

A Rationale For The Value Of Assessment, Southwest FL Presbytery 9-8-12

My hope is to try to answer some questions about why our MNA Committee values assessment so much (*and why practically, many people want to see a candidate assessed before he receives funding*).

This is only an initial outline – the larger goal is dialogue in the midst of on-going friendship and brotherhood. I simply want to put down my most basic thoughts in an orderly manner even as questions about the value of assessment abound. (After all, people in our presbytery were not assessed and planted healthy churches, so: “*Why is assessment necessary?*”).

I also understand questions about funding. If a local church believes in a candidate and his potential for ministry, “Why won’t MNA fund him even if he chooses not to go to Assessment?”

Wisdom, Not Law

First, this is a matter of freedom, and therefore more of an issue of wisdom than a matter of any direct command from Scripture. It is even a matter of freedom within our governing documents since neither the institution of MNA’s Assessment Center nor the act of assessing potential church planters are ever mentioned. Therefore, I want to conduct myself with charity, patience, and humility since it will be hard for anyone to pin their arguments on any canon. This will all be a discussion from good and necessary inference of Scripture and reason.

1) This is a matter of giving thought to our ways. Proverbs 14:15 teaches us that *the prudent man gives thought to his steps*. The entire structure and process of assessing potential church planters is aimed at helping men from a wide array of backgrounds to give thought to their readiness *for the particular work of starting a church*. Church planting is significantly unique compared to pastoring a congregation that is already established. It is not my point to itemize the differences. It is simply that *the assessment process is structured around this particular work*. One consideration is what those who have been assessed say about the process, especially those who were not recommended to plant a church immediately. The wide, wide majority of men are grateful. And almost everyone agrees that they have not received such thorough, *personal* attention to them or their wife at any time in their ministry.

2) This is not essentially different from seminary. It is remarkable to me that people question the legitimacy of an assessment process designed, led and governed by denominational elders while almost no one questions the process – *the requirement even* – of seminary training that is not in the majority of cases tied to our denominational oversight. Seminaries that feed into our denomination (supplying most of the teaching elders in our presbytery) are under no polity oversight of our denomination (only Covenant). Seminaries require years of attendance, and surely shape a man’s philosophy of ministry immeasurably more than 3 days of assessment. *And yet somehow the process of the Assessment Center is seen as suspect?*

If some object that assessing potential church planters is extra-ecclesiastical, it is surely less so than *any* seminary. And as a man who has completed both processes of training and preparation, I remain grateful for both.

3) A lot is at stake. The assessment of potential church planters is a work designed to help prevent waste. Among many other outcomes, a failed church planting effort is highly expensive. It is costly for the church planter who fails because it is extremely painful and discouraging (even to the point

that men who fail at church planting question their entire ministry, often quitting). It is costly for those who have given to the project because there is no return on their investment; the money is simply gone. To act like a failed church plant is neither expensive nor painful is unwise and unrealistic, if not unloving. And as we consider what faithful stewardship would require of us I believe it is a profoundly helpful process to give thought to our ways before such a venture is attempted. While there never is a promise of success for those candidates who are recommended there is a clear caution for those who are not recommended for the particular work of church planting. Of those who are not recommended who yet go on to attempt a church plant, the current average is that almost 95% of those works fail.

A parallel consideration: If your elders evaluated the possible expenditure of \$250,000 to \$500,000, would you see it as harmful to gather *recommendations* from others who have experience in whatever venture you're considering? Almost every group of elders in a PCA congregation understands the implicit value of crosschecking as we hold one another accountable. We sharpen one another as iron does iron. We simply check one another's math. And let me emphasize, *the summary conclusions by the Assessment Center of every candidate are only recommendations.*

The Question of Authority

The MNA Church Planting Assessment Center only makes recommendations. They have no ecclesiastical authority whatsoever. So to think that they rule or govern is not accurate. To speak of the Assessment Center as disqualifying someone for ministry is not accurate. To object to their activities as a usurping of a presbytery's authority is not accurate. These critiques are simply straw men. What the Assessment Center only aims to do is help. They provide an evaluation of a candidate's readiness in 6 distinct yet interrelated areas: a man's experience of Grace, his relational wholeness, his sense of calling to church planting, his ability to share the Gospel clearly (fruitfulness in evangelism), his ability to lead, and his ability to preach.

