

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “COLLECTIVE”?

By Dave Harvey



GREAT
COMMISSION
COLLECTIVE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How we define Collective ultimately determines who we are and where we are going. While the collective pie is larger than the pieces we’ll cover here, these two slices are absolutely central:

“**Collective**” means **WE**. A collective is a group where the burden for progress, the burden for forward movement, is shared by every member. And the engine of a collective tows some other important ideas behind it.

- **WE contains collaboration.** When interdependence is our conviction, collaboration becomes our practice. Interdependence says, “We need each other,”; collaboration says, “Let’s do something together. Let’s create and build something together.”
- **WE contains contextualization.** We’re not franchised; we contextualize. We’re not model driven; we’re values driven. We have no central church, no single model, no dominant personality. What we have instead are attributes and values and a commitment to see those distinctives contextualized all over the world.
- **WE contains vocabulary leadership.** Now that I’ve served in leadership within three different network/movements, I’ve discovered that networks will encourage one of two kinds of leadership—dictionary leadership or thesaurus leadership. Click [here](#) to see what distinguishes these two forms of leadership.

Second, “collective” means SEND. In a collective, the responsibility for multiplication is not outsourced; it’s shared. Planting is not something the network does for local churches. It’s a mission we share together. Each part—the local church and the network—has its lane, and the two function together in partnership.

In the network, we provide assessment, training, funding, and coaching. We want to and need to do that well. But all of that becomes pointless unless the local churches supply one essential ingredient: planters! And to supply planters, we need to cultivate planters. Some reasons we don’t do this can be found [here](#).

But we must do it. So I wanted to put forward a vision for a way we could do it. If you’re interested in reading about this risky-but-reachable goal that every GCC eldership should consider, check it out [here](#). Examine the [7 action steps](#) and discuss them with your elders.

Certainly, we want more church plants, but I’m equally excited about what is going to happen in your church as you galvanize your elders and church towards this exciting goal. There is a unique nourishment, excitement, and enthusiasm that inevitably comes as a local church concentrates and consolidates towards church planting. And when a church breathes that air, they become utterly invigorated.

INTRODUCTION

According to legend, Socrates observed, “The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms.” It makes sense. To unite around an idea, we must first agree to its meaning. I’ve come to believe that the quality of our work in GCC will be determined by our agreement around the definition of a single term: *Collective*. After all, we’re not the Great Commission *Denomination* or the Great Commission *Seminary*. We’re the Great Commission *Collective*. And what we understand *Collective* to mean ultimately determines the ship we are building and the speed at which we will sail.

In GCC’s vocabulary, the word “collective” is pretty malleable—like an empty cup we fill with our own meaning. For some, the Collective is the vehicle for our relationships and fellowship. It’s the things we do that nurture our relational connections. For others, the Collective may be an upgrade on the best we had in Harvest Bible Fellowship.

I want to suggest that the Great Commission Collective is something more. And while the collective pie is larger than the pieces we’ll cover here, two slices are absolutely central.

SLICING THE PIE

First, “collective” means **WE**. The word itself conveys this meaning. A collective is something shared and done by the many, not the few. It’s a group thing. When you hear the word “episcopalian” or “presbyterian,” those labels tell you something about the leadership of the group. But “collective” is different—it speaks of the value and roles of the members of the group. A collective is a group where the burden for progress, the burden for forward movement, is shared by every member. And the forward movement of a collective tows some other important ideas behind it; two ideas, to be precise.

WE contains collaboration.

We have learned elsewhere that the New Testament makes a strong case for interdependent churches. But when interdependence is our conviction, collaboration becomes our practice. Interdependence says, “We need each other”; collaboration says, “Let’s do something together. Let’s create and build something together. Let’s swap ideas and learn from one another. And this isn’t just something we’re lifting from the best practices of the business world.

No, when we study the Scriptures, we see Paul celebrating the work of God in one church to provoke faith in another group of believers (1 Thess. 1:6–8; 2 Cor. 9:1–2). Knowing his letter to the Colossians would also be read to the Laodiceans, Paul celebrates the example of faith and love the Colossians had for one another (Col. 1:3–4). He used the Thessalonians, heck, even the Corinthians—bet you didn’t expect that twist—as examples for the Macedonians! Paul regularly referenced the lives and examples of individual believers as well. Paul is using these models and he’s saying, “Friends, study different models; learn from each other. Check out what God is doing outside of your thing.”

By the way, collaboration is not code for leaderless. Networks need leadership for the same reason pluralities need lead pastors. Someone must own the unity of the **WE**. Someone must take responsibility to organize gifts and orchestrate alignment so that the collective is effective.

