

Launching an Academic Network

The Leadership Anvil
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One of the primary goals of The Leadership Anvil is to motivate and equip Christian academics to launch academic networks all across Europe. Our prayer is that we can help academics see the need to reach out to their brothers and sisters who serve in higher education and determine with God's help to establish academic networks in their city, region, or country.

Definition. What is an academic network? An academic network is a group of Christians working in academia who gather periodically for encouragement, equipping, prayer, and accountability. The goal of an academic network is to equip Christians to serve Christ more effectively in the academy.

Need. One of the problems most of us face as academics is isolation. We are often isolated in our work, especially if we are serving in a public institution. Often an evangelical will find themselves to be the only believer in their faculty or sometimes even in the whole university.

Sadly, many of our churches harbor some anti-intellectualism, so even at church we experience isolation because of the suspicion our brothers and sisters may have about what in the world we are doing working in such a godless place as a university.

Much of our work as academics is best done in isolation. Lectures are not prepared, books are not written by a committee usually, but rather, by a scholar laboring away in isolation.

On top of all that, many of us tend to be more introverted, maybe even somewhere on the Asperger's scale, so that our personalities tend toward isolation, because that's where we feel comfortable.

Vision. All of this means that as academics we must be more intentional, more focused to connect with others, especially our brothers and sisters in the faith who serve in the academy. Because of our own depravity and because we are opposed by Satan and because Scripture commands us to be in relationship with other members of the Body of Christ, we must connect with others of like mind and like faith. One another passages.

The few evangelicals who serve God in the academy there play a crucial role, one that is highly strategic. Because of the far-reaching influence of the classroom and higher education in shaping leaders and the overall culture, every Christian academician possesses an outsized potential for national impact. Our brothers and sisters who serve Christ in universities and seminaries need to be united, equipped, and resourced, so they can be effective. They wield an enormous impact which is multiplied in a ripple effect, as they shape the gatekeepers of the culture, as those they teach, teach others. An academic network is an effective way to bring these leaders together.

Purpose. The vision of an academic network is to provide a regular setting in which Christian academics can gather for times of equipping, learning, sharing best practices, praying together, and accountability. Scripture: spurring one another on to good works.

Process. The question then is how does one go about launching an academic network? It's not complicated and doesn't require extensive planning to begin. The basic rule is to start by doing something. Once God grips your heart with a burden for your fellow academics, you don't need a five-year plan, or even a one-year plan. Just do something. Schedule a time to get Christian academics together.

Launching a Network

1. Someone needs to have a vision for establishing an academic network. This vision is a realization that such a network will play a significant role in helping Christian academics better understand how to bring glory to God in the academy.
2. Write a clear concise purpose statement of what the academic network should accomplish in helping Christian academics serve Christ more effectively in higher education.
3. Meet with a few Christian academics to explain the vision. Pray that God will gather a core team to lead this effort, but don't wait for a team. Many great movements have been started by one person whom God has called and given a vision. So an academic network can certainly be launched through the vision and efforts of one person.

Meetings

1. Schedule a meeting or a series of meetings with Christian academics in various cities across the country. These meetings give academics an opportunity to gather and meet their brothers and sisters who are facing similar challenges and problems. Even at this first meeting, they can be challenged to be more intentional and more missional in their academic work. The goal is that they will leave the meeting with a clearer vision of what it means to serve Christ in the academy and a desire to represent Christ more effectively.
2. Aim for substance, not for numbers. Because there are so few evangelicals in higher education in many universities, there may be only a few at the first meetings. At our first meetings in Lithuania, we had fewer than ten professors. But it was worth it, because of the encouragement, determination and growth it brought to that group.
3. Pick a topic which is important to Christian academics, something that will make them willing to take 1-2 hours out of their busy schedule. The topics need to be focused on Christians in higher education generally and not to a specific field of study, such as physics, business, or engineering. Of course, some subjects elicit broad interest such as a scientist talking about the relationship of science and faith. Naturally, once a network has grown, there may be enough participants to split some sessions up into sub-groups by discipline. The speakers, especially in these early meetings, should be good communicators. Even professors don't like to listen to a dull or boring presentation.
4. Possible topics for network meetings:
 - a. Forming a Christian worldview.
 - b. Integrating our faith with our academic discipline.

