Recent Denominational Research in New Church Development

Conducted for Path One
The United Methodist Church
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Lewis Center for Church Leadership
Washington, DC
www.churchleadership.com
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Including current research underway by the Lewis Center in partnership with Dr. Donald R. House and RRC, Inc., Bryan, Texas

Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Introduction</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II. Summary of Recent Research on New Church Starts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Southern Baptist 1990</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Seven Denominations 1993</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Episcopal Church 2001</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Six Mainline Denominations 2006</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Southern Baptist 2007</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Texas United Methodist 2007*</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Actionable Strategic Insights for the United Methodist Church by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Contributors</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is preliminary research done in partnership with Donald R. House, Ph.D., and funded by the Texas Methodist Foundation.
Introduction

The report attempts to capture the findings of recent research on new church starts in mainline denominations and some other relevant churches. It was prepared for Path One by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary. While acknowledging that there has not been a great deal of careful research on the subject, there was a felt need to try to capture what was present in the scholarly literature. The goal is to make the research as accessible as possible to members of the Path One team so that the findings can inform their work.

The Lewis Center has an interest in new church starts growing out of its mission to provide research, resources, and ideas to support church leaders so that there will be an increase in congregational and denominational service, vitality, and growth. In addition to this project for Path One, the Lewis Center is engaged in a research partnership with Dr. Donald R. House and RRC, Inc. of Bryan, Texas, studying new church starts in several conferences. Preliminary findings from the research on new starts in Texas are included in this report. This work is funded by the Texas Methodist Foundation. Also underway is a study of the new church starts in the Virginia Conference done in partnership with Dr. House and funded by the Virginia Conference.

In undertaking this task, the Lewis Center has:

1) Identified the relevant research on new church starts in mainline denomination and some other churches
2) Outlined the scope and methodology of each study
3) Summarized the key learnings of each study in an executive summary of findings
4) Developed a list of what Lewis Center director Lovett H. Weems, Jr., sees as the “Actionable Strategic Insights” from this body of research that are most critical for the United Methodist Church in its efforts to establish new congregations

The report presents the findings of five studies on new church starts published between 1990 and 2007 as well as the preliminary research report on United Methodist new church starts in Texas.

Sources

The publication information for each study is provided for those wishing to pursue the findings further. Any sharing of this report or portions of it should always provide the source and copyright information of the portions cited.
Background

In a paper published in the Journal of Religious Research dated June 1990, religious researcher C. Kirk Hadaway presents findings from a study on the impact of new church development (NCD) on Southern Baptist growth. The paper examines the role of new churches in the growth of the Southern Baptist Convention. Efforts to understand denominational growth and decline should look at the mundane organizational activity which produces growth, as well as the theological, cultural and demographic factors which have affected American denominations during the last several decades.

This paper looks at new churches in the Southern Baptist Convention to discover their importance to the growth of this denomination. Specifically, its purpose is to determine: (1) to what extent newer churches grow faster than older churches; (2) to what extent the relationship of church age to church growth is due to intervening factors; (3) the amount of growth in the Southern Baptist Convention which is due to the addition of new churches; and (4) the hypothetical long-term effects of adding no new churches on the SBC.

Methods

Data on membership, date of church organization, and other variables related to SBC churches were obtained from the Uniform Church Letter. The UCL, as it is known, is a lengthy form sent to all churches in the Southern Baptist Convention on a yearly basis. It includes questions about membership, participation, giving, and a host of other issues. Including identification codes, the form typically contains nearly 160 separate data items. Response rate is very high. Normally, around 96 percent of SBC churches return their completed church letter.

In this study, 1981 and 1986 UCL data were used. The age of the church was determined through the date of organization given by each church on the UCL. The church growth variable was constructed by calculating the percent change in total members for each church from 1981 to 1986. In addition, a three category growth-plateau-decline variable was created by rounding percent membership change to whole numbers and categorizing the values obtained. Churches which declined by eleven percent or more between 1981 and 1986 were categorized as in decline. Churches which declined by ten percent or less, or which grew by ten percent or less during this same five year span were categorized as being in plateau and churches which grew eleven percent or more were categorized as experiencing growth.