What do I think is really involved in this debate? I think the real issue is trust. Our denomination is marked (if not marred?) by factions and various groups with different ministry emphases. So as it is no secret that the more progressive portions of the PCA have been the most active in church planting they are perceived as guarding what kinds of churches can get approved. These more conservative pastors and churches question, I believe, whether their candidates will be fairly treated. What has ended up happening in this climate of suspicion is that the more conservative ends of our denomination openly critique the Assessment Center as being pro-Church Growth, or pro-Emergent Church, or simply theologically suspect. As the distrust (if not disrespect) between these various groups thrives unchecked, there are profound questions over the legitimacy of one group assessing a candidate from another group.

I have fielded questions from people asking if MNA will assess their candidates "fairly." In trying to understand what I think they mean, I wonder if their real concern is that their candidate won't be examined on what *they* think is key (like proper theology or the best philosophy of ministry, etc.) or that MNA will look at other factors that they don't care about.

Here is the crux of the matter. If people do not trust the "who-assesses" or like the "what is assessed" then people will not want their candidates going through the process. And all I can offer is that from my personal experience – with numerous years as an assessor – never, ever has any particular philosophy of ministry been specifically encouraged or discouraged. **That is not the**

domain of the Assessment Center! That is the purview only of a candidate's Session or Presbytery. The Assessment Center is only examining a candidate about a very specific range of concerns related specifically to the particular work of starting a church from scratch.

In the end it is a matter of what defines a job “well done.” If we have a different view of the end result and how to get to a job “well done” we will *never* agree on the current assessment process. The process that our denomination has established does not guarantee that any candidate will succeed but *it helps avoid the failure that hurts not only the new work but especially the man and his family.*

Answering Objections

To the objection that this is usurping Presbytery's authority.

This is not true because **only men duly ordained by Presbytery** can be called. The assessment of potential church planters only goes to their readiness for this particular work. **Assessment has nothing to do with a man's licensure, ordination, or a call to a particular work.** That is solely the work and responsibility of Presbytery and the MNA Assessment Center is scrupulously attentive to its limited role.

To the objection that this requirement is somehow blocking churches from planting other churches.

Again, this is not true because **any church can plant a church as long as it takes responsibility for its funding and the call of a church planter.** If a congregation seeks to plant its own daughter church, and if its leaders appropriately call and send out a church planter, there is no barrier to their desires. **Assessment is not a polity requirement.** *Now, it is a funding requirement because of the previously noted considerations of stewardship.* But any church is free to plant any church they desire, but it is solely **their** responsibility to fund it.

Any time a man moves beyond his own congregation to ask (and that is a key term – to ask, not to demand) for funding, that man is now open to any number of considerations or requirements from the funding agents. This is true for scholarships, grants, charitable trusts, or private individuals, so why is it surprising that it would be true of a Presbytery.

Summary Conclusion

I believe that this is a loving process. The work of assessing potential church planters is a work of love hoping to sustain an even longer fruit – the fruit of a healthy ministry. Jesus invited scrutiny from His worst enemies. Paul challenged critics fearlessly because he was not unwilling to be scrutinized. What the assessment process is designed to be is a benevolent preparation by friendly co-workers to those who are at the starting line. “Are you ready for this work? How do you know? What similar experiences have you had? How is your marriage? Who else believes you can handle this? What other experience do you have as a self-starter with no supporting infrastructure for your daily ministry? How unified are you in your marriage about this kind of work? How skilled are you at gathering people to a new project? How strong is your prayer life?”

There is nothing to fear from this kind of scrutiny, and there is no malice in the hearts of those who are there to assess potential church planters.

So again, this is only a start. It does express what I think is most central. And still it's only my opinion. I will be only too glad to talk more and try to gain clarity and agreement as friends – with any pastor or any group of elders from any congregation.

I remain yours gratefully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tim Rice". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word "Rice".

TE, Tim Rice, Trinity Lakeland