

CHURCH PLANTING OVERVIEW

State of Church Planting USA

Article Summary

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State of Church Planting USA is a four part report, for additional resources see:

[Who Starts New Churches?](#)

[Improving the Health and Survivability of New Churches](#)

[Funding New Churches](#)

Podcast:

[Researcher's Commentary on State of Church Planting USA](#)

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North American Christians are interested in church planting in a way not seen for many decades. In response, Leadership Network commissioned a research project that surveyed over 200 church-planting churches, more than 100 denominational leaders from dozens of denominations, and over 45 church planting networks. Their research addressed a number of factors, several of which set the stage for what many believe is possible—a church planting movement in North America.



Church plants are often exciting places, with their emphasis on reaching new people and sharing the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ.

Interest in Church Planting

One of the first discoveries from this research was that energy and enthusiasm about church planting in North America is at an unprecedented high. This increased interest shows up in the number of books published on the subject of church planting, as just one evidence. From 1996 to 2002, only two mainstream books came out on the subject. Seminary professors, pastors, and church planting leaders had great difficulty finding many resources prior to the 21st Century. However, since that time at least ten mainstream church-planting books have been published and many others are forthcoming, including a book from the Archbishop of Canterbury, one of the world's best known Christian leaders representing a denomination not currently known for starting new churches. Church planting has come a long way from being a "last resort" profession to becoming a preferred ministry option.

In 2004 a research team from the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board contacted 124 organizations, denominations, churches, and

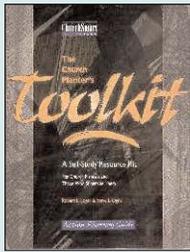
agencies to ask them some key questions about church planting. One noteworthy finding was that no respondents indicated a decreased interest in church planting, and all but two of the groups indicated an increased interest. Moreover, many indicated that their interest in planting churches had increased *dramatically*. Similar interest levels can be seen in the church planting emphases of many denominations from the United Methodists, to Assemblies of God, to the Reformed Church in America.

New models and strategies reflect this new enthusiasm for church planting. Church planters want to start new churches in order to reach people who are currently unreached with the gospel. As North American cities become increasingly diverse, new models are emerging to reach these diverse people. In 1982 a book by Dr. Charles Chaney emphasized the need for more churches in the U.S. However, he insightfully pointed out,

America will not be won to Christ by existing churches, even if they should suddenly become vibrantly and evangelistically alive. Nor will the United States be won to Christ by establishing more churches like the vast majority of those we now have.¹

Dr. Chaney's words are being realized. Church planting is much more varied than in the past. Today we see house churches, emerging churches, purpose driven churches, ethnic churches, college dorm churches and many other types of churches being planted. There was a time when one training resource like *The Church Planter's Toolkit* (1991) would serve practically every church planter. However there are now numerous training resources available (and needed) for the different models and approaches to church planting.

Researchers for Leadership Network surveyed over 200 church-planting churches, more than 100 denominational leaders from dozens of denominations, and over 45 church planting networks to get an accurate picture of church planting in the U.S. today.



Church planting resources were limited prior to 2003. The Church Planter's Toolkit was first introduced in 1991. It was the first (and for a long time the only) comprehensive training system for church planters in North America. Today there are numerous resources of this type.

Four Thousand New Churches Yearly

With this dramatic rise in interest around church planting one might ask how many churches are being planted each year in the U.S. Due to the organic way most church planting takes place and the haphazard manner in which most tracking occurs (if it does at all), insufficient information exists to quantify the exact number of churches being planted each year. For example, in many situations a sponsor church, a denomination, and a network all report the same church in their annual numbers. In some cases a denomination may report a church as one of its new church plants while the church fails to report an affiliation with the denomination.

The overall finding from the research commissioned by Leadership Network suggests a dramatic upturn: followers of Christ are planting approximately 4,000 churches each year in the United States. This number, perhaps an all time high, reflects a significant increase over estimates from previous years.

Cooperation for the Kingdom

A second discovery from Leadership Network's research shows that this generation's church planting organizations display a heart of cooperation and resource. Free on-line tools abound—denominational training manuals, research papers, how-to articles, as well as audio and video training. This cooperation indicates an obvious "kingdom mentality" in the church planting community that expands beyond denomination or regional allegiances.

