

Church Planting as an Evangelistic Strategy

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Purpose: Research paper for hire by North American Mission Board

Date: 6/15/02

C. Peter Wagner stated, "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches."¹ But, is this statement actually true? We will seek to determine the validity of this claim by conducting empirical research and literature review in light of the biblical mandates and current context of ministry. The decisive purpose of this paper is to determine the validity of church planting as an effective evangelism strategy, particularly in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Biblical Mandate: Nature of Church is Mission

The church exists for the pleasure of God and for His glory. The church does not exist for the pleasure and comfort of its members and attenders. The gospel is not to be given just to followers of Christ, but through them to each God-created person in the world in the various sub-cultures and tribes in which they live.

The nature of the church is missional. Instead of thinking in terms of a theology of missions, Christians are better served by thinking in terms of a missional theology. The church is to engage a world without Christ in such a way as to expand the kingdom of God by drawing people into a life-giving and life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Condition of America

North Americans can be characterized as spiritual, yet there is a growing anti-church sentiment and preference toward no religion. USA Today writer Cathy Lynn Grossman noted "people are

¹C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

looking upward, inward, online and out-of-doors for the comfort, connection and inspiration they once sought in formal sanctuaries. Their “spirituality” is unhemmed by ritual, Scripture or theology.”²

The church is not on the radar of many lost Americans. People are searching outside of established churches. Grossman’s research found, “People want help connecting, creating community and seeing God in other people. But religious institutions have been discredited, so they are trying to do it outside the churches.”³ Pastors of seeker-type churches begun in the 80s & 90s would promote themselves as “church” with the same message, but without some of the negatives that were bothersome to seekers. However, some pastors of newer churches now are either not using the word “church” in their name or promoting themselves as “disorganized” or “unorganized” religion.

Still other Americans are choosing the no religion category as their indicated preferences. Grossman said, “Americans almost all say religion matters, yet more people than ever are opting out. Not just out of the pews. Out from under a theological roof altogether.”⁴

Research confirms the shifts. In 2001, more than 29.4 million Americans said they had no religion, more than double the number in 1990. This is more than Methodists, Lutherans and Episcopalians all added up, according to the American Religious Identification Survey 2000. People with no religion now account for 14% of the nation, up from 8% in a 1990 survey. 50% of Americans call themselves religious, down from 54% in December 1999. But an additional 33% call themselves “spiritual but not religious,” up from 30%, and about one in 10 say they are neither.⁵

² From “Charting the Unchurched” 3/7/02, USA Today, Cathy Lynn Grossman

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⁵ From “Charting the Unchurched” 3/7/02, USA Today, Cathy Lynn Grossman

The church is not without hope in ministering in this context. People still have an inner longing to know God and are looking for ways to remove the guilt they feel, but do not understand. Mark Galli, managing editor of *Christianity Today* said, “Lone-ranger spirituality is not conducive to taking us to the depths God designed us to go. It leaves out the communal dimension of faith. If you leave out the irritations, frustrations and joy that community entails, you miss something about God.”⁶

State of Evangelism in American Churches

Any honest diagnosis on the condition of the church of North America would include the word “unhealthy”. In the US, the Christian church is losing the battle on most fronts. Some are noticed, while others go unnoticed. Either way, the consequences are still the same. Bill Bright, founder of the worldwide evangelistic organization Campus Crusade for Christ, said "One of the great scandals of the centuries is the condition of the church of Christ in America today.”⁷

Little Evangelism

Little effective evangelism is taking place. George Hunter reported that nation-wide, only 1% of the churches in America are growing by conversion. I have read that half of all churches did not add one new member through conversion growth. According to the Uniform Church Letter, about 50% of SBC churches report no evangelistic activity. In 2000, around 6,700 SBC churches did not baptize even one person. The vast major of SBC baptisms are either children of present members or are adults who are not being baptized for their initial

⁶ Statement made by Mark Galli, managing editor of *Christianity Today* in article “Charting the Unchurched” 3/7/02, USA Today, Cathy Lynn Grossman.

⁷ Bill Bright quoted in Baptist Press article By Mark Kelly. Bright spoke at the Southern Baptist Convention on Jun 13, 2002.

commitments to Christ, but because of membership requirements. By most any measure, pagans are not responding to Christ.