Executive Summary of Findings

1. Newer churches grow faster than older churches.

Of churches organized prior to 1927:
   o 25% grew between 1981 and 1986
   o mean growth of 4.1 percent
   o median growth of 1.7 percent

Of churches organized from 1972 – 1981:
   o 68% grew between 1981 and 1986
   o mean growth of 47.1 percent
   o median growth of 28.5 percent

2. As the age of churches grows, the proportion experiencing growth declines.

3. Newer churches do not grow faster just because they start small and thus show a higher rate of growth. Newer churches in all size categories show greater growth than established churches of comparable sizes.

4. Newer churches do not grow faster just because they are planted in suburban areas where the population is increasing. Churches are more likely to grow in areas of population growth. However, in all locations—from rural and open country to downtown and urban—newer churches grow faster than established churches.

5. The 2,128 new Southern Baptist churches contributed 262,375 total members or 25.7 percent of all new members received during the period 1981-1986.

6. There is a cumulative impact of new churches. New churches grow faster than older churches and thus add more persons in the years following their birth than would older churches of similar size in similar locations.

7. New churches are a source of denominational growth. In some cases they only produce enough growth to moderate denominational declines, while in others they add significantly to overall membership gains. If growth is to return to mainline denominations having experience great loss in recent decades, new churches will need to be part of the reason.

Background

This study examined the economic status of new church development (NCD) communities. It utilized information that tracked local church membership in the years 1950-1988 gathered by the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, the American Baptist Church, the United Church of Christ, The United Methodist Church, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Yearly data on NCDs collected by denominational agencies were matched with denominational yearbook data on membership. The study took as a starting point Lyle Schaller’s assumptions stated in *Forty-four Questions for Church Planters* (p. 49):

1. Newer denominations grow faster and start more churches than do older denominations
2. Denominational growth is strongly related to two factors: new church development and growth in average congregation size
3. Growing denominations have started at least 20 percent of their churches within the last twenty-five years
4. New churches grow faster if they start larger, that is, with at least 200 at the first worship service
5. Churches tend to grow fastest in high population areas experiencing rapid rates of in-migration

Based on these assumptions the study sought to compile and evaluate these hypotheses and “because of our explicit interest in denominational growth and decline, NCD is examined with an eye to this larger relationship,” (p. 49). The analysis tests three primary assumptions:

1. Growing denominations have higher rates of NCD and increasing average congregation size.
2. Growing denominations plant churches in areas that are “geographically favorable” that is, in areas of high population growth, high in-migration rates, and/or unchurched people groups.
3. Growing denominations demonstrate resilience to the degree they adapt changing social conditions and sustain growth across congregational age, size and location factors.

The study’s authors began by determining the number of NCDs during the study period in several denominations. The purpose of the entire survey is to show whether there is any discernible pattern to NCD activity in various denominations over time; and if there is, to then determine if such a pattern parallels trends in denominational growth over the same period. To accomplish this task, yearly data on NCD were collected from denominational agencies and matched with denominational yearbook data on membership. Complete information was obtained from five denominations.

Executive Summary of Findings

For the evangelical and mainline denominations studied, the low ebb was reached in the mid-to late-1960s. The evangelical denominations turned around in the early 1970’s, but not the mainline. The Assemblies of God has done even better, starting more new churches in the 1980s than it started in the 1950s.

Denominational Membership Change and Rates of New Church Development

- The correlation between the new church start rate and percent membership change is a very strong correlation.


- Declining denominations are losing members in spite of the new churches that they organize. New churches helped to moderate the declines experienced by older churches in this denomination.

New Churches as a Way to Reach New Populations

- All denominations have targeted NCD outside their regions of concentration.

- In the denominations studied, newer churches in states of high denominational concentration are just as likely to grow as newer churches in states outside the region of concentration, with the exception of the United Church of Christ.

New Churches and Community Population Characteristics

- New churches tend to be planted where the population is growing faster than it is growing where existing congregations are located.

Summative Remarks on Findings

- Growing denominations have higher rates of NCD.

- Growing denominations also have an increasing average congregation size.

- All denominations tend to plant churches in areas that are demographically favorable and outside their region of concentration.

