

# ECO Church Planting 2.0

Evaluating and Redesigning our  
Approach to Church Planting in  
ECO

# Background

Since the formation of ECO in 2012, our desire has always been to be a denomination that plants churches. Tim Keller, Terry Gyger, Allen Thompson, Tom Wood, and other expert leaders in a variety of denominations and networks helped us to dream and strategize about truly becoming a church planting denomination. We knew it wasn't going to be easy. Allen Thompson said that it would likely take 20-50 years of very intentional and difficult work to become a church planting denomination. We knew from the beginning that there would need to be continual learning and refining as we prayerfully lived into God's vision for ECO.

We are seeking to be a church planting denomination at a time when the landscape of church planting is changing drastically. Leaders within church planting networks across the country are radically rethinking and readjusting church planting strategies in their denominations and networks. They acknowledge that in some ways ECO is positioned well because we do not have to unlearn a methodology of church planting that had been successful in the past and is now proving to be less and less effective for God's Kingdom.

Matt Lee, our former Church Planting Catalyst, was the first full-time ministry position hire for ECO. Matt planted multiple churches, had been a part of the Evangelical Covenant Church (that has had a history of successful church planting), and directed Fuller's Church Planting efforts. As Matt transitioned out of his position with ECO to return to the front lines of church planting, he was extremely insightful in pointing out the challenges that ECO faces in developing a church planting culture.

Our revised approach comes from thoughtful and prayerful conversations with Matt Lee, trans-local church planting leaders in other networks, current church planters in ECO, and presbytery leaders who have had to navigate the current process.

## The First Five Years

ECO's first five years were very helpful for our learning process. We are so thankful to our church planters who were willing to engage in church planting during development and transition of the structure and process. We have also been thankful for the churches who have given finances, time, and even groups of covenant partners, to help start churches in new communities or with new people groups. We have some great successes, but have also seen some significant challenges. The following is a distillation of what we have learned and observed.

- Church plants have tended to excel when there have been clear and realistic plans that include timelines and benchmarks for the development and funding of the plant. There have often been adjustments to initial plans, but it is invaluable to have a plan from which modifications can be made.

- Church plants have more often thrived when there has been a rigorous assessment of the planter, and the planter has fulfilled the learning objectives that have been articulated as a result of that assessment.
- The pipeline of church planters has proven to be a challenge. Because we don't yet have a church planting culture established, we are not properly equipped to readily identify and develop people who will make good church planters. There are potential planters in our pipeline. However, many of them need additional work and/or internships in order to have a greater chance of launching a successful church.
- The ecclesiastical process for overseeing church plants has been confusing. At times there have been too many people involved, which has made the process cumbersome. Other times, too few people have been involved and the plant is not able to thrive like it could if it had proper support and oversight.
- In ECO, we have great flexibility in the way that we approach church planting. However, our flexibility can also prove to be challenging as we strive to appropriately categorize, evaluate, and approach church plants.

## Two Types of Church Plants

While there are many models and forms of church planting, most church plants are derivatives of two basic approaches.