We are not without hope. Christ is on His throne and churches can impact their area for Christ. Aubrey Malphurs said, “While numerous signs indicate that there’s danger ahead if the established church in America doesn’t change its attitude toward evangelism, there’s a solution. That solution is church planting.... New churches have the potential to pursue lost people with a passion.”⁸

Few New Church Plants

In the 1950s, most every denomination in the US would have felt the need to expand the influence of the church through missions. However, most denominations have decreased their involvement with mission efforts and church planting. “In 1918, mainline churches provided 82 percent of the Western missionary force. By 1966, when theological liberalism and sociopolitical definitions of mission had begun to crowd out traditional missions emphases on evangelism and church planting, mainline churches supplied only 6 percent.”⁹

In fiscal 2001, the United Methodist Church’s Board of Global Ministries decided to slash spending by \$11 million. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) meanwhile considered mission cuts of \$2.5 million.¹⁰ The good news is that there is some shift in the thinking of some denominational leaders. Only recently have some denominations begun to see the vital role church planting plays to the health of any denomination.

⁸ Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 193. Lyle Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), pp. 22-23.

⁹ Darryl Brown “Bad Priorities Can Kill”, *Christianity Today*, February 4, 2002; p. 27.

¹⁰ Darryl Brown “Bad Priorities Can Kill”, *Christianity Today*, February 4, 2002; p. 27.

Church Planting as Evangelistic Strategy

Necessity of Planting

McGavran's Use of 'Church Growth'

Donald McGavran coined the term 'church growth' and used it instead of 'evangelism' because of the negative associations assigned to the word evangelism. McGavran used church growth to describe the evangelization of all people with the view toward the development of indigenous congregations with the new converts in a manner consistent with their cultural norms.

In describing the three major components of the Church Growth movement under McGavran, Elmer Towns said the following about church planting. "At the beginning of the movement many equated Church Growth with church planting. McGavran said the best way to evangelize a caste is not for a foreigner to preach to them. He concluded the best way to reach 'untouchables' was to plant a church in their culture and have members of that church who were 'untouchable' to evangelize their friends, neighbors, relatives, and associates. Church planting resulted in 'untouchables' evangelizing 'untouchables.'"¹¹

If Evangelical Churches Don't Plant, Who Will?

If evangelistic churches do not start churches, either evangelistic churches will not be started or non-evangelistic churches will be started. Sylvia Ronsvalle of empty tomb, inc., decries a lack of leadership. "Denominations have not been calling people to do anything beyond institutional maintenance,"¹² It is absolutely essential that kingdom expanding churches start churches, as the vast majority of denominations have become sidetracked in the struggle of maintaining their institutions.

¹¹ Elmer Towns, Putting an End to Worship Wars, p. 42.

¹² Darryl Brown "Bad Priorities Can Kill", Christianity Today, February 4, 2002; p. 27.

Additionally, various non-Christian groups continue to grow and expand throughout the US. This trend will continue as people search for spiritual guidance and for purpose in their lives.

Sample Growth of non-Christian Churches

	1965	¹³ 1997 and 99
Mormons	1.8 million	4.9 million (1997 US)
Jehovah's Witness	330 thousand	1 million (1999 US)

Rationale for Planting

Theological Rationale

God desires a relationship with the people He creates and desires for them to function in communal relationships with each other. Each new generation must be evangelized and congregationalized within its given context. God does not have grandchildren. Darryl Brown stated that 1.5 billion people have never heard the gospel.¹⁴ I believe this figure is dramatically low when one considers whether or not a person has heard and understood the essential elements of the gospel.

Studies reveal that 30-32% of the American population will attend a public worship service in any given week. I also believe that it would be very difficult to locate 15% of the American population in anyone's church on any given Sunday. 350 thousands churches would have to average 120 in attendance to reach 15% of the population. George Gallup estimates the unchurched population in the US at 195 million. I believe that based on the number of churches (around 300-350 thousands), the population (281 million) and the stated average worship attendance of the churches (75), a better unchurched estimate is probably closer to 225 million.

