we want to send out more church planters, we proceed with such a candidate. It can be safely said that every candidate sent out with this reservation has failed. The reality is that the going is tougher in our ever changing culture, and those who will minister among people groups in which the PCA is not strong require, if anything, an even greater equipping and mentoring in order to plant churches.

How, then, do we develop Ministry in this Ever-Changing Culture?

While praying, searching for and preparing to mentor new church planters, let’s begin to minister in some ways that will prepare us to come alongside a church planter (rather than send him in to work alone) and that will begin to form a foundation of relationships from which a church plant may be launched effectively. We are familiar with the concept of pre-evangelism and evangelism. There is a preparation for the Gospel that opens the heart and the mind to the actual hearing of the Gospel. Think of this (we compare it to evangelism deliberately because evangelism is at the heart of church planting) as “pre-church planting.” What are some things we can do to begin ministry and prepare the way for church planting in our complex culture?

There are a couple of questions we really have to raise at this point, though they are questions that make us squirm:

- First, are we willing to pay the price? This is hard work! And it’s so complicated! Isn’t there a simpler way? I’m really comfortable with sending in the professionals because I feel so inept. Yes, it is hard work and it is complicated. And the truth is that we don’t have to do it! We can live in a Christian and mostly Anglo world, and a few others here and there will even want to join us. But if we believe God has called us to advance His Church in this culture, we have to roll up our sleeves and do the hard work – and the hardest work of all will be prayer. More about that in the paper’s conclusion.

- The other question we should consider here: are some of us called to this hard work of outreach across cultural lines, while others are not? Basically, the question can be rephrased this way: are some of us called to bear witness, while some are not? Here's the reality: in North America today, all people outside of Christ are of a different culture. Life outside of Christ is very different from life in Christ, whatever your cultural milieu otherwise. That is more true than ever, and increasingly so, whether you are a rich white man or a poor member of another ethnic group. Increasingly, North American Christians face the choice: live an isolated life in a tiny little world – or meet, get to know, learn to love and seek to bear witness among people who make us uncomfortable. And increasingly, North American wealthy Anglo Christians will find they have more in common with lower income Hispanic Christians than with other wealthy Anglos. In fact, many PCA members have seen more people come to Christ when working in a lower income community among an ethnic group different from their own than they have among their cultural peers.

Now back to the question of where to begin ministry. We must always be thinking and working toward church planting as the ultimate goal, but here are some good reasons for beginning with other ministries:

1. While there are limits on the extent to which people are willing and able to form relationships with people where they sense little in common, most PCA churches can assimilate many more people, and many more kinds of people into their midst than they may realize before they try. Even when a new church is established in the long run, it is good for existing PCA churches to develop ongoing relationships and ministry across cultural lines with the new people groups in her community. This is good because it creates new opportunities for ministry for existing PCA church members and it brings greater functional unity to the Body of Christ.

2. In light of the major influx of non-Anglo ethnic groups into the suburbs, many PCA churches are well positioned for ministry among people who are of different ethnic backgrounds but live in the same communities as the PCA members. That is, we don't need to plant a church as a new base for ministry, because that base already exists in our already existing church.

3. If the first step, when we know next to nothing about the people group, is that of bringing in a church planter, the failure rate is high often due to the reality that the wrong man is chosen – not because he is not equipped, but because we don't understand, or worse yet, we misunderstand, the culture of the community we seek to reach. If we take the time to get to know people there and minister among them for awhile, we have much greater ability to figure out how a church can be planted and how the church planter should be equipped.

4. Generally speaking, the best leadership for any ministry is leadership arising out of the culture in which that ministry exists (this should not cause us to shy away from encouraging Anglos to minister among other ethnic groups). Therefore, the ideal is that we commit ourselves to the long-term process of training and mentoring church planters and other pastors from the culture in which they are going to minister.

What are some practical ways to begin ministry?