### **Launch Large and Quick:**

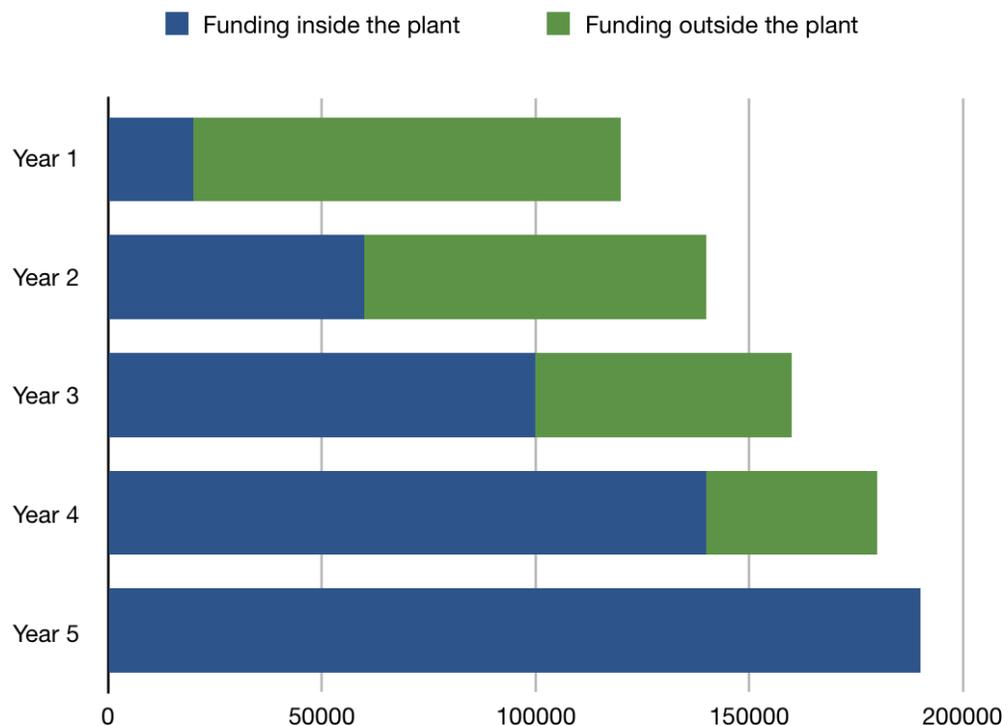
Launching large and quick is the traditional model of planting. It occurs when the church plant is either a) in an area that is experiencing population growth, or b) is birthed from an existing church that intentionally sends a group of people to hive off to begin a new church plant. Using this model, a church usually becomes internally self-sustaining after year three or four. The planter is usually full time because there will be weekly public worship services within the first 6-12 months.

If a planter is starting from scratch in a new community, 100% of the funding will come from outside the plant during the first year. It will likely take 9-12 months for public worship services to begin. There is a decreasing level of outside funding over a 3-4 year period as more and more funding comes from inside the church.

If a planter is starting with a group of people from a sending church, then weekly public worship services will likely start closer to 6-9 months. In this case, since there is a core group, those covenant partners would provide at least 25% of the funding in the first year. The remaining funding will come from outside support.

In both cases, benchmarks for attendance and internal giving should be developed and analyzed on a quarterly basis. If these benchmarks are slightly different than originally outlined, adjustments can be made to the plan. If the benchmarks are significantly different, then decisions should be made as to whether the planting model should be changed or the plant should be closed.

An example of an appropriate four-year budget for a launch large and quick model is found in Appendix A. Note that this is simply an example, as every plant will have different needs. The budget below is \$120,000 in year one, \$140,000 in year two, \$160,000 in year three, and \$180,000 in year four. The graph below shows an example of an appropriate funding methodology for those plants. Note that funding is contingent upon meeting benchmarks.



### **Missional Community Development**

A missional community model is usually characterized by a slower and more organic process. A missional community is a collection of a few believers who are intentionally seeking to reach a specific group of non-Christians who come from de-churched or never-churched backgrounds. This group of people will typically have a unifying characteristic. For example, they could be soccer families, artists, young professionals, retirement communities, or those living in a

walkable community. There may be as many as 70 people whom a missional community is particularly trying to reach through relationship building. The intention is that when those who have connected with the missional community are ready, they will begin to explore the Christian faith within this safe space. The individuals involved eventually become Christians and join in the mission of the community. As the numbers of Christians in the missional community grow, the group multiplies. A new group or subset of people is identified, and a new missional community is established. The whole process of developing and multiplying a missional community can take between one and three years. The long-term goal for missional community development may include the eventual launch of a public worship service after three to four thriving missional communities have been developed. Alternatively, there may also be the desire to maintain an exclusively house church model.

Because missional communities are slow in developing, and because the target population is non-believers, there will likely be less financial support coming from inside the church plant. Ed Stetzer says that if the goal is to eventually develop a public worship service and have the pastor serve full-time, it may take 7-10 years for this model of plant to be self-sustaining.

Therefore, it is highly recommended for missional community plants that the planter is bi-vocational or co-vocational. There is a slight distinction between these two approaches. Bi-vocational usually indicates that a person has another job in addition to planting the church. This other job will likely be at least half time or maybe even full time. Ideally, bi-vocational work will put the planter in a position to connect with people who could be part of the missional community. The goal however in a bi-vocational model is usually that after several years, there will be enough momentum to allow for the support of the planter full-time as he or she plants the larger church. Sometimes bi-vocational work includes work at a local established church. For example, the planter may help the church move into a missional direction while simultaneously laying the foundation for church planting.