- c. Problems faced by Christians in higher education
 - d. Educational principles in the Bible
 - e. Why Christians are needed in higher education
 - f. Appropriate ways to share Christ with our students and colleagues.
 - g. How to teach with excellence.
 - h. Responding to threats to academic freedom.
 - i. Ways to serve our students and colleagues.
 - j. Apologetics issues.
 - k. Responding to secularism, postmodernism, or atheism/agnosticism.
 - l. Ways professors can disciple new believers and help postgraduates.
 - m. How to become a public intellectual by address public issues from a Christian perspective.
 - n. Biblical examples of how God used learned individuals for His work, e.g., Moses, Daniel, and Paul.
 - o. Historic examples of Christian academics who made a difference, e.g., Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, Jerome, Columban, St. Gall, Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Jan Hus, John Wycliffe, Erasmus, Luther, Melancthon, William Tyndale, the Cambridge Reformers (Hugh Latimer, Robert Barnes, John Frith, Thomas Bilney, Nicholas Ridley, John Bale, John Foxe), Jan Comenius, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Madam Curie, Dorothy Sayer, C. S. Lewis, Frank Gaebelien, Kenneth Pike, Charles Malik, Lamin Sanneh, Dallas Willard, John Lennox, Ken Elzinga, Paul Marshall.
 - p. Historic examples of Christianity influencing education and the culture, e.g., the Irish monks who went all across Europe spreading the Gospel and starting schools, the explosion of education brought by the Protestant Reformation.
5. In most cases, the speakers for the forum should be academics themselves or at least have advanced degrees. Like any professional group, academics listen best to those of their own profession.
6. Include time in each meeting to connect with one another, as well as leaving plenty of time for the speaker. We academics thrive on information, but we also need relationships. If there are fewer than 10 people, you can go around the circle and ask each person to take a couple of minutes to share their name, academic field, where they are working, and family information. If there are more than 10 people, you can break everyone into groups of 3-4 and have them share in their small group. Possible topics for small group sharing and connecting with one another:
- a. Current concerns, problems, burdens, or challenges, followed by prayer for one another
 - b. Best practices you have used as a Christian academic
 - c. Current research projects
 - d. Personal concerns for which you need prayer
 - e. A book you have read recently
 - f. A lesson God has taught you recently
 - g. One of your most difficult experiences as an academic
 - h. An answered prayer
7. Follow-up with participants and keep in touch after the meeting. Build relationships.

Building and Expanding the Network

1. Develop a mailing list of all the Christian academics in your city/region/nation. Ways to expand your list of academics:
 - a. Ask all the Christian academics you know to tell you the names and contact info for all the Christians they know who work in the academy.
 - b. Ask pastors for the names of Christian academics in their congregation.
 - c. Ask campus ministries such as IFES or Cru to help you connect with professors.
 - d. Ask the national evangelical fellowship for names.
 - e. Ask other Christian academic groups for names, e.g., Professoren Forum in Germany.
2. Send out emails announcing the next meeting.
3. In some cases it works best to have an academic network for each city which has a concentration of academics. For instance, in 2015, a small group of us in Lithuania launched two networks, one which meets in Kaunas and one which meets in Vilnius. We work closely with LKSB, the Lithuanian IFES organization. When we meet, we have the same program in each city. But the dual locations make it more accessible for the academics who live in each of the regions.
4. Learn from the experience of others. The most successful national academic network in Europe is the Romanian Christian Academic Network, led by Dr. Emanuel Tundrea (emanuel@emanuel.ro). He is a wealth of information on starting and sustaining a network over several years. He will tell you it is a lot of work, but well worth the labor. Another good source of help is Dr. Yury Baczyszczka (baczyszczka@gmail.com), the leader of the University Network at the East European Leadership Forum which met annually in Kyiv before the Russian invasion.
5. Local academic networks are good, but it is good to launch an annual national network meeting where Christian academics from across the country can gather. In Romania they started with a one-day meeting. Participants came from all over the country. Later the Romanian leaders expanded the program to a two-day meeting. They rotate from one university city to another each year to make it easier for various regions to participate.
6. One of the primary goals of The Leadership Anvil is to help launch academic networks throughout Europe. So please let us know how we can help. We have devoted the last several decades to helping our Christian colleagues in the academy learn ways to serve Christ more effectively. One of the primary goals for this chapter of our lives is to help our brothers and sisters form academic networks all over Europe. With God's help, we can see groups of Christian academics gathering on a regular basis in every country of Europe within the next ten years.

One of the ways we can help is by coming to speak at your network meeting. There is no cost to you because funding for our travel is all provided by The Leadership Anvil.

7. Dream big and pray boldly. Ask the network participants:
 - a. If you could ask God for anything at your university, what would you ask Him to do?
 - b. What is one thing you can do to encourage other academics?