But because they are more decentralized, collectives can take longer to build. The value is not in a single superstar. It's in the WE.

Do you remember *It's A Wonderful Life*? George Bailey led the Bedford Falls Building and Loan when Potter was up to no good and all the loans were called. People rushed to the building to withdraw their money, but George jumped up to say, hang on, the real resources here are not locked away in a vault. It's in what we do together. "Your money's not here, Sam. It's in Joe's church and Bill's and a hundred others. *You're* lending them money to build and they're going to pay it back to you as best they can." In other words, when we join a collective, we're investing together to move each other forward. It's a we thing.

WE contains contextualization.

We're not franchised; we contextualize. We're not model driven; we're values driven. We have no central church, no single model, no dominant personality. What we have instead are attributes and values and a commitment to see those distinctives contextualized all over the world.

While there's a value and benefits to playbooks, and I believe that it can be helpful to have a single playbook in certain areas of ministry, the very best collectives have multiple playbooks. Why? Because localized elder pluralities are owning the responsibility to apply collective values in their varying cities and cultures across the world. Do you see why this is important? Contextualization pushes local elders to think harder and deeper. They feel more responsible for the development and application of their model. Elders own the lostness of their community. Franchises create strong brands, but collectives create strong leaders.

WE contains Vocabulary Leadership

Now that I've served in leadership within three different network/movements, I've discovered that networks will encourage one of two kinds of leadership—*dictionary* leadership or *thesaurus* leadership.

A dictionary defines. It removes ambiguity and enhances clarity. Dictionary leaders strive for definition and clarity as a mark of success. That's not a bad thing. As 1 Corinthians 14:8 says, "If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?" Franchises tend to create dictionary leaders who provide set models that give local expression some needed clarity to order their world. They reduce mission complexity by simplifying the brand. And in the hands of a dictionary leader, the franchise works—provided ministry remains confined within the market assumptions of the brand.

The trouble with dictionary leadership is that there are things about God and his ways that defy definition. Models only reach so far; leadership does not solve all problems. Sometimes we throw up our hands and say with the psalmist, "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me" (Ps. 131:1). After all, mystery is baked into life and leadership in a fallen world. We suffer. People disappoint us. Satan seduces someone, and we're left reeling. When the worst happens, a dictionary leader can be delivered to places unreached by clarity and definition. In fact, a leader dependent upon definition becomes most vulnerable in times of suffering. The silence of God pushes the dictionary leader towards ambiguity. They find it difficult to rest under the dark clouds of mystery when the torrents of "why?" remain unanswered.

Mission, too, contains mystery. Anyone who has ever helped plant a church knows that mission gets messy, pushing us beyond our definitions and expectations. Some plays just don't gain yardage on our field. Again, I'm not trashing dictionary leadership—we need it. But the mystery and complexities of mission are often managed more effectively by another approach—call it *thesaurus* leadership.

A thesaurus supplies synonyms—different words that mean the same thing. Thesaurus leaders don't eschew definition—you can't identify a synonym without clarifying meaning. But thesaurus leaders are creative, flexible, and adaptable, able to consider alternative options for pursuing the same path. Thesaurus leaders recognize that *WE* entails a multitude of contexts, and they're eager to innovate in service of mission. Thesaurus leaders have broad vocabulary for the complexities of a broken world and, when necessary, can call audibles. They are happy to imagine different ways the gospel may move forward. And that reality brings us to the second key thing to understand about "collective."

Second, "collective" means *SEND*. Collectives form for the sake of a common mission. In the Great Commission Collective, our mission is...*Planting Churches. Strengthening Leaders*. But I want to talk specifically about the planting side of that mission statement.

In a collective, the responsibility for multiplication is not outsourced; it's shared. Planting is not something the network does for local churches. It's a mission we share together. Each part—the local church and the network—has its lane, and the two function together in partnership.

In the network, we provide assessment, training, funding, and coaching. We want to *and need* to do that well. But all of that becomes pointless unless the local churches supply one essential ingredient: *planters!* This is so essential it's worth restating: Local church leaders, you supply planters! And to supply planters, we need to cultivate planters. Think about it this way.

Imagine we are all part of a farm co-op, and you say, "I'll take the responsibility to supply carrots." Well, you can't just wander around your farmhouse looking for bundles of carrots. You can't just say, "Well, there are no pre-grown, pre-bundled carrots sitting ready at my house, so I'm not going to participate!" No, if you're a supplier for a farm co-op, you've got cultivating work to do. You must go and till the soil, plant the seeds, and irrigate the fields. (Remember, I'm from Pittsburgh, so this farming illustration is way beyond my depth.)