Co-vocational usually indicates that employment outside of the church plant is intentional and the planter may never seek to obtain full-time funding from the plant. Sometimes the person's outside vocation pays well and allows enough flexibility to establish missional communities and plant a new church. An example of co-vocational work may be when a planter opens a coffee shop that is also the venue for missional communities (and eventually public worship). The planter may get the majority of his or her income from the business and use additional funds from offerings to pay for other ministry programs or staff positions.

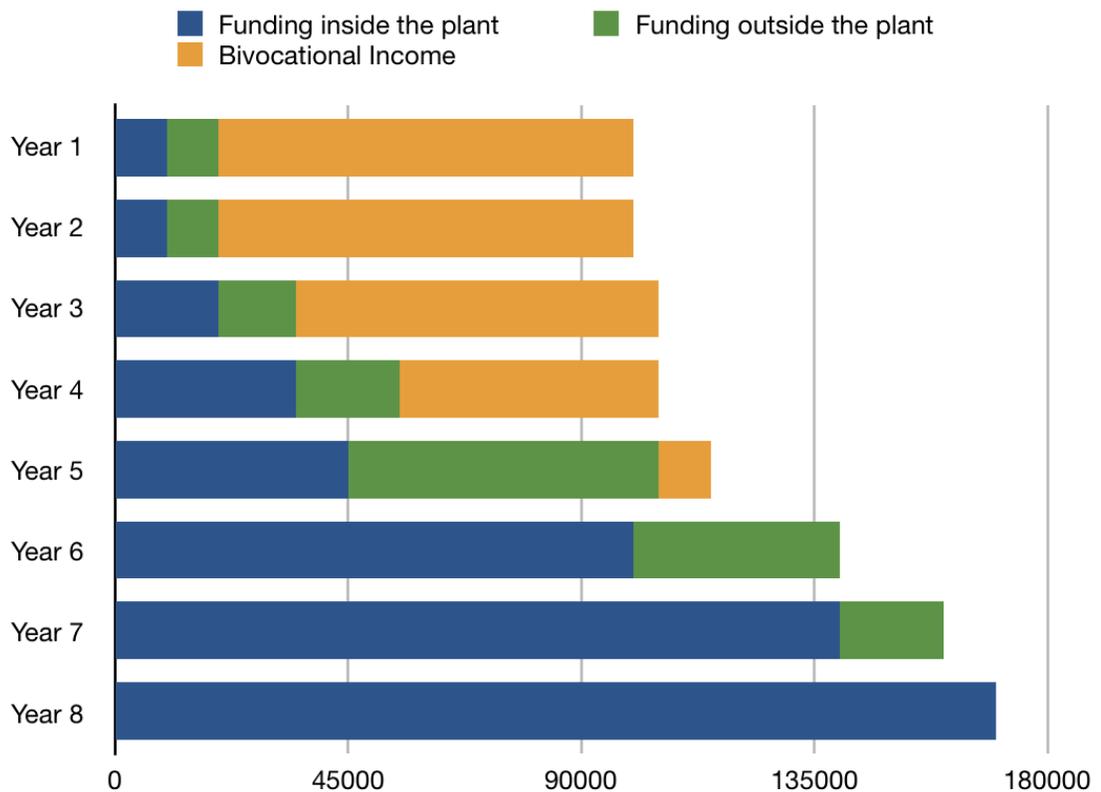
In a missional community model, the planter may receive little to no outside support for the first three to four years. This takes the pressure off the planter to launch public worship where an offering is taken, and allow the ministry to grow organically.

As missional communities multiply, there will likely be a plan to develop a team to launch public worship services. When they are ready for public worship, there may be a need for increased external funding so the planter is able to give full time effort to the church.

An example of a missional community public worship launch process might be that in the first 2-3 years, the planter has minimal or no outside financial support. The planter gets most, if not all, of his or her salary from another paid vocation. Once the missional community multiplies in year 2 or 3, the planter may reduce time at the outside vocation and receive a little more support from both inside and outside of the church plant.

Then, in year five, perhaps 40-50 committed believers make up a critical core mass and the group is ready to begin to prepare for public worship. At this point, there may be the need for significant outside funding to bring the planter full-time in order to launch public worship. The diagram below illustrates that outside funding is minimal until year five when the church is ready to prepare for public worship. This plan allows the planter to switch out of a bi-vocational role. The larger levels of funding from the outside are contingent upon the benchmarks of missional community multiplication, number of individuals committed to making this community their church plant, and internal giving. If benchmarks are not met from previous years, then additional financial investment in the church is very minimal. This diagram is not prescriptive for every missional church plant process, but it gives an example of a potential funding structure.