Responses in the research indicate a growing involvement in churches planting churches, a

rapidly growing involvement in networks planting churches, and moderately growing involvement in denominations planting churches. However, the level of cooperation and mutual support among these various groups is extremely encouraging to overall church planting efforts. Many planters will have multiple sponsors representing a variety of churches, church planting organizations, and sometimes even different denominations.

The National New Church Conference website is further evidence of cooperation in the church planting community. The conference began a few years ago as a small training event among Christian churches. In 2007, the conference, an amazing testimony of cooperation and mutual support, hosted over 1,500 participants in Orlando, FL, from almost every denomination, network, and church background. The desire among diverse groups to share resources, to learn from each other, and to encourage one another is remarkable.



On a local scale, a similar type of event was hosted in 2007, in Houston, TX. *Accelerate*, a citywide conference for church planting leaders, attracted more than 150 local church planting leaders from many different denominational and ethnic backgrounds. For this event, the executive directors of the three largest protestant denominations in Houston (Southern Baptists, United Methodists, and Presbyterian Church USA) worked together to draft what they called a "Church Planting Manifesto" that expands beyond denominational or regional allegiances.² This was an affirmation of their mutual commitment and support around church planting in their city. After presenting this manifesto, almost every participant signed it in agreement, including denominational leaders from many other denominations as well. This may have been an historic moment in denominational cooperation in the U.S.

A Significant Shift Is Taking Place

A third observation from the Leadership Network research project shows that the energy of successful church planting seems to be moving quickly from denominational structures to hands-on local churches and networks. Denominations have always had an inescapable impact upon church plants and church planting in the United States, and most church plants are still denominationally connected at some level. However, today most denominations are partnering to develop resources to help their church planters. These partners represent a new wave of church-planting churches and networks.

The additional emphasis placed on church planting is resulting in an increase of self-replicating churches. The Leadership Network research indicates that for many of these churches, the concept of planting “reproducing churches” is a recent phenomenon—spearheaded primarily from churches founded within the last twenty years.

Bill Wellons at Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, AR (<http://www.fbclr.org>) serves as the full-time director for Fellowship’s church planting efforts via Fellowship Associates, (<http://www.fellowshipassociates.com>) which was founded in 1999. A majority of his time—approximately 75 percent—is directed toward this goal. Fellowship Associates, led by Steve Snider, President has four staff members directly involved in the Residency program and six church staff mentors who invest in training for specific ministry areas. From the beginning, Fellowship has had a heart for planting churches in their city, state, country and world (churches in Barcelona, Spain and Poland are in progress as a result of the Residency Program). Their program includes a 10-month residency, a national church leadership conference, and personality assessment training.

Many other churches have a similar emphasis including **Redeemer Presbyterian Church** in New York City (<http://www.redeemer.com>), **NorthWood Church** in Keller, TX (<http://www.northwoodchurch.org>), Hill Country Bible Church in Austin, TX (<http://www.hcbc.com>), and Westridge Church in Dallas, GA

(<http://www.westridge.com>). This level of local church involvement has been difficult to find in decades past.

Many of these church-planting churches are forming networks, a trend that is growing rapidly. Numerous church-planting networks exist today such as Acts 29 (<http://www.acts29network.org>), Stadia (<http://www.stadia.cc>), and Infinity Alliance. The reasons for the formation of networks are varied: ideology, theology, independence, entrepreneurial spirit, kingdom mentality, frustration, vision, calling, or the seeming necessity of a different kind of church for the community. These networks vary in their scope of theology, methodology, and ecclesiology. But they all share a common passion for planting churches of what they call “similar DNA.” A network can be defined as a group of churches that have publicly acknowledged their intention to work together for the purpose of church planting and have a cooperative strategy to accomplish that goal.

While church planting was once relegated to the denominational agencies, today networks and local churches are taking a much more proactive role. As a result, national agencies are retooling to come alongside regional and local church-planting efforts to provide help in recruiting, assessment, training, coaching, and funding.



New churches typically have more baptisms than established churches, and report a higher percentage of attendees as new believers.