- It must be added, however, that new churches tend to be located in “geographically favorable” areas and among receptive populations even in declining denominations.

- It is also true that all five denominations are making major efforts to expand beyond their Anglo base into African-American and ethnic populations.


For more information about new church starts visit us online at www.path1.org.
Background

This study, conducted and compiled in 2000, sought information from Episcopal congregations organized from 1980 to 1995. Using a survey format, questionnaires were sent to the founding pastor, the current pastor, and five key lay leaders with questions related to the positions they held (i.e. the founding pastor received questions related to his or her role while the lay leaders answered lay questions).

The study focused on four key sections: community demographics of the church’s location; characteristics of the founding pastor and lay leaders at the start of the new church; key aspects of the initial start such as size, site selection, etc.; and strategies for new parish development.

The study defined success for New Church Developments (NCDs) in terms of the stability and growth of a congregation over a seven-year period beginning at the time of the first worship service. Stability was measured primarily by the worship attendance over seven years with the assumption that “the number of active participants is related to the ability of a new church to exist as a self-supporting congregation” (p. 5). The following categories were used to define success rates (i.e. strength variables):

1. **Smallest and weakest** - average worship attendance of 75 persons or less
2. **Small and somewhat weak** - average worship attendance of 76-150
3. **Larger and moderately strong** - average worship attendance of 151 to 249
4. **Largest and strongest** - average worship attendance of 250+

Surveys were presented to 105 founding pastors and information was merged with relevant U.S. Census information at the zip code level. Denominational data were used to measure membership change and average worship attendance over the seven-year period.

Executive Summary of Findings

Demographic Factors

- Population growth was only moderately related to new church success.
- New Episcopal churches were most successful in affluent areas where an annual income of $75,000 or more was reported by more than 20% of households in 1990. Lower percentages of wealthier households produced decreasing levels of NCD success.
- Episcopal new church starts tend to do better where newer, somewhat more expensive housing is being constructed.

Characteristics of the Founding Pastor and Lay Leaders

- While a relatively young and confident pastor is important for new church success, a core group of laity with practical evangelism and outreach skills and training is even more crucial.
- The study found that 57% of the most successful new church starts were pastored by individuals skilled in starting and managing groups. Pastors who are not skilled in group ministry were pastoring less successful new churches.
- Successful new church pastors tend to be between ages 24 and 35.

Characteristics of the Initial Start

- Careful site work was a significant positive variable. Nearly 71% of churches that reported doing no site work were categorized as “smallest and weakest,” whereas only 4.2% of churches that reported doing the most site work were classified in the same category.
- While it is important for the pastor to articulate a vision it is even more critical that leaders share it. Nearly 80% of the largest and strongest new churches scored high on having a common vision.
- There is a very strong relationship between new church success and the initial size of the congregation (attendance three months after the first service). Nearly three quarters of new churches that remain very weak began with a worship attendance of less than 40. No successful churches reported an initial size of less than 40 and only 4.2% of unsuccessful churches reported an initial size of 75 or more.

Background

Dr. H. Stanley Wood conducted a multi-denominational study designed to focus on the qualities of leadership in new church developments (NCDs). An important finding of this study related to the level of awareness of NCD leaders to contextual economics. The study involved participants from the Christian Reformed Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ.

“Data for this first volume are drawn from more than 700 Euro-American NCD pastors who responded to a survey. Out of these 700+ respondents, more than sixty male and female founding pastors were gathered in focus groups that consisted of seven to ten pastors.” The NCD study team deemed these pastors “the most effective developers within their respective denominations,” meaning they had formed the largest stable worshipping communities with formerly unchurched persons (page xix).

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative data came from a fifty-eight question Founding Pastor Church Development Survey completed by 704 pastors who started churches in the 1980s and 1990s. Their churches were classified according to the following categories:

1. Fewer than 100 members, or fewer than 75 worship attendees
2. 101-170 members, or 76-125 worship attendees
3. 171-304 members, or 126-225 worship attendees
4. 305-540 members, or 226-400 worship attendees
5. 541 or more members, or 401 or more worship attendees

The qualitative aspect of the research involved six focus groups of new church development pastors who were classified as “effective” or “extraordinary” based on the above parameters (p. xii-xiv). The focus groups were made up of pastors of comparable experience so that shared experience and knowledge went into reviewing gathered data. Pastors from six out of the seven participating denominations participated in the focus groups. The seventh did not have a large-membership congregation (p. xx).