Because of flexibility within ECO's polity, it may be advantageous for the missional community to be developed under the umbrella of a local church. This allows the potential planter to hold off on assessment and obtaining national and presbytery approval. The plant/planter can simply operate under the supervision of a local church until there is enough traction to justify the time and energy to develop an official church plant within ECO.



## Needs of Planters, Plants, Champions, and Funders

Flexibility within ECO provides the opportunity for the needs of plants, planters, champions, and funders to get met through a variety of ways that will be laid out in each individual church planting plan.

### The Needs of Planters:

- **Assessment** – Church planters and their spouses (if applicable) need to be assessed for their overall suitability for church planting. Outcomes from this assessment should include the type of plant that would be best suited for the individual and a prescription for any additional training needed. ECO has access to a variety of assessments that can be recommended, depending upon whether the potential planter is looking at a launch large and quick model or a missional model.
- **Training** – Planters seeking to launch large and quick will need a boot camp-type of training that will infuse the nuts and bolts of planting.

- **Coaching** – Both forms of church planting need on-going coaching. ECO can both connect church planters to coaches as well as provide some funding for coaching. The amount and length of funding will be dependent upon the number of church plants and the resources available to ECO. It is our desire to fund a church plant coach for at least two years.
- **Approval** – The actual approval for the planter to become a member of presbytery resides with the local presbytery or its Ministry Partnership Team. The presbytery needs to examine the pastor and ensure that he or she has been assessed for church planting.
- **Care** – Planting can be lonely and challenging, and planters and spouses need quite a bit of care and support. Care should come from congregations and pastors in the local presbytery, as well as other planters in ECO and/or outside of our tribe.

## The Needs of Plants:

### Assessment

Before a presbytery approves a church plant, there needs to be a vetting plan in place in order to assess the feasibility of the church plant plan. Vetting can be done through the Synod office.

See Appendix B for what should be included in a church plant plan.

See Appendix C for a checklist to approve plants.

- **Corporate and Legal Needs**  
In order for the church plant to receive money that is tax deductible for the donor, the plant needs to have appropriate not-for-profit status, which can be attained once the plant and planter have been approved. A church plant may also be housed under the corporate umbrella of another church that will handle the collection and distribution of finances.
- **Monitoring and Oversight**  
The plant does not have a team of elders that function as a session until it becomes an established church. However, the plant still needs monitoring and oversight. If the plant is under the umbrella of an established congregation, then legal oversight comes from the session. However, the church plant should still have a steering team (See Appendix D for steering team responsibilities). If the church plant is its own corporation, then the steering team is also the corporate board. In the early stages, the steering team might be composed primarily of those from the sponsoring church(es). As the church plant grows, the steering team should be composed mainly of those involved directly in the church plant.

- **Funding**

Church plants will have various needs for funding depending upon the type of church being planted. The more money that is needed, the clearer and more frequently monitored benchmarks and timelines will be.

### **Champions and Funders**

There are many that want to see successful church plants in ECO, including denominational leadership, individual donors, churches, pastors, and leaders at the presbytery and national level. We realize that in taking risks, we will experience failure, but it is important to maximize opportunities for success so that champions and funders experience their support as good stewardship.

Therefore, while churches can certainly plant churches directly, any church plant that is recognized as “official” on the ECO website and is eligible for support will need to be thoroughly vetted by the Synod office. If an individual or an organization is supporting a church plant financially, it is recommended that the donor(s) ensure that the Synod office has validated the plant.

## Becoming an Established Church within ECO

Because church takes a variety of forms and the criteria for an established church varies significantly, moving churches from planting status to that of an established church proves to be challenging for many denominations. However, the following three principles guide the movement of a church from plant status to established church status. Details for this transition will be articulated in each original church planting plan.

### **Sustainability**

Established churches do not officially receive funding from supporting churches and individual donors, so they need to be financially stable in order to uphold the basic needs of the church. Too many denominations have seen churches die in infancy when they transition to established churches while still receiving funding from outside donors, so it is important to determine whether or not the church is financially viable before it is launched. Sustainability will look different for each church depending on context and type of plant. For example, if a church planter is intentionally bi-vocational or co-vocational, then a plant may be free to become an established congregation with less financial need than a church where the pastor is seeking full-time employment by the congregation.