¹³ The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches. These membership numbers represent Inclusive Members, not the often lower Confirmed Members.

¹⁴ Darryl Brown "Bad Priorities Can Kill", Christianity Today, February 4, 2002; p. 27.

Harvey Conn recommended the following church planting focus:

1. God has commanded us to make disciples among every ethnic group or “people movement” world-wide, (Mt. 28:19; Acts 1:8)
2. God intends to fulfill His purpose of discipling nations by local congregations, i.e., churches, not just with individuals. (1 Cor. 12:14; Eph. 4:11-16)
3. Acquiring many individual converts to Christ does not naturally result in forming a church to carry on the process.
4. God desires that all people would have the opportunity to worship and serve Him within a church that reflects their unique cultural and social environment.
5. A major barrier to reaching unchurched people for Christ is that they perceive Christianity and the “church” as “foreign” to their culture or social environment.

Therefore, we must establish indigenous churches as the Biblical function and goal of New Testament evangelism.¹⁵

For Christians to evangelize the world, it will take millions of additional churches. To congregationalize 6 billion people at 100 participants per church, it will take a total of 60 million churches worldwide. For Christians to evangelize America, it will take hundreds of thousands of new churches. To congregationalize 281 million Americans at 100 participants per church, it will take a total of 2.81 million churches, which is dramatically higher than the estimated 300-350 thousand churches which currently exists. God loves people; it will take more churches to reach them.

Practical Rationale

Effective Evangelism Support

Church planting should be combined with present evangelism strategies, particularly harvest approaches to evangelism. Effective evangelistic activities create the need for additional local churches. Under the leadership of president Jack McAlister, The Every Home Crusade discovered that their efforts to distribute Christian literature into every home in the world became more fruitful when they began to start “Christ groups” in India. These groups functioned

¹⁵ Harvie M. Conn, editor, *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*. These fundamentals adopted from Caleb Project Research Expeditions, by John Holzman, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997, pp 53-54.

somewhat like churches. Youth With A Mission began to start churches at one a day worldwide in conjunctions with their other ministries efforts.¹⁶

Campus Crusade for Christ under the leadership of Bill Bright developed into a highly influential evangelistic force around the world. A component of their campus ministries carried out functions of church. The successful worldwide distribution and impact of the Jesus film created the need for the establishment of groups, so they planted “home fellowships” which often developed into churches. As a result CCC set as one of their eight international goals for the year 2000 to partner with various denominations to start 1 million new churches.¹⁷

Churches are Declining and Dying

The saying, “the dinosaur never sees it coming” may be an appropriate warning to the American church of the 21st century. According to Bill Easum, the median age of 60% of the congregations in the US is 60 years of age or older.¹⁸ With the extreme difficulty churches are having at winning adults and holding on to church youth, the number of local churches that are dying will dramatically rise in the next 20-25 years.

Churches are dying and declining all over America. George Barna reported that no county in the US is more church today than it was ten years ago. Win Arn noted that 80-85% of the churches in America are either plateaued or declining.¹⁹ Edward Dayton reports in the publication *Unreached Peoples* that churches in America and the United States are losing 2,765,000 members per year. Bob Logan estimated that 3,500-4,000 close each year. As

¹⁶ Bryan Bishop, “YWAM Steps Out” (*World Christian*, January-February, 1986), p. 19.

¹⁷ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), p. 23.

¹⁸ Easum communicated this to Will McRaney after Easum spoke at an American Society for Church Growth annual meeting in 2000. In the message, Easum said that he believed that 75% of the churches in existence would no longer be in existence in 23 years.

¹⁹ Win Arn, *The Pastor’s Manual for Effective Ministry* (Monrovia, CA: Church Growth, 1988), p. 43.

churches decline and die, it is practical to start churches that can effectively evangelize the unreached peoples of America.

The combined communicant membership of protestant churches over the last ten years reveal a staggering trend. While the US population increased 11.4%, church membership declined 9.5%. The population increased 24,153,000 people, while church membership decreased 4,498,242 people. (Meacham)

North America is the ONLY continent where Christianity is not growing. The church attendance has declined approximately 10% over the last 7 years. (Meacham)

America loses 72 churches per week, gain 24 churches per week, for a net loss of an estimated 48 churches per week. That lose yields a net loss of 2,450 churches per year.

