

IMPROVING THE HEALTH AND SURVIVABILITY OF NEW CHURCHES

State of Church Planting USA

Article Summary

Many people have repeated the idea—which turns out to be a myth—that the vast majority of new churches fail within their first two years. In fact, the opposite is true. In a research project commissioned by Leadership Network over 100 different studies were analyzed to help assess the health and survivability of new churches in the U.S. Discover what improves the strength and effectiveness of church plants.

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

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Many people have repeated the idea—which turns out to be a myth—that the vast majority of new churches fail within their first two years. In fact, the opposite is true. In a research project commissioned by Leadership Network, dozens of studies on church plant health, survivability, and processes were studied in order to discover what improves the strength and effectiveness of church plants.

The Reality Today

In September 2006, The North American Mission Board (NAMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention completed a Church Planting Survivability and Health study. Included in the study were church plants from 12 denominations and networks. Leadership Network participated in this study of more than 1,000 churches. Over 500 were phone interviewed to determine their health and the factors that led to survivability and health. From this study it was discovered that 68% of church plants still exist four years after having been started. The graph below displays the survivability by year.

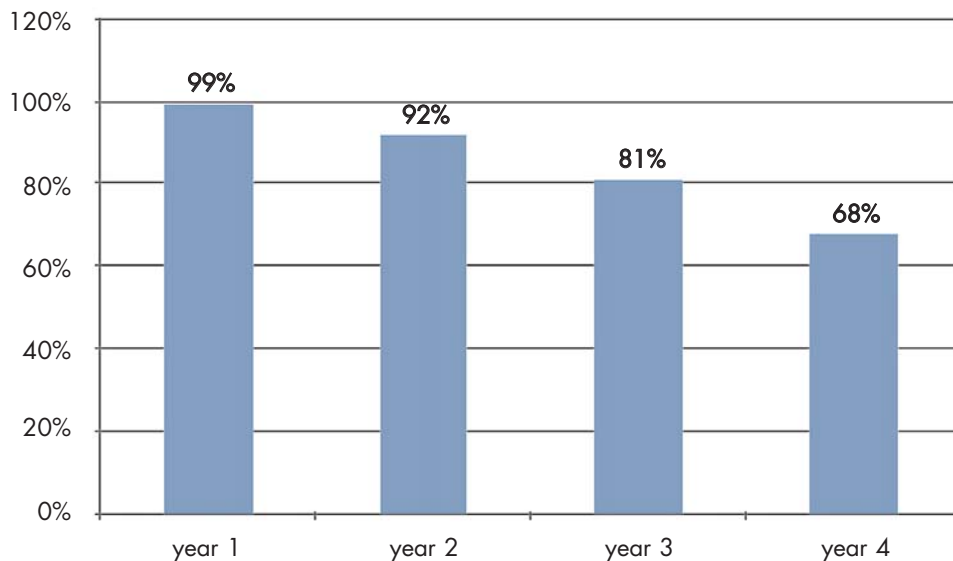
Indicators of Church Health

Size is a common indicator used to evaluate the health of a new church. Though size is not a complete measure of health, achieving a critical mass is essential for survivability. A surprising result of the NAMB study shows that church plants are actually smaller than many imagined. The typical church plant does not pass 100 in attendance after 4 years.

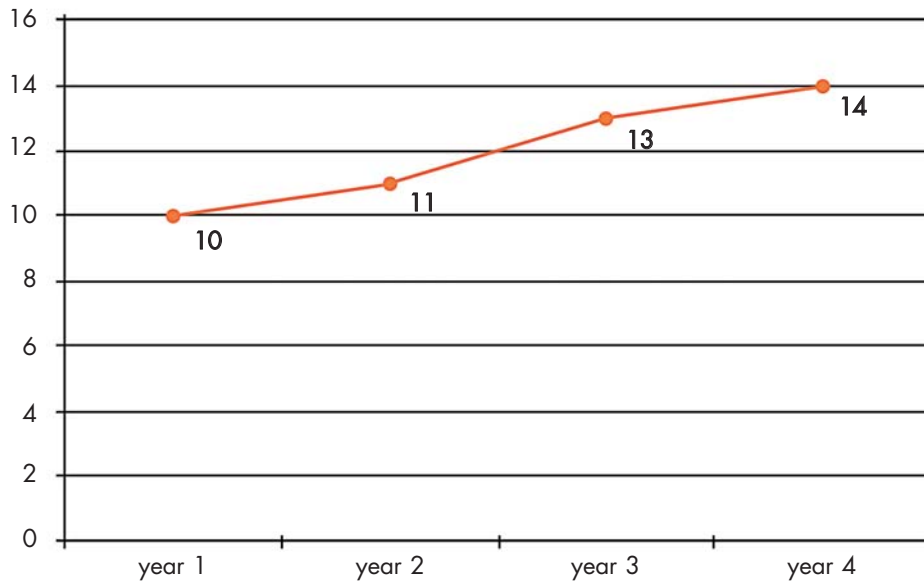
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Another indicator of new church health is evangelistic effectiveness. The number of baptisms or conversions has a strong correlation to the evangelistic effectiveness of new churches. The average number of baptisms or conversions is 10 the first year, 11 the second year, 13 the third year; and 14 the fourth year.