### **Mission Clarity and Ability**

Some denominations will determine if a church is ready to become established by the number of people who call the church home. It is hard to determine a specific number of people for every situation, but there needs to be a large enough group that has embraced and committed to the mission and vision of the church.

### **Self-Governing**

The church will have elders who are spiritually mature and trained for their role and function. Appropriate by-laws and policies should be in place to handle the governance of the church as well.

## Church-Presbytery-Synod Partnership in Planting

At the very beginning of ECO, we had a group of people around the country who were interested in helping to get new churches planted. It is illustrative of our Presbyterianism that within months, presbyteries began to make those people chairs of church planting committees. This system has now evolved to the point where most presbyteries have church planting committees. While we are thrilled that presbyteries want to take seriously the call to be a church planting denomination, we are finding that in many cases, the development of a separate committee brings about certain challenges when trying to transition church plants into established churches.

So, as ECO moves forward, Ministry Partnership Teams (MPTs) will approve plants and planters and manage any internal issues. MPTs should have a member that is passionate about church planting, advocates for planting in the presbytery, and ensures a smooth process for the needs of the plant and planter. If the presbytery has an additional church planting team, their role should be championing and encouraging plants, as opposed to the ecclesiastical role of the MPT. The Synod office is structuring itself to work on process questions with and through the MPT.

**The local congregation, the presbytery, and the Synod should have the following responsibilities:**

### **Local Congregation:**

Ideally, churches will plant other churches. It could be that a congregation will plant another church, or a group of congregations will partner together to plant a church. If this is the case, the congregation(s) can oversee the process and utilize the resources available in and through ECO to support and plant the new church. If the congregation wants to have the plant recognized by the presbytery, be counted in the denomination's statistics, and receive funding for coaching, they must follow the process outlined in Appendix C.

### **Presbytery:**

Via the MPT, the presbytery needs to approve a church plant when the plant wants national recognition and/or the plant is obtaining a separate 501c3 tax exempt status. The checklist for that process is outlined in Appendix C.

The MPT also needs to approve the planter as a member of presbytery. If a planter meets the competencies for ordination in ECO, but has not yet met the requirements for planting, then a pastor can be accepted as functioning in a validated ministry while he or she finishes any requirements necessary.

The presbytery will also need to approve movement from a plant to established status.

### **Synod:**

The Synod has the following roles in the church planting process:

- Provides resources
- Provides suggestions for appropriate planter assessments
- Validates the church planting plan and, if necessary, coaches the planter or other entity in the creation and refinement of a plan
- Receives annual reports from the plant
- May work with the presbytery and oversight team as church plants change status to either becoming an established church or switching planting models based upon benchmarks
- Raises awareness for church planting in ECO and helps recruit planters from inside and outside of the denomination

## Additional Questions

### **Can a church still begin the process of planting another church without the involvement of the Synod or local presbytery?**

Yes. A church may begin the process of planting a new congregation. In some cases it is recommended that the church take initial steps to investigate and plan for a plant before going to the Synod. Part of the reason that our polity allows for sacraments to be served in micro-expressions of church is to allow a variety of people to begin to experiment in missional and planting endeavors. The larger system may become involved when and if these expressions begin to mature into a church plant.

### **Developing plans and going through assessment seems like a lot for someone who is planting with a missional, organic model. Are there other options?**

Yes. For those who are exploring the process of planting through a missional or a more organic process and are several years away from potentially launching public worship, it is recommended that these plants do *not* go through the formal process. There may be pieces of the process that are helpful, but it is better for such missional communities to serve under the umbrella of an established congregation until they are ready to take next steps.

**What should a presbytery do if there is a planter or plant that has not completed all of the necessary steps?**

When a potential planter is already a pastor but has not yet completed all of the steps to be authorized as a planter, the presbytery could choose to accept the pastor in a validated ministry while he or she explores planting. Once all of the necessary steps have been completed, the plant and planter may be approved.

Second, sometimes a potential planter is qualified to plant but does not have the qualifications for ordination in ECO (for example, if a person is coming from another denomination or is still working on finishing his or her ECO requirements for ordination). In either case, a presbytery can allow the person to be a deacon through a local church and then give him or her Commissioned Lay Pastor status as requirements are completed. CLP status could also be a permanent solution for a candidate.