The US is the largest post-Christian nation on the earth and the third largest unchurched nation. (need sources if decide to use)

The church to population ratio is also declining for every 10,000 Americans

- In 1900 there were 27 churches for every 10,000 Americans
- In 1950 there were 17 churches for every 10,000 Americans
- In 1996 there were 11 churches for every 10,000 Americans²⁰

	1965	1998 ²¹
United Methodist	11 million	8.4 million
Presbyterian USA	4 million	3.57 million
Disciples of Christ	2 million	.88 million (1997)
Episcopal	3.4 million	2.36 million

Not only are churches declining and dying, denominations are in trouble as well. David Dorsey Ray made the following statement about the United Methodist denomination from his DMin project research.

²⁰ Thomas Clegg paper "The Need For Church Planting in America", 1996

²¹ The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.

The Great Commission calls the Church to "make disciples" by the method of baptizing and teaching. These ministries can best be accomplished in the setting of a local congregation, and thus the Great Commission is also mandating church planting. There are other means to evangelism, but the most effective method of reaching the lost is church planting, and thus it is biblical and reasonable for the Church to continue planting new congregations.

The lack of new congregations is not the only reason for the continuing decline of the United Methodist Church, but it certainly is a contributing factor and must be corrected if the United Methodist Church is to reverse its direction.²²

Church Revitalization is Difficult

Another reason to plant churches is the enormous difficulty in revitalizing a struggling church. It is possible for a church to get back on a missional/evangelistic path, but it is not an easy option to expand God's Kingdom. Wagner said, "Remember this simple fact: It's easier to have babies than to raise the dead! Not that all existing churches are dead, or even that most of them are. Most can and should be brought to life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Still the most exciting part of the hospital is the maternity ward."²³ In the Purpose-Driven Church, Rick Warren made a similar observation concerning revitalization and church planting.

Lyle Schaller is the most prolific writer on church issues in the last 50 years and for many he is the most respected spokesperson. In a speech to the Southern Baptist New Work Fellowship, Lyle Schaller said, "Some think we need to make all our existing congregations vital before starting new churches. What's wrong with that is nobody knows how to do that...and nobody's young enough to live long enough to do it."²⁴

²² David Dorsey Ray, Abstract of DMin Dissertation: "Rediscovering the Lost Art of Church Planting in the United Methodist Church of Northwest Texas," 1992.

²³ C. Peter Wagner, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), p. 25.

²⁴ "Schaller Says SBC Must Decide about New Church Starts," *Biblical Recorder*, June 15, 1991, p. 8.

Diverse Population

The US has a diverse population; racially, ethnically, economically, religiously, and in other ways. This diversity has not created a melting pot in most cities, but a stew pot. The expression of the local church needs to be different to effectively evangelize and congregationalize in the midst of such diversity.

The challenges are many. There are 45 unchurched people groups (ethnic groups having no churches to evangelize them).²⁵ The following demographics present challenges facing the Church.

- 35 million handicapped
- 10 million alcoholics
- 2.4 million Hindus
- 6 million Jews
- 3 million Muslims
- 4 million Americans are prison inmates
- 1.4 million Native Americans or Indians
- 6 million temporary residents in America who are neither immigrants or tourists, many are students or workers with green cards²⁶

Urban Need

Biblical Impact of Cities

A study of the New Testament reveals the important role major cities played in spreading the gospel to the world. The Holy Spirit directed the affairs and paths of the leaders of the church to start new churches in the influential places. The following passages are just a few that indicate the significant role of the cities (Mt. 11:1, Acts 1:8, Acts 8:4-5, Acts 11:19-20, Acts 19:10, Phil. 1:13). In short, Gospel spread from the cities out to other areas. It was trickle down or out evangelism. Today, cities continue to influence suburbia and rural areas.

SBC Roots

²⁵ Elmer Towns, "Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America" The Journal for the American Society of Church Growth, Volume 9 Spring 1998, p. 45.

²⁶ Elmer Towns, "Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America" The Journal for the American Society of Church Growth, Volume 9 Spring 1998, p. 45.