Discovery: 68% of New Churches Still Going After Four Years



New Churches Average 10-14 Baptisms per Year



Certain factors, when present, correlate with higher baptisms. Over 100 factors were tested and the following were found to be statistically significant:

- *engaging in ministry evangelism (i.e., food banks, shelter, drug/alcohol recovery)*
- *starting at least one daughter church within three years of the church plant*
- *having a proactive stewardship development plan enabling the church to be financially self-sufficient*
- *conducting a mid-week children's program*
- *conducting a children's special event (i.e., Fall Festival, Easter Egg Hunt)*
- *sending out mailers for invitation to services and church events*
- *conducting a block party as an outreach activity*
- *conducting a new member class for new church members*
- *conducting leadership training for church members*
- *receiving church-planting training in terms of a boot camp or basic training by the church planter*
- *working full-time over part-time as the church planter*
- *being assessed prior to the beginning of the church plant as the church planter*
- *delegating leadership roles to church members'*

One long-held principle says that churches must become self-sufficient in order to have long-term survivability. Though 30% of the churches studied attained self-sufficiency in the first year, 30% were still not self-sustaining by year five.

Factors Influencing Survivability

In the NAMB study over 100 factors were tested for statistical significance in relationship to survivability. Only a few factors indicated a statistically significant relationship to survivability. Interestingly, the chance of survivability increases by over 400% when the church planter has a “realistic” understanding and expectation of the church-planting experience. On the other hand, conducting door-to-door or cold-call evangelism in church planting decreases the odds of survivability by 59%.

The odds of survivability increase by over 250% where leadership development training is offered in the plant. In addition, survivability increases by 178% when there is a proactive stewardship development plan within the church plant.

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The Planting Pastor

Over the past two decades most church planting leaders have come to believe that the most critical factor to the success of a church plant is the church planter or planters. Research by Leadership Network and others bears this out. Survivability is significantly higher when the church planter engages in support systems provided by denominations, networks, and/or church-planting churches. Before the 1990s most church-planting groups had little interest in focusing on the church planter’s abilities, training, or involvement in support networks. None of the church planting books written before 1990 addressed such issues. In contrast, today the topic of systems is a key issue for church planting organizations. Every group surveyed indicates that having well-designed support systems for the planter have improved their survivability. Some groups report that their survival rate has doubled since implementing important systems such as assessment, training, and coaching.

The NAMB study also focused on the value of peer groups. Odds of survivability increase by 135% when the church planter meets with a group of church planting peers.

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Vineyard Study

A significant study was conducted by Todd Hunter while he was a denominational director of church planting. Though dated, several significant findings are still quite relevant from his study for *Association of Vineyard Churches Church Pathology Report*, December 1986.

Hunter divided his report into two main categories: “Autopsy Reports” of failed churches and “Successful Churches.” Key issues cited that contribute greatly to church planting failures include:

- *The planter’s inability to recruit, mobilize, and nurture workers and leaders,*
- *The planter’s inability to plan effectively,*
- *The planter’s ineffectiveness at gathering new people, and*
- *The planter’s ineffective evangelistic methodology.*

Hunter concluded that these issues could be corrected with training and church growth experience.

Hunter went on to discover that the disposition of the planting pastor makes a crucial difference.

The pastors that struggle the most are more pastoral than hard-charging and lack strong

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leadership skills. Low success church planters are simply predisposed to a more passive approach to ministry that focuses on nurturing those who naturally come to them rather than aggressively seeking to penetrate the community and gather those who could be leaders for the kingdom. They prefer to nurture existing relationships rather than recruit, evangelize, plan, or research their community.