Third, if candidates are not yet ordained in ECO and are not yet qualified to be church planters, then it is probably best to wait until they are qualified to plant (unless there is a compelling reason to proceed with ordination prior to approval of the planter and church planting plan).

**Conclusion:**

We are very hopeful, encouraged, and expectant for the future of church planting in ECO. We pray that we can faithfully move forward with a plan for success in which God would be glorified and many would come to know Jesus in our communities across the country.

For more information contact the ECO office at [office@eco-pres.org](mailto:office@eco-pres.org)

**Appendix A**  
**Sample Budget**

## **Appendix B Elements of a Church Planting Plan**

As new ECO churches form through plants, we certainly want to maintain freedom and flexibility as the Lord leads.

However, we have found that churches that have clear strategic plans are:

- better able to evaluate circumstances and make adaptations
- able to communicate clear expectations with funders and champions of church
- typically more successful than those who do not have planting plans

Therefore we are requiring clear church planting plans in order to help church planters succeed and manage expectations. The national office has a team of successful church planters that will evaluate church planting plans and guide planters in the process of refining their plans.

The following are elements that need to be included in a church planting plan:

- **Demographic and Cultural Study** – Extremely helpful demographic information is available through our partner organization, MissionInsite. Information about logging into their database is available on our website. In addition, those preparing to plant a church should determine the types of churches that already exist within the community.
- **Mission, Vision, and Strategy** – After information is collected on demographics and the spiritual landscape of the area, a plant can begin to articulate the particular mission and vision to which it is called. The mission and vision of the church plant will then inform the strategy of how the church will accomplish its vision.
- **Timeline**– There should be a clear and descriptive working time line that delineates a church plant from the development phase to pre-launch to launch to establishment. Included in this timeline are the criteria for becoming an established church.
- **Benchmarks** – At the very least, quarterly and annual benchmarks need to be established for internal giving and average attendance. Before launch, attendance should reflect core group numbers, and after launch it should reflect average worship attendance.
- **Oversight** –The plan needs to include clearly articulated details for corporate oversight as well as a steering team who will oversee the pastor and ministry. There will also need to be a timeline for when oversight shifts from external members to internal members of the plant. How the group will evaluate benchmarks, how decisions will be made to move the plant forward toward establishment, changing models, or potential closing plant are included in the oversight plan.
- **Budget** – There needs to be a detailed budget articulated that takes the plant through its establishment as an official ECO church.

## **Appendix C Plant Approval Checklist**

As presbyteries consider the validation of plants and planters, the following checklist will help insure all the necessary steps are completed.

### **Approval of Plants:**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Plant Plan**

A plan has been developed according to the guidelines established by ECO.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Plant Plan Approval**

The ECO office has facilitated the refinement and approval of the plant plan and confirmed its feasibility.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Consultation with neighborhood churches**

Neighboring churches do not have to approve the plant, but as part of a covenant order their leadership should be consulted in the process and have discussed the relationship between the churches with the planter.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Oversight of the plant has been established and regular updates will be given**

There is a plant oversight team in place to give support, direction, legal and fiduciary oversight.

### **Approval of Planter:**

\_\_\_\_\_ The planter meets the requirements for ECO ordination.

\_\_\_\_\_ The presbytery has done appropriate reference checks.

\_\_\_\_\_ The ECO office has completed the criminal background check.

\_\_\_\_\_ The planter has been assessed by a reputable assessing organization and a copy of the report has been given to the presbytery's MPT.

\_\_\_\_\_ The planter has fulfilled the recommendations of the assessing organization.

## **Appendix D**

### **Guidelines for Church Plant Steering Teams**

Church plants are different than established churches in that according to ECO polity, plants do not have a formalized group of elders with specified roles and responsibilities. However, it is vital that church plants have a group of people that serve as a steering team to offer encouragement, support, and accountability. In some cases, this team may also serve as the officers for the corporation.

Recognizing that each church plant is unique, this document seeks to give guidance to the formation, make up, and roles of the steering team. Particular questions are posed to help steering teams ask questions to specify their roles and responsibilities.

#### **Composition of the Steering Team**

The steering team should be composed of people who are invested in encouraging the success of the church plant. A team might be made up of about five people, likely including at least one individual inside the plant and one individual outside of the plant. In cases where a single church is planting the new church, then the primary makeup of the steering team would be people from the sending church who are committed to the success of the plant.