80% of the US population lives in cities with over 50,000 residents. However, the SBC has primarily been a rural group of predominately white churches with a much smaller but growing number of suburban churches. The SBC must now develop strategies and local congregational expressions that fit the needs of the urban setting. Referring to the Christian church in America Towns said, “we must develop a modern day strategy: (1) to not be afraid of the cities. (2) to see the cities multitude-God loves people. (3) to develop a Biblical workable strategy to reach the cities. (4) to realize by reaching the cities we can fulfill the Great Commission to reach the world.”²⁷

Ethnic Make-up of Urban Areas

More ethnic people live in American cities than the white city dwellers. Additionally, the vast majority of various ethnic groups reside in the cities: 88% of Hispanics, 81% of African Americans, 90% of Orientals, 48% of Native Americans. In examining the greater Los Angeles area, we discover that LA contains...

- the 2nd largest Hispanic city with 4.5 million Hispanics
- the 2nd largest Chinese city outside of Asia
- the 2nd largest Japanese city outside of Japan
- the largest Korean city outside of Korea
- the largest Vietnamese city outside of Vietnam
- the largest Philippine city outside of the Philippines

If the SBC is to do its part in seeing America reached for Christ, we will have to accept some of the many cross-cultural church opportunities.

Characteristics of Urban Cities

The cities are the greatest mission field in America. Towns noted the following reasons: “there are so many people there, representing so many needs, while at the same time, it is

²⁷ Elmer Towns, “Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America” The Journal for the American Society of Church Growth, Volume 9 Spring 1998, p. 43.

difficult to reach them because they come from so many backgrounds and there are so few churches doing far too little.”²⁸

Urban cities are influential, have large numbers of people who are unevangelized, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, dynamic, changing, and elusive. The Christian church is not effective in evangelizing the cities under the current conditions using methods and approaches that were designed to reach rural or suburban areas.

75% of Americans who live in the city are unevangelized. They can be characterized by the following:

Undesirable – because they are street people, poor, illiterate, or foreign
Unwanted – because they are different than people in the traditional white church
Unseen – because they are not what we see in our Christian literature, i.e., they are not white Americans²⁹

Local Expression

The churches of the city cannot always be like the ones in our rural and suburban settings. Urban churches will be of all shapes and sizes such as: storefront churches, metropolitan churches, outer-urban church, city suburban church, and countless others. Urban churches will be known more by their internal ministry than their outer characteristics. They will not always own property, parking lots and parsonages. They may not have steeples, Sunday School rooms, or family life centers.

There will be other differences. Urban churches may not be organized around boards, committees, or flow charts. They may not be incorporated by the state. They may not have an extensive budget, bank account, or bills. They will be simple and functional, yet effective in

²⁸ Elmer Towns, “Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America” The Journal for the American Society of Church Growth, Volume 9 Spring 1998, p. 45.

²⁹ Elmer Towns, “Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America” The Journal for the American Society of Church Growth, Volume 9 Spring 1998, p. 46.

helping its members live out the Christian life in their communities. The churches of the cities possess more characteristics of New Testament churches.³⁰

SBC History of Church Planting

In the last two-thirds of the 20th century, the SBC was successful in starting churches primarily through two methods. Based on a review of the annuals of the SBC, Southern Baptists did a good job in congregationalizing and splitting. The HMB did begin to start missions and churches among and for various ethnic groups. These ethnic plants were the forerunning efforts to use church planting as an evangelistic strategy.³¹

Congregationalizing

As the Home Mission Board expanded its territories outside the South and as the country's population moved in increasing numbers to the West, the SBC was presented with the opportunities to gather existing Southern Baptists into local congregations. Because many of these new churches did not reach indigenous people in large numbers, these churches are approaching a critical problem due to the median age of their congregations.

Church Splitting

It is hard to say it, but even church splits can be used by God to expand His Kingdom. New churches were birthed out of the conflict of existing churches. The limitation of this approach to church planting is that most of these groups were not birthed out a passion to see lost people come to Christ, but out of selfish motives or church conflict.

³⁰ Adapted from Elmer Towns, "Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America" *The Journal for the American Society of Church Growth*, Volume 9 Spring 1998, p. 49.