Evangelistic Effectiveness

Finally, the Leadership Network research project suggests that this generation of church planting leaders is committed to increasing not only the survivability and multiplication of church plants but also the evangelistic effectiveness of those plants. Today there is an increasing emphasis on systems that will produce better and more consistent results in church planting. These systems include recruitment, assessment, training, coaching, prayer, and funding.

Although new models continue to emerge, the research seems to indicate that seeker models, purpose-driven, and ethnic church planting produce more evangelistic conversions. Also, with few exceptions, church planters involved in church planting systems (e.g. assessment, basic training, coaching, etc.) reach more unchurched people and grow more rapidly than those who are not. Also, the church plants that grow larger, more quickly, tend to be more heavily resourced and staffed than those that do not.

Researchers such as Dr. Ed Stetzer are very encouraged by this new generation of church planters. “I believe the intelligence and creativity exists within this generation of leaders to make a significant impact on reaching the unchurched in the U.S.” Stetzer notes.

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– Dr. Ed Stetzer

House Churches

In the history of the church, the model now designated as “House Church” has always existed. House churches are typically small groups of believers that meet in homes, and function as autonomous faith communities with unpaid lay leaders. With the advent of the internet and email, communication has become much easier for these individual congregations to exchange information with one another and alert



New churches take every form from house churches to big-launch, instant congregations.

others of their presence in a community. Studies conducted by Barna Research and the Center for Missional Research show a growing influence of house churches. The Leadership Network research affirmed this as well.

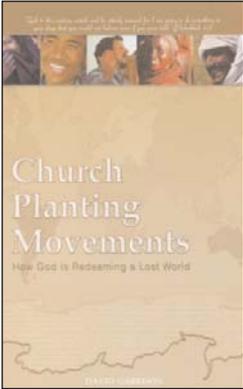
The house-church model produces a simple paradigm that is easily replicated, having a greater influence on people without a cumbersome structure. This key goal was reflected by many respondents in their desire for the “growth of Christianity via decentralized church by reproduction of small house churches.” One survey respondent—Keith Giles of California—stated that the church is to be a “God-designed, family-based model of ‘being the Church’ that emphasizes the value of each person and provides for the discipleship of everyone as they follow Jesus in their actual life.” Indications are that house churches will continue to increase in popularity, at least for the immediate future.

In a survey of 3600 Americans, 26.3% indicated that they meet weekly with a group of 20 people or less to pray and study scriptures as their primary form of spiritual or religious gathering.

– Center for Missional Research

Where is the Church Planting Movement?

Though North America is witnessing a significant change in church planting, it has not yet seen a breakthrough in true church multiplication. Many people using many methods have tried and failed to generate movements in the United States.



Roland Allen's *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and Causes Which Hinder It* was first published in 1927, yet had little impact at its first publication. It asked important questions that the church in the 1930s was not ready to address. The book is still relevant today, though David Garrison's *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* is more readily applicable. Both force the

church to think through a fundamental issue: the church is not multiplying as it should and we need to find out why.

The question is simple: "Why don't we see church planting movements in the Western world like we see in the Global South? The answers are not quite as simple, and are seemingly endless. For some, the answer is the simplicity of the house-church. For others, the answer is more vocational church planting teams. For yet others,



NewSong Church in Irvine, CA celebrated their very first service with an outdoor fellowship event.

it is the formation of networks for the purpose of church planting. At the heart of this question are probably cultural issues rooted in our Western context.

The state of church planting in the U.S. is diverse, sophisticated, and yet by many measures stronger than ever. However, Christians must continue searching for answers to the multiplication question. We must continue to learn and improve. We must diligently press forward to continue advancing the good news of the kingdom so that lives and cities might be transformed.



ED STETZER



DAVE TRAVIS

Leadership network welcomes your response. This report is an excerpt from research Leadership Network specially commissioned through **Dave Travis**, Managing Director. LifeWay Research's **Ed Stetzer** was the primary researcher. This excerpt of Stetzer's research was compiled by **Glenn Smith** under the direction of **Warren Bird**, Director of Research and Intellectual Capital for Leadership Network. Contact them via Bonnie.Randle@leadnet.org

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Leadership Network's mission is to identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact.

** Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.*

ENDNOTES

¹ Chaney, Charles, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1982, page 18.

² <http://www.ubahouston.org/files/Ministry%20Resources/ChurchPlantingManifesto.pdf>