The study sought “to be a comprehensive investigation of new-church developers spanning the last two decades of the twentieth century” (p. xix). The study is published in two volumes – the first dealing with data on European American NCD leaders and the second volume focusing on five distinct racial/ethnic groups: African American; Hispanic, Asian; “a specific group of Asian (Korean);” and Native American.

Executive Summary of Findings

The characteristics of an extraordinary NCD pastor

Defined as: 1) those pastors who started and sustained new churches that achieved the highest membership growth within their respective denominations; and 2) those pastors who were able to attract and assimilate formerly unchurched persons into active church life.

- Catalytic innovator
- Vibrant faith in God
- Visionary/vision caster
- Empowering leadership
- Passion for people
- Personal and relational health
- Passion for faith sharing
- Inspiring preaching and worship
- Administrative skills

Demographic Factors

“Congregational growth is far more likely in new suburban communities.” Some 67% of successful new church starts in the study were located in “newer suburbs.”

The research team also argued that the numbers do not imply that the reciprocal -- that the older suburbs, urban areas, and rural areas are detrimental to new church growth -- is true. The numbers reflect that evangelical new church starts experience healthy growth in a variety of geographical locations, but the highest rate of growth (and that growth being coupled with success) was attained in the newer suburbs.

NCD data strongly support the careful selection of communities with more favorable circumstances for success. It is a common new-church planning strategy to focus not on the place or the people in general, but to decide on specific target population(s). New churches that target the entire community are generally not as effective as new churches that choose a carefully selected group of people.

Viewing “location” as an intentional focus on a particular population (or combination of population groups) is foundational to growth.

Families provide the most common niche population for new congregations. The growth of congregations rises in direct proportion to the number of families in the community, except in areas where families number in excess of 80 percent.

Vision

We find strong support for the NCD hypothesis that effective church builders “need to articulate a compelling vision for the ministry.” In the NCD data, the largest and fastest-growing churches were more likely than the smaller congregations (43 percent vs. 14 percent) to report that the congregation shares the vision for the church’s future.
All of the new-member classes in the fastest-growing congregations affirmed the vision and direction of the congregation.

**Size of Congregation**

The strongest correlate of new success was the number in attendance at the beginning. Congregations that had 75+ in worship attendance at the outset by the third month grew to be the largest and strongest; those that began with fewer than 40 remained small.

**Congregational Worship/Practices**

Growing congregations, ones that are increasing in membership size, are significantly more likely to rate their worship as "uplifting" and "inspirational." These responders do not report that their worship was flawless, nor were they unwilling to change it. Rather, they seemed to reclaim the notion that "public worship" was a witness to their faith and thus a time of outreach and evangelism. When a congregation is especially conscious of its missionary calling, it will examine its language, its music, its communication style, and its use of the arts from the point of view of new people.

Southern Baptist
2007

Background

This research was conducted in an attempt to identify the survivability rate for churches begun by Southern Baptist church planters and the factors that contribute to their growth and survival so that better strategies could be developed. To understand the overall state of church plant survivability and health in the United States, other denominations were invited to participate. The participating denominations included: Southern Baptists; Sovereign Grace Ministries; Baptist General Conference; Leadership Network; General Baptists; Wesleyan; New Thing Network; Assemblies of God; Evangelical Free; Foursquare; Southern Baptist; Christian Church; and Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. All these denominations or networks are considered evangelical.

An initial sample was identified of 2,266 congregations that received church planting funds from 2000 to 2005. This sample included all such churches in smaller denominations that had fewer than 50 total plants. For larger denominations, only a portion (43%) of their churches receiving church planting funds was selected for study. This initial sample was then screened via interviews, phone calls, or internet searches to determine if they met survivability criteria. Through these means, the study determined the survivability of 2,080 of the original 2,266 – 92 percent.