³¹ Part of summary findings of Will McRaney in unpublished PhD seminar paper, "The Impact of Church Planting on Southern Baptist Evangelism", November 9, 1989.

Recategorization

With the Bold Mission Thrust, the SBC set a goal of having 50,000 churches by the year 2000. In an effort to lift up the value of local congregations, the Convention recategorized around thousands of missions (*check this figure*) into the category of church-type mission. This boosted the number of churches, but the SBC did not reach this goal. However, church planting did become a higher value in the last decade of the 20th century.

Pioneers – Sending and Seeker Oriented Churches

The SBC had a few local church pioneers set the pace and helped to set a new direction for church planting. Those two men were Harold Bullock and Rick Warren. They were committed to church planting beyond congregationalizing and church splitting.

Bullock started Hope Baptist Mission, now Hope Community Church, in 1977 in Ft. Worth, TX with a handful of people who were committed to walking with Jesus and following Harold's vision for church. This church was the first modern highly purpose driven church that I am aware of in the SBC, as Hope was started after very careful investigation into its purpose, ministry context, and specific ministry values and goals.³² Hope set the pace in its methodologies, structure, priorities and values, evangelism, worship style, facilities, and in two other very important ways. Hope was started to evangelize those who were not presently being reached by existing churches and designed to impact America by becoming a church planting sending church.

Hope was started after Bullock, with his training in chemistry, began to ask some key questions: (1) in light of the American pluralistic and metropolitan context, how can the Christian church win America to Christ, (2) how many churches would it take to adequately

³² See study on Hope Church in "The Purpose-Driven Church: An Investigation into the Process of Developing and Implementing a Purpose Statement and Its Benefits to Church Growth" by Will McRaney, PhD Dissertation, 1992.

church America, (3) what type of church needs to be started and leaders developed, (4) how can a church evangelize lost adults, and (5) how can a church produce people who walk with Jesus and others with great character, skill and integrity, among other significant questions.

One other question Bullock was and is seeking to answer is fundamentally different than many other high profile leaders. Bullock is asking, how can my church develop God-called men to be change agents, such they not only do they plant churches, they plant a different kind of church producing a high quality follower of Christ. Bullock has focused on training church planters and his members not just in knowledge or even skill, but has invested himself in the character development of the leaders who have sought out his mentoring.

Bullock and Hope were pioneers in having a vision beyond themselves by intentionally becoming a church planting training and sending church, not just a mega church. To date, Harold and Hope have sent out almost 80 church planters from coast to coast with a success rate of 85% in their plants. Twenty-five years later, Hope and Bullock is a great-untold story in America church life in the last quarter of the 20th century, but their impact will be felt in the 21st century.

Warren, along with a few of his contemporaries and many who have followed his teaching and leadership, started seeker sensitive churches in an effort to reach out to lost people who were not responding to the existing churches around them. These seeker churches such as Warren's Saddleback Community Church, were some of the first plants in the SBC started to evangelize people who were not being and probably would not be evangelized by existing churches.

Saddleback is a premiere church and is one of the most influential churches in the US in the last 20 years. They have grown by conversion growth, started new churches, developed

people through their spiritual development processes, conducted massive conferences for leaders, invested in missions instead of elaborate buildings, and led out in overseas missions among many other contributions they have made. They have remained focused on unchurched people and called leaders to focus on their purpose in every aspect of their ministry.

Today's Call

From Franchise to Specialty Shop

The SBC was franchising before franchising became popular with Ray Kroc's McDonald restaurants. The SBC became the largest Protestant denomination in the US in large part because it franchised many of its key components among its new churches without a hierarchical mandate. SBC churches have similar buildings, order of service, language, organizations, ministries, decision making structure, theology, small group ministry, and missional efforts. However, many church plants today are targeted toward specific groups of people who are not presently being reached by existing churches.

The SBC now needs to figure out how it will develop congregational life in a highly diverse and pluralistic environment. Who and how will we reach the motorcycle club, street people, high rise apartment dwellers, multi-family housing residents, second generation immigrants and countless others? It will be through new churches that are indigenous to their subculture.