Success Factors

On the other hand, according to the Vineyard research, the plants that thrive are led by pastors who work hard, who have well thought-out plans, who focus on gathering new people, and who can creatively work through and solve problems. These pastors engage in aggressive outreach and are fueled by optimism and faith. Additionally, these planters have good social skills and take responsibility for the growth of the church while imparting the value of the church to the people.

Finally, Hunter also discovered several success factors related to the new congregation. The prospects of survivability in a new church diminish if in the early stage the church attracts too many nominal or hurt Christians who are unwilling or unable to change and grow (i.e., church hoppers, burned out leaders, the chronically hurt, etc.). Also, if those initial members are unwilling to actively seek and welcome those who are different from themselves it can also reduce the health and survivability. Sociological strangulation and back-door problems hurt new churches as well as established churches.

Fast Growing Church Plants

As has already been mentioned, most new churches start and remain small. However, strong interest exists in the “launch large” approach.

Acts 1 and 2 indicate that the early church went from 120 believers to 3,120 believers overnight. In the first year after Christ’s death, the number of believers increased to over 20,000.² Church Planter Ron Sylvia is one of the voices that believe “launching large is congruent with the best of missionary theology and with the methods of Jesus.”³ Such large starts lead to momentum, credibility, and status as self-supporting will soon follow.⁴

Stephen Gray is a researcher who compared 60 fast-growing church plants and 52 struggling church plants to try to understand the factors that enabled churches to grow larger than 200 in their first three years. He has a new book developing this research called, *Planting Fast Growing Churches*. Gray found that in successful church plants:

- *88% have church planting teams.*
- *63% have a core group of 26 to 75 people.*
- *75% use a contemporary style of worship.*
- *80% put ten percent or more of their budgets toward outreach and evangelism.*
- *16% have a higher rate of full-time pastors than struggling church plants.*
- *63% of planters leading fast-growing plants raise additional funding, compared to 23% of those that are struggling.*

Church planters leading fast growing church plants felt a greater sense of support from their pastoral colleagues and surrounding churches, they have more fellowship with other pastors, their work is more highly celebrated by their denomination, and they experience far less negativity from their direct superiors than did those planters leading struggling church plants.

Training and Teams

Nearly 65% of all planters receive some type of training for their work. The real difference is in

Teams are very important in plants that grow fast. Gray's research reveals that:

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how much training they receive. Planters leading fast-growing church plants engaged in substantially more training. Seventy-four percent of fast-growing church planters receive one to two weeks of training. Of the church planters involved in struggling plants, 77% receive less than one week of specifically designed church-planting training.

Teams are very important in plants that grow fast. Gray's research reveals that:

- *88% of fast-growing church plants have church planting teams. By contrast, 12% of struggling church plants are planted by teams.*
- *Over 90 percent of struggling churches work with only one paid staff member. Only 17 percent of fast-growing plants started with only one paid staff member.*

The size of the core team seems to have significant bearing on whether the new church grows fast or struggles to grow. For example, 63% of the fast-growing plants have a core group of 26 to 75 people. Of the churches that struggle, nearly 70% have less than 25 in their core group. Also, over 80% of struggling churches fail to have over 100 at their first service. Of the fast-growth churches, 75% have over 100 in attendance at the first service.

Priorities In Fast-Growing Church Plants

Church plants that grow faster are also intentional about their outreach priorities. For example, 80% of fast-growing churches put 10% of their budgets toward outreach and evangelism compared to 42% of struggling churches committing this

percentage. Fast-growing churches also use more contemporary worship styles that are more culturally relevant to the unchurched people they are trying to reach.

Some of the other significant findings that differentiate fast-growing church plants from struggling church plants during the three-year period following launch include:

1. Only 9% of fast-growing church planters are given salary support past three years; 44% of struggling church planters are supported past three years.
2. 63% of fast-growing church planters raise additional funding for the church plant. Only 23% of struggling church planters raise additional funding.
3. Planters leading fast-growing church plants are given more freedom to cast their own vision, choose their own target audience and they have more freedom in the spending of finances.
4. Fast-growing church plants have multiple paid staff. Two paid staff members was a majority among the church plants in Gray's research.
5. A majority of fast-growing church plants utilize two or more volunteer staff as part of the church planting team prior to public launch.
6. Fast-growing church plants utilize more seed families than struggling church plants.
7. Fast-growing church plants use both preview services and small groups to build the initial core group.
8. Fast-growing church plants that use preview services used three or more of these services prior to public launch. A large contingent of these churches use over five.
9. Fast-growing church plants have children and teen ministries in place at time of launch and offer at least three ministry opportunities to first-time attendees.