- The best beginning point for ministry always is to form relationships with the people – i.e., get to know and love them personally. What are their needs? What ministry is already taking place in their midst? What are the best entry points for new ministry? People rarely come to Christ through impersonal proclamation, but rather most come to Christ through hearing the Gospel in the context of a personal relationship, in which we love our neighbors as ourselves.
- Begin with ministries to children. Parents usually face great challenges in rearing their children and are grateful for assistance. This is especially true if their children grow up speaking English, while the parents have little ability in the English language. VBS is an effective means of ministry in almost any community or cultural context. After school tutoring is another almost universal means of outreach to children, particularly in communities of need.
- Meeting the needs of newcomers is a huge opportunity. English as a second language (ESL) is a ready entry point for ministry among new immigrants. In most communities, literally putting a sign in front of the meeting place is sufficient for recruiting. Those who lead classes do not necessarily need to know any language other than English.
- Another ESL possibility: in our Anglo-centric culture, we naturally think only of our forming and leading ESL schools. A wonderful next step is our quipping people of other ethnic groups to lead them, forming their own means of outreach.
- Be willing to serve people in the community, addressing their needs selflessly, whether or not they will ever become a part of the existing PCA congregation. Encourage and celebrate initiatives taken by fellow church members in serving the practical needs of their neighbors.
- Seek to build the kind of atmosphere in our worship and fellowship that will invite as many as possible to want to participate. Ask what kinds of changes need to be made intentionally in the life and work of our churches in order to be able to welcome others who are different from us. In many cases, this may mean sacrificing personal preferences for the sake of building up the Body. We should be continually asking the question, how can we line up our customs with the culture we are trying to reach, within biblical limits? For example, some congregations include in their worship hymns and songs in a variety of languages represented in their communities, such as Spanish, Swahili, or Creole, mixing the language used in song with subtitles, so that one worship service includes several language groups in the lifting of praise to God.
- Instead of the strengths of our reformed and Presbyterian heritage being barriers, as they often are, put them to the maximum use for outward facing ministry, while at the same time appreciating that the work of the Spirit and the Gospel is present in other traditions as well. The PCA can offer time, talent and treasure that strengthens already existing churches and ministries of other traditions. The PCA's educational resources particularly can be of help in strengthening others, even if they do not become members of the PCA.
- Church staffing: the make-up and ongoing mentoring of church staff members will be different if we are committed to ministering among people who are not part of the mainstream culture of the congregation. Staff members should be called and equipped with ministry among the people groups in our communities in

mind. In some cases, calling a bilingual staff member will provide opportunity both for outreach and church planting, and also assist in assimilating new people into the congregation. Such staff positions will also open up opportunities for leadership development among a growing variety of people groups, since not everyone who is called to ministry or other leadership in the church is necessarily gifted for church planting.

- Take advantage of any opportunity for experience with people who are different from us. Even transient or one-time experiences or contacts will encourage us and help us gain experience in ministry.
- Whatever the forms of ministry, concentrate particularly on building leadership that is indigenous to the group with whom we seek to minister, especially giving to emerging leaders the acceptance and opportunity to lead.

ESL ministries are a particularly effective way to minister among a variety of cultures and are among the least difficult to implement. ESL ministries also can be used for pre-church planting. Jerry Baker, who is the Language Missions Ministries Specialist for the Georgia Baptist Convention summarizes the method they have used, which could be implemented by many PCA churches or presbyteries:

- A team of church planters actively looks at areas of high ethnic concentration to find an area for a potential ethnic church plant.
- They identify an established Southern Baptist Church in that general area.
- They go to the church and encourage them to start an ESL School.
- At this point, the church planters only monitor what the volunteers within the church start to do.
- An ESL School is started. They have devotions during their break time. They include Scripture in the classroom. They hand out tracts.
- They start heart language Bible Studies for the students.
- Then as the Bible Study grows, they bring in a church planter or pastor and hold a worship service once a month for this group.
- As that takes hold, they increase the number of worship services each month.
- Then the established church running the ESL School calls a pastor to head up this new ethnic congregation within them.
- In addition, the Southern Baptists encourage their ethnic churches to start ESL Schools as an outreach in their community.

Mercy ministries and community development ministries offer additional pre-church planting opportunities. A study by PCA member Any Sherman entitled, *The Community Serving Activities of Hispanic Protestant Congregations*, identifies the services, listed below, that are offered by evangelical Hispanic congregations in ministry to other Hispanics in their community (none of those surveyed were PCA).