Experts Support CP as Evangelistic Strategy

Some wise churchmen around the country have been touting church planting as an evangelistic strategy. Here are a few of their statements. Logan and Ogne said, "New churches are the most

effective at reaching unchurched pre-Christians.”³³ Schaller said, “If you are interested in reaching new people, by far the most effective way to do this is through church planting.”³⁴

Elmer Towns has made similar statements from his perspective on the value of church planting to evangelism.

As we stated in the beginning we noted Wagner’s often quoted statement, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”³⁵ He also said, “Not to make an explicit connection between evangelism and the local church is a strategic blunder. As the number of individuals who are evangelized increases, so also must the number of churches and the variety of churches. The more harvest God gives us, the more barns and silos and grain elevators are needed. In any given geographical area, the Christian community will grow or decline according to the degree of effort given to planting new churches.”³⁶

Statistical Support for CP as Evangelistic Strategy

Research Background

The next several sections are based on the Uniform Church Letters submitted by SB churches for the reporting year 2000. Churches submitted their reports and checked the box as either a ‘mission’ or ‘church’. The reports below are divided into studies on churches and then mission groups. In both missions and churches, there was a direct correlation between the age of the church and the evangelistic effectiveness as measured by baptisms, recognizing that many other factors demonstrate evangelistic faithfulness and fruitfulness. However, for the purposes of this study, evangelism can best be seen through the baptism statistics.

³³ Robert E. Logan and Steven L. Ogne, Page 1-3 in “Church Planter’s Toolkit”, Church Smart Resources, 1991.

³⁴ “Schaller Says SBC Must Decide about New Church Starts,” *Biblical Recorder*, June 15, 1991, p. 8.

³⁵ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

³⁶ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), p. 12.

Most studies are based on membership, however this is not the best factor from which to determine baptism ratios based on age of the church or mission. Older churches have a higher percentage of non-residents members and a higher percentage of inactive resident members because of their age. So, determining evangelistic effectiveness based on membership would give the truest picture.

The following research will be used to determine the baptism to average worship attendance ratios and the baptism to the average Sunday School attendance ratios. Both of these ratios were compared with the age of the church or mission to determine if there is a correlation. Worship and Sunday School were chosen as the best alternatives to membership, recognizing that there are limitations with both of these numbers. Younger churches typically have a higher percentage of guests in their average attendance figures than older churches. While older churches typically have a higher percentage of their worshipers attending Sunday School. However, using either of these measurements will be more helpful than membership numbers.

The tables below were designed to allow you the opportunity to review more data than a typical summary so that you can make additional calculations as helpful to your particular need. I have included a short summary of the statistics from my perspective.

Research Question & Summary Answer

The ultimate question for this research paper: “Is church planting an effective evangelistic strategy?” In this section of the paper, we will discover the undeniable answer to that question is ‘yes’. Church plants that are missions and then become young churches do baptize much higher percentages of worship attenders and small group (Sunday School) attenders. Win Arn noted the lifecycle of church in terms of their growth and decline. He said, “In the normal life cycle of churches, there is birth, and in time, death. Many churches begin a

plateau and/or show decline around their 15th-18th year.”³⁷ Based on the uniform church letters, the median starting year for a SBC churches reporting in 2000 was 1934.

Younger Churches

SBC Church Statistics

Southern Baptist churches reporting on the 2000 Uniform Church Letter. The following statistics do not include churches that did not report. Also those ministries that reported themselves as missions are not included below. 35,928 churches reported.³⁸

Total Baptisms	Tot Avg. Worship	Tot. Avg. SS	Baptism/Worship avg	Baptism/SS avg
371,712	4,934,417	3,644,520	13.27	9.80

SS is 73.9% of worship attendance.