10. 57% of fast-growing church plants teach financial stewardship during the first six months from public launch. By contrast only 40% of struggling church plants teach financial stewardship.

All church planting groups report greater success when planters leverage assessment, training, and coaching.

Best Practices

Although new models continue to emerge, the research from Leadership Network seems to indicate that seeker-oriented, purpose-driven, and ethnic church planting models produce more evangelistic conversions.

In his doctoral dissertation, Joel Rainey conducted research to address issues of “model” related to the people being reached in new churches.⁵ Rainey found that there is a high conversion rate among all church plants, but “churches identified as Purpose-Driven seemed to report the conversion growth results that were the most racially monochromatic. Ninety-one percent of all those converted in purpose driven churches were white, while churches utilizing this model reported less than 2% of their conversion growth in each of the other ethnic categories.” While different models have various degrees of success one thing is certain. The best models are always contextually appropriate.

With few exceptions, those involved in church planting systems reach more unchurched people and grow more rapidly than those who are not. Assessment may be the most critical system of all. In 2003, Ed Stetzer examined over 600 church planters and found that church attendance increases more rapidly among the church planters who went through an assessment process prior to launch. Averaged over a 4 year period, assessed planters experience a 20% higher attendance than non-assessed planters. Steven Gray’s study revealed that planters leading fast-growing church plants obtained a higher Ridley Assessment Score than those leading struggling church plants. All church planting groups report greater success when planters leverage assessment, training, and coaching.

One of the best practices in church planter support systems can be observed in the Foursquare Church. Rod Koop explains how their system works:

We extend tremendous flexibility to our leaders and coaches in fulfilling the objectives of all components of our system. We are field-based in spirit and function, knowing that local leadership is much more likely to nurture what they conceive and birth as opposed to what might be artificially launched through a national program. We seek the birth and nurture of a Parenting Culture in our movement through:

- *Our assessments, which are conducted and written as much as to provide a guide for coaches as they are a tool of selection. Whether we say yes, no or not yet to a prospective planter, we assume a coaching relationship will take place post-assessment for at least 18 months.*
- *Our coach training, that takes just over an hour to complete. We felt it was important to get people coaching, then follow with a system of ongoing training for coaches along the way. We fund the coach/planter relationship and our online, monthly coaching report keeps Supervisors in the loop on the progress of the plant, alerting them to the need for intervention if necessary.*
- *Planter cohorts and coaches, who gather to process boot camp-type training over months rather than days, using our Planter’s Guidebook as a tool that allows individualized progress to be made. These groups build relationships around a shared journey that includes war stories and best practices emerging from the front lines of Church Planting.*

All of this support is delivered locally by leaders on the field. Although great flexibility for field implementation of church planting systems is in place, accountability also exists. Koop concludes:

All coaching appointments are to be followed by an online report. When a coach hits “send,” a copy goes to the District Superintendent, the district planting leader, the national coaching leader, myself and the Admin office who cuts a check for \$50 to the coach. We fund 18 months or \$900 total. When reports are not received, the coach gets a call from the district planting leader asking why. When a coach stops coaching, we swap them out as church plant funding is conditional on having a functioning planter/coach relationship.

As online reports are received, the quality of the coaching appointment is obvious. This triggers ongoing training as needed in the form of an email reply or phone call with tips on how to either have a better coaching appointment or how to be more informative in their reporting. Tools are brought to bear as needed: books, articles and even coach-to-coach appointments. As our culture has changed to a field-based, field-embraced structure of planting, compliance has become less of an issue.⁶



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

ENDNOTES

¹ Stetzer, Ed and Phillip Connor, "Church Planting Survivability and Health Study," Center for Missional Research, North American Mission Board, 2007, page 5.

² *Go Big: Lead Your Church to Explosive Growth*, Bill Easum & Bil Cornelius (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 7.

³ *Starting New Churches on Purpose*, Ron Sylvia (Lake Forest, CA: Purpose Driven Publishing, 2006), 108.

⁴ *Ibid*, 109.

⁵ Joel Owens Rainey, "A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Selected Church Planting Models Measured by Conversion Growth and New Church Starts," Ed.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005, 8.

⁶ Rod Koop, November 2007.