Since these are services that Hispanic churches offer in predominantly Hispanic communities, the list provides a good guide as to the kinds of services a PCA church might offer in reaching out to people of a different culture. They are listed in order here by the number of churches offering the services, with the services listed higher on the list offered by the most churches. Some services are helpful only in lower income

communities, but others could be used to serve any socio-economic group. Note that this list includes only the top 25% of the total services offered by churches in the survey. For a complete listing, the Sherman paper is available on the MNA web site:

- Pastoral Counseling
- Food assistance
- Family counseling
- Clothing assistance
- Referrals to other helping agencies
- Emergency financial assistance
- Aid to immigrants
- ESL classes
- Aid to prisoners and their families
- Tutoring programs
- Substance abuse rehab and counseling
- Parental training

As cultural change becomes more and more a way of life, we will be called more and more to demonstrate the reality of the Gospel in deed even as we proclaim it in Word. The Maclellan Foundation papers offer some helpful observations on this theme in an article they entitle, *Transformation & Holistic Faith*:

Assumptions: Transformation is a difficult concept to grasp since it can mean many things to many people. However, the 1983 Wheaton Conference sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship proposed the following definition: According to the biblical view of human life, then, transformation is the change from a condition of human existence contrary to God's purposes to one in which people are able to enjoy fullness of life in harmony with God (Jn 10:10; Col 3:8-15; Eph 4:13). This transformation can only take place through the obedience of individuals and communities to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whose power changes the lives of men and women by releasing them from the guilt, power and consequences of sin, enabling them to respond with love toward God and towards others (Rom 5:5) and making them "new creatures in Christ" (2 Cor 5:17).

Trends: Over the past couple decades, there has been a renewed recognition that ministry needs to be more holistic than we allowed it to be in the past. The concept of evangelism is not as important as it was previously valued to be. Evangelism is not only saving souls, but also transforming lives, societies, cultures, and nations through the integration of faith and life. As Christianity spreads in the Third World, so does the concept of transformation in cultures which inherently integrate religion and life. According to Vinay Samuel, the key elements of transformation are

- ✦ An integral relation between evangelism and social change
- ✦ Mission as witness and journey in the world
- ✦ Mission in context
- ✦ Truth, commitment to change, and imagination
- ✦ Theology, Christian mission, and understanding are always local
- ✦ Freedom and power for the poor
- ✦ Reconciliation and solidarity
- ✦ Building communities of change

However, according to Barna studies, Americans still struggle with the compartmentalization of faith and life and are less inclined to live out a holistic faith.

Relevance: While in the past evangelism meant giving merely the message of the gospel, those who are convicted by the need for transformation realize that evangelism needs to be more than just words. Effective ministry should care for the body and mind as well as the soul, reaching out to the needs of the whole person. The message of Jesus Christ should transform and change those who hear it, and through them, transform societies, cultures, and nations. It is important for Maclellan to support those groups that have a holistic outlook on ministry, realizing that faith is more than mere knowledge. We need to be concerned not only with planting churches, but we also need to be concerned with the kind of churches we are planting.

Resources:

Barna Research Group, "Americans Describe Sources of Spiritual Fulfillment and Frustration," (November 29, 2004).

Barna Research Group, "A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life," (December 1, 2003).

Samuel, Vinay. "Mission as Transformation: Unpublished lecture given at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 1998" in *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel*. Oxford: Regnum, 1999.

Samuel, Vinay and Chris Sugden, eds. *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel*. Oxford: Regnum, 1999.

Skreslet, Stanley H. "Impending Transformation: Mission Structures for a New Century." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. (Issue 23.01, January 1999).

Transformation: An Evangelical Dialogue on Mission and Ethics. (Journal: January 1984-present).

Similarly, Lovelace's observations, written 30 years ago, are perhaps more relevant today than when he wrote them:

It is possible for both individuals and churches to become devoted mainly to personal spiritual culture and forget outreach, especially if the process of reaching out involves touching those who may contaminate us. Thus many Protestant churches have in effect become closed systems for the nurture and servicing of the inheritors of a denominational tradition. ...

The leaders of the Reformation, of course, engaged in the form of mission appropriate to their calling and possible in their embattled circumstances: the spreading of their approach to church renewal in the waves of influence emanating from Wittenberg and Geneva. With the advent of the evangelical movement, Protestant home and foreign missions began to bloom most remarkably, first in the Pietist missions of Halle and Herrnhut and later in the interdenominational works springing up in England and America in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Associated with the verbal presentation of the gospel in this work were tangible demonstrations of physical compassion: food for the hungry, homes for orphans and charity schools for the poor. The home missions work of the Second Awakening also attacked evils within the structure of society, promoting prison reform, temperance, peace and – with conspicuous success – the abolition of the slave trade and the release of slaves. Both the proclamation and social action components of the evangelical missionary movement were built on a foundation of awareness and concern on the congregational level, nurtured by informed corporate prayer. There was no dichotomy perceived between evangelism and social concern, and no disparity between interest in these forms of mission abroad and willingness to implement them at home. Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, pp. 149-150