Phone calls and interviews were conducted from September 15, 2006 through January 15, 2007, principally by seminary students. The survey was conducted in English, Korean, and Spanish. Of those church plants surveyed whose primary ethnicity is known, 57 percent were Anglo, 17 percent Hispanic, 5 percent African-American, 6 percent multi-ethnic and 15 percent among a variety of other language groups.

Approximately 13 percent of churches surveyed began before 2000. The remainder began in 2000 or later. Thirty-three percent of churches were planted in communities where it is 10 percent or less evangelical Christian.

Only 19 percent of church plants identified themselves with a particular church planting model. Of those who identified a model, 35 percent indicated Purpose-Driven, 11 percent indicated Ethnic, 10 percent indicated Relational, 7 percent indicated Ministry Based, and 6 percent indicated Seeker-Targeted.


For more information about new church starts visit us online at www.path1.org.
Executive Summary of Findings

Sponsoring Churches
- About 80 percent of sponsoring churches provided funding to the church plant.
- Nearly 61 percent of church plants had a sponsoring church.
- Thirty-seven percent of church plants were loaned laity from a sponsoring church.

Denominational Assistance
- Denominational church planter training was provided for 79 percent of planters.
- Almost 74 percent had a denominational church planting mentor or supervisor.
- About 60 percent of church planters were involved in a church planter peer network.
- Approximately 49 percent of church plants accessed demographic information about their communities from a denominational office.

Staff Team
- About 24 percent of church plants began with a staff team of more than one person.
- Of those plants starting with a staff team, the average number of staff was four.

Church Planter Education
- The great majority of church planters (61%) have a college degree.
- Most have a seminary master’s degree (56%).

Financial Stability
- Among churches that survive, the data reveal that 54 percent of the church plants founded in a particular year are financially self-sufficient three years after their start.

Significant Factors in Church Plant Survivability

Church Member Leadership Development
- If the church planter provides leadership development training for new church members, the odds of survivability increase by over 250 percent.

Church Planter Peer Group
- The church planter meeting with a group of church planting peers at least monthly increases the odds of survivability by 135 percent.

Stewardship Plan
- Having a proactive stewardship development plan enabling the church to be financially self-sufficient increases the odds of survivability by over 178 percent.


For more information about new church starts visit us online at www.path1.org.
Background

The Texas Methodist Foundation provided a grant to the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary in 2006 to examine the successes and failures among new church starts since 1985 within five Texas conferences. The Lewis Center developed and implemented the project with RRC, Inc., of Bryan, Texas. The two principal researchers were Dr. Donald R. House, president of RRC, Inc., and Dr. Lovett H. Weems, Jr., executive director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership.

Each identified founding pastor was asked to participate in an interview or survey in which key information was recorded. While all planned interviews were not completed, considerable survey information was obtained that supports some of the conclusions presented in a later section of this report. In the Texas Conference, names of laity active in the early years of the congregation were requested so they could be surveyed. A number responded, though all of them came from either churches just started or from churches that had reached 350 or more average worship attendance so limited observations can be drawn.

With the geographical codes for each church, supporting demographic data were obtained for the years 1990 and 2000. The data are reported down to the census block—representing a very small geographic area, such as a few city blocks. The demographic data include family incomes, ages, educational attainment, and ethnicity among residents within the census block. With specially designed computer software, it is possible to review the demographics within any specified radius drawn around a geographic point on the map. For our purposes, it is possible to record the demographic data from the resident population within (say) four miles of the location of a new church start for both 1990 and 2000. These data provide an important record of sizes and characteristics of resident populations around a new church start. In addition, it provides a basis for estimating changes in the resident population around a new church start. For instance, the data provides a record of a neighborhood that moves from high income to low income over the decade. It records the growth in middle and high income families in the neighborhood. It records the neighborhood gains and losses of children in the neighborhood.