If the church plant is sponsored by a group of churches, then likely there will be individuals on the steering team from the primary sponsoring churches. There may also be people on the team who are actively involved in the church plant. Those steering team members who are not part of the church plant should attend the church plant quarterly to obtain first hand knowledge and experience what is happening there.

#### **Steering Team Responsibilities**

##### **Supportive Responsibilities:**

The steering team is in place to support the plant and planter as he or she seeks to fulfill the vision of the plant. This steering team should support the plant and the planter through:

- Prayer
- Providing expertise needed in various areas that may not be in the planter's gift mix (may include areas such as finances, marketing, or legal consultation)
- Ensuring that the planter has what he or she needs as far as outside coaching, training, and support
- Serving as a sounding board for ideas
- Advocating for the plant with the presbytery in order to help smooth processes and gather various types of support, financial and otherwise

### **Legal/Corporate/Fiduciary Responsibilities:**

The church plant will either be a separate 501c3 corporation under ECO's umbrella, or a ministry underneath a sponsoring church. If the church is a separate 501c3, then the steering team would likely be the corporate officers of the church. If the church plant is under the corporate identity of the sponsoring church, then the elders or trustees of that congregation would be the de-facto corporate officers.

Whether or not the steering team serves as corporate officers, the steering team has some fiduciary responsibilities for the church plant. They should ensure the following:

- Finances are being handled in an appropriate and responsible manner, including collecting and counting of offering and the reimbursement of expenses. There should be proper establishment and adherence to a budget along with periodic financial statements.
- Best practices are in place for children's ministry in order to protect their safety and security
- Appropriate insurance is in place
- Contracts for rental agreements are clear and appropriate
- Employment contracts are clear

### **Strategic Responsibilities:**

The steering team needs to ensure that a written church planting plan is in place. This plan should be evaluated by a church planting expert to determine feasibility. The plan will likely be changed or altered as the church moves forward, but it is important to have a defined starting point. The plan should include the following:

- A description of the church plant's:
  - Mission
  - Vision
  - Values
  - Strategy
  - Target audience
  - Community demographics
- Timeline for sustainability and chartering as a congregation
- Quarterly benchmarks for appropriate metrics, such as:
  - Attendance
  - Multiplication of groups and leaders
  - Financial contributions from those inside the plant

The steering team should receive reports at least quarterly, which should include stories and narrative description, in addition to weekly attendance numbers and how the plant is doing compared to the benchmarks.

**A note about feasibility, viability and the role of the steering team:**

As noted previously, church plant plans, approaches, strategy, and funding models can be very different depending on context. It is very important in the beginning of the plant to articulate feasible benchmarks and expectations for funding and sustainability. It is also important to make appropriate adjustments along the way.

The typical plant funding strategy would include three years of outside funding which would taper off each year. For example, in year one, the plant might have 25% of funding coming from those inside the plant and 75% coming from outside the plant. Then it would shift so that in year two, the funding would be split evenly between those inside the plant and those outside the plant. Then in year three, there might be 75% of the money coming from those inside the plant and 25% coming from those outside the plant.

This plan can certainly vary. Some plants start by taking fifty people from a mother church and are able to be sustainable within 2 years. Other plants are slower, more organic, and missional in approach. These organic missional plants may take 7-8 years to afford a full-time pastor, or there may be a plan for the pastor to be permanently bi-vocational. In the case of the latter, for example, the planter might start off being bi-vocational 30 hours a week and receive minimal outside funding for a shorter time period.

In order to increase the likelihood of a successful plant, expectations should be clearly articulated to those financially supporting the plant. The steering team has a responsibility to the plant and planter to support them and help them succeed. They also have a responsibility to those who are contributing to the plant to ensure that broader expectations are being met. Therefore, the steering team may need to help the planter adjust when necessary. In some cases, a bi-vocational planter may multiply missional communities and need to give full-time effort to the plant. The steering team needs to help the planter secure the finances and support to be able to make that adjustment happen. In other cases, a planter might be missing benchmarks and be much further off track from being financially sustainable than expected. In this case, the planter might need to move to bi-vocational status.

If we are going to become a movement, then we must aggressively plant churches. We want to be bold and entrepreneurial in ECO! We must also be wise about how we support church plants in order to maximize success and help those supporting church plants make the best use of their resources.