The point is that if the local church supplies church planters, then our churches must prioritize the business of creating ecosystems where planters are cultivated. Church planters, after all, are the fruit of the kind of preaching and application that centers on gospel mission. Church planters are the fruit of celebrating and honoring people who are aspiring to be sent or have been sent. Church planters come forward when elders have "how can we encourage and cultivate church planters" on the elder's agenda. Church planters are the fruit of children's ministries that train teachers how to make church planting beautiful for the next generation. And church planters are the fruit of healthy discipleship ministries that move the newly converted toward maturity in sharing their faith.

UPWARD, INWARD, (AND HOPEFULLY, OUTWARD)

Finding church planters can't be something we outsource. It starts with the local church, and it must be a shared responsibility. Here's why. In a culture where church planting is largely outsourced—where a local church thinks planters should come primarily from outside of themselves—there are two weaknesses built into the church.

First, is Mission Omission. This happens when the church develops an upward and inward focus without a corresponding outward focus. An imbalance embeds into the church. We cultivate elders who have giftings for care, teaching, protection, and stability (and for these instincts we praise God!). But if we're not careful, these elders can grow to become risk-averse and then celebrate this weakness as if it's a strength. *Koinonia* becomes *koinonitis*—the corruption of fellowship as it bends people inward and slowly dulls our vision for the lost.

How do we know if this is happening?

- We cultivate elders but not planters because we can't see beyond our own thing.
- None of our staff ever wants to leave and we congratulate ourselves, not thinking that there may be a completely different way to interpret that data. Perhaps everyone wants to stay in our ecosystem because there's never been a vision to go.
- Our elders rarely choose the risk of mission opportunities over the safety of protecting our people and resources.

Can you see yourself at all in that picture?

Guys, honestly, I believe this is one of our greatest weaknesses in GCC. Our risk as a collective is towards becoming inward and upward at the expense of outward. Our danger lies in affirming certain values about church planting but not diligently applying ourselves to the work of cultivating planters so that our church understands multiplication as a sign of congregational success.

And here's the challenge with that. If we are only inward and upward, we'll miss the nourishment that can come only from an outward push. We'll miss the robust maturity and humility cultivated when risk is embraced and we choose to sacrificially send those we love.

Second, when churches grow only upward and inward, collective growth comes predominantly from the outside. Let me just say, I want our collective to grow some from the outside. I thank God for the churches that we've onboarded in recent years. I like to think of these churches, to use the words of Dan Fogelberg (and I'm dating myself now), as "Twin Sons from Different Mothers." I believe God has these brothers-from-another-mother all over the country. In fact, all over the world. And when we find one another, we discover the similarity of our DNA—that we think about things in a similar way—and we lock arms together to move into the future. May God give us more!

But a more significant sign of collective health is seen in home-grown leadership—the fruit of our churches multiplying leaders. Reproduction, after all, is an essential sign of life. I mean, if we must pillage other networks to secure our own future, we're being parasites. But if we have the kind of leadership and discipleship that can produce home-grown planters, we're a life-giving organism. We remain a movement.

REASONS WE DON'T SEND

For this to be the case, elders and elderships must define health not merely in their care for one another but in the way they identify and develop guys who will be sent. They've got to locate and train planters. Quite frankly, senior pastors need to own this responsibility. When I had the privilege of being a senior pastor, one of the most important parts of my job description was discipling the guys who felt called to ministry or who the elders thought might be called to ministry. I wanted to be attached to them and to ensure they felt attached to me.

Now, I know there are reasons pastors avoid this. We think, "We're just not ready. At this place in our growth as a church, or in this place in our budget, we're not ready to pour into younger men and send them." There may be exceptions, but the "not ready" defense often reveals the way an ingrown focus has hijacked the elder's definition of success. There's little mission in their view of maturity.

I love studying the Great Commission in Matthew 28. When Jesus first meets the disciples on the mountain, the evangelist tells us, "And when they saw him they worshiped him, *but some doubted*" (v. 17). Just think about it. Those three words precede the amazing mission Jesus delivers to the apostles (and the church) in the next sentence. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples..." Before the Savior's declaration of his authority and commission of his church, there's an acknowledgement of what a mess we are. They're looking straight at the resurrected Christ, *but some doubt!*

And it's as if Jesus responds by saying, "Whatever. Just go. Your doubts will be resolved in your going! Yeah, you're not ready, I get it. But go!" We must come to terms with this reality. The mission always marches forward through messy means. It's happening all over the world every day. It's a bit like how some folks start a family. You're not ready, but the kids still come. If you wait until you are, you never will.

We don't want to allow the Western ideals of safety and risk avoidance to paralyze our progress.