Specific community-level religious information has been collected by private organizations, given the prohibition of government-collected religious information. Two types of information at the county level have been assembled: number of residents who attend religious services, and the number of religious congregations (or churches). These data are used to provide a type of religious involvement of the residents of a county. It is assumed that the level religious activity in a community will affect a United Methodist new church start.
Executive Summary of Findings

Contextual Factors. Among the five annual conferences included in this study, the characteristics of the communities in which the new churches were planted differ considerably. On the basis of population growth alone, there are significant differences. As presented, the typical new church start in North Texas was placed in a neighborhood in which population growth averaged 29,170 between 1990 and 2000. This growth in population was limited to a 4-mile radius around the location of the new church. This significant growth stands in stark contrast to the population growth reported in the Northwest Texas Annual Conference—only 3,574 gain in population over ten years. The Texas Annual Conference averaged 17,861, but was only 61% of the figure for North Texas. These figures, however, do not address the availability of locations for new church starts. For the Texas Conference, it is possible to compare the characteristics of the neighborhood surrounding new church starts and the neighborhood surrounding existing churches.

The typical new church was placed in a neighborhood with a population growth that is four times the growth in population surrounding existing United Methodist churches. There are 1,435 census tracts within the boundaries of the Texas Annual Conference, and the average population growth within a 4-mile radius of the population center of each census tract equals 13,507. Interestingly, this growth is about three times that of the growth surrounding existing United Methodist churches. Clearly, population growth was an important criterion for new church start site selections, and existing United Methodist churches are poorly positioned to capture the full impact of population growth.

Within the Texas Annual Conference, new churches were placed in neighborhoods in which 10.1% of the population earned incomes in excess of $75,000 per year. This compares to only 3.8% of the population where existing churches reside. On average, 58.5% of the population surrounding new church starts reports an educational attainment level of at least a college degree—compared to 40.1% for existing churches. Only 8.2% of the surrounding population reached the age of 65 and over, compared to 13.5% for existing churches. A surprising 6.5% of the population surrounding a new church start is reported as Asian in race compared to only 1.7% for existing churches.

After many evaluations, the following factors were deemed important for the larger groups of new church starts using regression analysis:

1. Worship attendance increases with the age of the new church
2. Worship attendance increases with population growth
3. Worship attendance is greater in neighborhoods with a greater proportion of higher income residents
4. Worship attendance is greater in neighborhoods with a greater proportion of persons 65 years of age and older

New churches grow in attendance faster if they are placed in faster growing communities. This appears consistent with the practice of placing churches in the faster growing communities. However, the interaction terms indicate that the response to population growth is conditioned by the number of other United Methodist churches in the area. All else being equal, attendance is less in communities with a larger number of other United Methodist churches within a 5-mile radius.
Attendance is greater in communities with a higher percentage of high income residents and older residents. The importance of older residents may be puzzling to some. It is generally believed that new churches target communities with growing numbers of young families. That may be true. We do know that United Methodist churches find it relatively difficult to attract young people and much less difficult to attract older people. With this, it indicates that a new church start will have greater success in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of older people and less success in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of younger people. The empirical results are consistent with this other evidence. Many from other denominations report different experiences, finding that new church starts depend upon young families to form a foundation for growth. In the UMC, there are successful new church starts that depend upon young families for growth, but these results underscore the importance of a presence of older, high income families in the community. More research is needed to determine if this relation is unique to Texas or shared across a larger geographic area.

A careful examination of attendance growth patterns among existing churches suggests that without new church starts the United Methodist church cannot keep pace with population growth. We examined the expected attendance growth of an existing United Methodist church in the presence of an increasing population within a 4-mile radius, in the absence of a new church start. This result strongly suggests that existing churches alone cannot be expected to increase attendance in proportion with population growth. The only apparent hope of keeping pace with population growth is through new church starts.

**Founding Pastors Survey.** On average, the younger pastor experiences greater worship attendance than the older pastor.

Founding pastors were asked about the facility used for the initial worship service. Responses included the use of rented public buildings (such as schools), another United Methodist church, business space, and homes. The results indicate that those that began in rented public buildings experienced increased worship attendance, compared to those utilizing another church’s facilities, retail space, or homes.

Approximately half of the founding pastors reported the assistance of local churches in beginning the new church. Those new church starts that received local assistance reported larger numbers in worship.

Founding pastors were asked about the strategy used to establish the new church. Responses included the “parachute drop,” product of a mothering church, and development from an existing small group. Where possible, the strategy was noted and a comparison between the parachute drop and other strategies were compared. New church starts that following the parachute drop model reported fewer in worship.

Pastors were asked about type of worship used. Responses were self-reported so definition of terms could differ from pastor to pastor. There is no single pattern. Not all use contemporary worship. Traditional and blended styles are well represented in churches with great growth. We need more data to draw conclusions.

**Large Churches and Pastoral Characteristics.** In this section we refer to large churches as those reaching 350 or more after seven years, mid-size churches as those worshipping 126-349 in the same period, and small churches as those with 125 or fewer in worship. So how are the large churches and their founding pastors different from the others?
Benchmarks. Most of the large churches and pastors set benchmarks for their churches from the beginning, even if some were only in the pastor’s mind. Only a few other pastors reported such goals from the beginning.

Small groups. Large church pastors reported spending more time developing small groups than other pastors. Also, laity from large churches reported unanimously that small groups were used to assimilate new members.

Use of time. In addition to greater focus on small groups, large church pastors spent more time on leadership development and meeting with community groups than other pastors did. Pastors of large and mid-size churches spent more time on evangelism and contacts than small church pastors did.

Program priorities in the first two years. Large church pastors focused on these things more than pastors of mid-size and small churches.
   o laity directly involved in ministry (laity rated very high)
   o a systematic plan to track visitors, contacts, and prospects (laity rated very high)
   o offering numerous points of contact with the local community
   o focus of ministry was reaching those not active in a church

Shared vision. A major difference between large church pastors and the other pastors was that large church pastors indicated that church leaders shared the same vision for the church’s future.

Where New Churches in Texas Are Started
   o The typical new church was placed in a neighborhood with a population growth that is four times the growth in population surrounding existing United Methodist churches.

   o Within the Texas Annual Conference, new churches were placed in neighborhoods in which 10.1% of the population earned incomes in excess of $75,000 per year, compared to only 3.8% of the population where existing churches reside.

   o On average, 58.5% of the population surrounding new church starts reports an educational attainment level of at least a college degree—compared to 40.1% for existing churches.

 Characteristics of Texas New Church Starts
   o New churches grow in attendance faster if they are placed in faster growing communities.

   o Worship attendance is greater in neighborhoods with a greater proportion of higher income residents

   o New churches with assistance from other local churches report greater numbers in worship.

   o Attendance appears to reach greater levels if the new church begins in a rented public facility rather than another church facility, retail space, or home.

   o New churches that began as a “parachute drop” report smaller numbers in worship.

   o New churches with locations selected through more careful study appear to report larger numbers in worship.
New Churches and Existing Congregations

- A new church start is expected to draw some of its members from neighboring United Methodist churches. However, the net gain in attendance is, on average, positive.

- The loss in attendance among neighboring churches can be significant, but the loss is relatively small in more populated areas. Among the largest communities, the loss in attendance among neighboring churches is insignificant.

- Existing churches alone cannot be expected to increase attendance in proportion with population growth.

- The only means by which the denomination can possibly keep pace with population growth is through new church starts.

Characteristics of Founding Pastors of Churches Reaching 350+ AWA within 7 Years

- On average, the younger pastor experiences greater worship attendance than the older pastor.

- Most of the large churches and pastors set benchmarks for their churches from the beginning, even if some were only in the pastor’s mind. Only a few other pastors reported such goals from the beginning.

- Large church pastors reported spending more time developing small groups than other pastors. Also, laity from large churches reported unanimously that small groups were used to assimilate new members.

- In addition to greater focus on small groups, large church pastors spent more time on leadership development and meeting with community groups than other pastors did. Pastors of large and mid-size churches spent more time on evangelism and contacts than small church pastors did.

- Large church pastors focused on these program priorities more than pastors of mid-size and small churches.
  - laity directly involved in ministry
  - a systematic plan to track visitors, contacts, and prospects
  - offering numerous points of contact with the local community
  - focus of ministry was reaching those not active in a church

- A major difference between large church pastors and the other pastors was that large church pastors indicated that church leaders shared the same vision for the church’s future.

Actionable Strategic Insights
New Church Development in the United Methodist Church

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Why new churches?