Another reason pastors avoid developing planters is, "We're too small." I've asked Trevor Peacock to speak at our LEAD Conference in February in San Antonio. Trevor will be speaking on the privileges and perils of the smaller church. I've asked Trevor to speak for two reasons.

First, I want our collective to legitimize the reality of the small church. We must work as hard as we can to remove the stigma that somehow smaller churches have not been predominant throughout Christian history. Even today, more than 90 percent of the churches in the world would be classified as small. It's always been that way. This is part of God's ordained means for the church moving forward.

Second, I was at Trevor's church in Calgary recently. They're about two hundred and fifty people meeting in a rented facility, and they were laying hands on their fourth church planter in the last decade. When I saw that, I thought, "This is who we want to be as a collective. Send is not about size. And collective means SEND!"

You don't need to get a building or get your dream team together before you cultivate planters. Mission rarely moves forward when we aim to pull everything together tight and secure before we send. You don't need to have a bundle in your bank account before you plant a church. That's not the spontaneous expansion of the church spoken about by Roland Allen that we see in the Book of Acts.

A VISION WITHIN REACH

Let's make this concrete. If collective means send, let's think: 1-2-3 > *Send*.

Let's work together to have one guy in a church planting residency within two years in each church, so that you can plant him out in three years.

That's it. 1- 2- 3 > *Send*

I'm advocating this not only because we want more church plants—yes, we want more church plants—but I'm equally excited about what is going to happen in your church as you galvanize your elders and church toward this goal. There is a unique nourishment, excitement, and enthusiasm that inevitably comes as a local church concentrates and consolidates towards church planting goals. And when a church breathes that air, they become utterly invigorated.

What might this look like? Consider these action items:

- **First, share the goal:** : Send this paper to your elders and ask them to read it. At an upcoming elders meeting, watch the [Collective Defined video](#) together and then discuss the paper. Get specific as you talk: *"If our survival as a church depended upon it, what would need to happen for us to deploy a church planting resident within two years?"* Announce the goal to the church and invite them to pray.
- **Secondly, consider existing leaders.** I know, it's hard to do. But consider whether any guys on staff or current elders might be suitable as a planter. The most fruitful churches are often planted by men who have already been part of a plurality and led as effective elders. If you have a mentality that the guys on your team are unavailable, then you may be cutting yourself off from an incredible blessing for your church. If you have someone ready for a church planting assessment, contact Laura at laura@gccollective.org.
- **Third, consider an outside candidate.** Some of our planters have come from outside of our Collective family—and we thank God for them! If you need to look outside of GCC, ask the elders to discuss some ways to find suitable candidates. Are there Bible schools or seminaries in the area? Are there leaders who have been in contact with you because they resonate with the theology and practice of your church? *If your church had three years to either plant a church or die, where would you search?*
- **Fourth, develop an Am I Called? group.** My book Am I Called? was distributed to every attendee at the LEAD conference. You can access the new study guide [here](#). Consider starting a study group to move men towards eldership, pastoring, and especially, church planting.

- **Fifth, use GCC resources.** We have \$15,000.00 available for each resident. This money is to help churches cultivate home-grown planters. But if you have no one, it might help you recruit a guy who is outside your current leadership team—or even outside your local church. To see the 23 questions to ask when starting a residency, along with two models for a resident (a pastoral resident and church planting resident), click [here](#).
- **Sixth, consider how GCC can help raise awareness.** Would it serve your elders or church for us to create some additional content on church planting? Can we answer any questions for your elders and/or leaders on church planting? Are there potential planters you are uncertain about where you would be helped by a “pre-assessment discussion”? Consider how GCC can help you identify planters or better inform your leaders and church about church planting. Then let us know!
- **Finally, contemplate planting locally.** Our board has reexamined some of our funding structures, and once a local church plants three or more churches towards forming a micro-network (or city collective), we can reduce their required giving from 3 to 2 percent. We hope this will encourage and elevate our commitment to church planting. More details on this funding opportunity can be [found here](#).

EVERYONE MOBILIZED, MANY SAVED

One of the many subplots of September 11, 2001, was that the largest water evacuation in the history of the world took place in New York City. After the second of the World Trade Center towers was hit, New York closed all bridges and subway tunnels. As a result, the folks in lower Manhattan were stuck. Maybe you’ve seen the videos. But an amazing thing happened. Within minutes, a makeshift armada of fishing vessels, pleasure yachts, tugboats, and passenger ferries were assembled to move people off the island. They evacuated close to five hundred thousand people.

Think about it. Half a million people were rescued without a brilliant commanding admiral giving direction. No, it was because the captains of each of the vessels of all sizes gathered their crews and became an improvised collective to see people saved. Because everyone mobilized, many were saved. That’s what it means to be a collective!