1. New church starts are one of the most effective means of reaching new populations.
   - As the age of churches grows, the proportion experiencing growth declines
   - In 1906, one-half of the churches in the predecessor denominations of the United Methodist Church were less than 25 years old; today most UM churches are over 90 years old (Lyle Schaller)
   - Existing churches alone cannot be expected to increase attendance in proportion with population growth
   - The only means by which the denomination can possibly keep pace with population growth is through new church starts

2. New church starts are critical to denominational growth.
   - All denominations lose members.
   - The difference for growing churches is that they receive more members than they lose.
   - Growing denominations have higher rates of new church starts.
   - The rate of growth in new church starts determines whether they lessen membership loss or produce membership gain.

Where to place new churches?

3. Denominations should maintain a vital balance in which they continue to focus on their strengths at the same time that they expand their constituencies.
   - Build on your strengths.
   - Expand your constituencies. In making the case for reaching the poor, Bishop Francis Asbury said we must transfer resources from “the center to the periphery.”

4. Target areas should be selected with great care, recognizing that population growth is an important, though not the only, factor to consider.

What kind of new churches?

5. In order for the denomination to grow, a larger segment of new churches need to reach 350 in average worship attendance within 5 to 7 years, with many of those averaging more than 500 in worship.
   - If our goal is to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people, we must recognize that since 1975 the group of churches consistently doing all three has been churches averaging 500 or more in worship.
o In 1975 these churches represented 1 percent of churches and about 8-9% of membership and attendance. Today they represent 2 percent of churches and
  o 20% of membership
  o 20% of attendance
  o 24% of professions of faith
  o 25% of youth
  o 26% of children
  o 29% of people of color

6. Every new church start should have a goal of being sustainable without resources from the district, conference, or general church within three to seven years.
  o This does not mean all churches must be “self-sustaining.” It does mean that if the church is not able to support itself fully, their partners will be other congregations or other sources of help where the relationship is more direct and relational.
  o Otherwise, denominational assistance will be limited only to a few churches requiring ongoing assistance instead of helping many get started.

What kind of leadership for new churches?

7. An increase in the number of clergy under 35 is essential for new church development success.
  o Many studies have found that the ideal age range for founding pastors is 25 - 35.
  o Today the percentage of United Methodist clergy under 35 is less than 5 percent (down from over 15% in 1985).

8. Careful selection of founding pastors using research-based criteria, along with adequate training, supervision, mentoring, and peer support are essential.

How to fund the new churches?

9. The United Methodist Church has sufficient resources today to fund new church starts, but the assets will need to be tapped strategically.
  o In promoting a rural strategy when the United States was moving westward and growing increasingly rural, Bishop Asbury used a phrase similar to what he used to advocate for the poor when he sought resources from the established urban areas for the frontier missions. He said we “must draw resources from the center to [the] circumference.”
  o Our situation today is just the opposite. We need to find a way in our new situation to draw resources from the circumference where so much was invested in the 19th and 20th centuries for 21st century frontiers?
  o We have the assets.
    o In 1964, the last year of membership gain by the EUB and Methodist denominations, the average net assets (assets minus debt) per church were $93,802.
    o In 2005, the net assets per church were $1, 420,466. [Inflation would have brought the figure to $577,081 by 2005.]
Contributors

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Texas United Methodist Church Report was prepared from research conducted in partnership with Dr. Donald R. House, president of RRC, Inc., an economic research consulting firm located in Bryan, Texas. It has a staff of twelve professional and associate members, including five Ph.D.s in economics. RRC was established in 1977 and serves clients throughout the US. Dr. House has been actively involved in economic research of the United Methodist Church since 1996. He currently serves as a member of the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) and President of the Council on Finance and Administration of the Texas Annual Conference. Email: dhouse@rrc-inc.com

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The Lewis Center for Church Leadership was established in 2003 by Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, to advance the understanding of Christian leadership and promote the effective and faithful practice of Christian leadership in the church and in society. The Center seeks to be a trusted resource for church leadership ideas, research, resources, and training so that there will be an increase in congregational and denominational service, vitality, and growth. The Center is building a new vision for church leadership grounded in faith, informed by knowledge, and exercised in effective action. It seeks a holistic understanding of Christian leadership that brings together theology and management, scholarship and practice, research and application.

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