Yrs. Existence	wor/bap	Tot Wor	Tot Bap	Tot Ch	Tot SS	SS/bap
0	7.20	5,544	770	224	3,504	4.55
1	7.50	8,593	1,146	141	4,893	4.27
2	6.43	10,781	1,676	173	7,368	4.40
3	10.79	21,813	2,022	259	12,293	6.08
4	9.59	25,175	2,625	264	15,761	6.00
5	10.12	26,368	2,605	283	15,524	5.96
6	11.15	30,126	2,701	321	19,271	7.13
7	10.33	38,943	3,771	324	20,591	5.46
8	9.70	30,307	3,124	329	19,311	6.18
9	11.39	31,692	2,783	262	17,425	6.26
10	10.26	47,275	4,607	300	28,722	6.23

Yrs. Existence	wor/bap	Tot Wor	Tot Bap	Tot Ch	Tot SS	SS/bap
0-5	9.06	98,274	10,844	1,344	59,343	5.47
6 thru 10	10.50	178,343	16,986	1,536	105,320	6.20
11 thru 15	11.95	188,363	15,763	1,469	116,811	7.41
16 thru 20	11.19	174,704	15,608	1,335	114,320	7.32
21 thru 30	12.36	270,173	21,860	2,093	188,455	8.62
31 thru 50	12.36	1,017,896	82,355	6,620	744,815	9.04

³⁷ Win Arn, *The Pastor's Manual for Effective Ministry* (Monrovia, CA: Church Growth, 1988), p. 43.

³⁸ Key: Yrs. Existence = the number of years the church has been in existence; **wor/bap** = total average worship attendance divided by total baptisms; Tot Wor = total average worship; Tot Ch = total number of churches reporting for that particular years existence; Tot SS = total average Sunday School (most small group churches report their small group attendance here); **SS/bap** = total average Sunday School attendance divided by total baptisms

51 plus	14.43	3,006,664	208,296	21,531	2,315,456	11.12
Yrs.						
Existence	wor/bap	Tot Wor	Tot Bap	Tot Ch	Tot SS	SS/bap
0-2	6.94	24,918	3,592	538	15,765	4.39
3 thru 15	11.00	440,062	40,001	3,811	265,709	6.64
16 +	13.62	4,469,437	328,119	31,579	3,363,046	10.25

Church Findings

It takes fewer worship attenders and Sunday School attenders to baptize one person in younger churches than in older churches. This can be seen clearly in both of the last two charts when years are grouped together. In terms of half decades and decades, the older the church, the more people it takes to baptize a single person.

There is a dramatic reduction in effectiveness in baptisms in churches after they reach 15 years of age as a congregation. This supports Arn's church lifecycle statements above.

I believe that it is safe to assume that people who attend Sunday School are more likely to be church members and more likely to be active in the overall life of the church. If this is true, the older churches are much more likely to have members who are more focused on the internal affairs of the church than the outward evangelism of the church.

Years in Existence (church)	Bap/100 Worship Attenders	Bap/100 SS Attenders
0-2 years	14.4	22.8
3-15 years	9.1	15.1
16+ years	7.3	9.8

Younger Missions

SBC Mission Statistics

The following tables are reflective of the 2,906 missions that reported through the 2000 UCL.

Total Baptisms	Tot Avg. Worship	Tot. Avg. SS	Worship avg/ Baptism	SS avg /Baptism
13,720	127,399	80,175	9.29	5.84

(SS is 62.9% of worship attendance)

The following are summaries of Christian groups filing as missions.

Yrs Existence	wor/bap	Tot Wor	Tot Bap	Tot Mis.	Tot SS	SS/bap
0	11.12	5,615	505	324	2,725	5.40
1	6.75	11,258	1,669	304	6,953	4.17
2	7.70	11,784	1,531	310	7,473	4.88
3	9.72	15,519	1,596	291	8,900	5.58
4	8.48	11,980	1,412	270	7,304	5.17
5	9.70	8,917	919	203	5,776	6.29
6	10.42	7,534	723	161	5,057	6.99
7	13.41	13,408	1,000	159	7,007	7.01
8	8.18	5,099	623	117	3,460	5.55
9	11.22	5,710	509	97	3,627	7.13
10	11.47	3,476	303	84	2,506	8.27

Yrs Existence	wor/bap	Tot Wor	Tot Bap	Tot Mis.	Tot SS	SS/bap
0 -2	7.73	28,657	3705	938	17,151	4.63
3 thru 4	9.14	27,499	3008	561	16,204	5.39
5 thru 6	10.02	16,451	1642	364	10,833	5.61
7 thru 8	11.40	18,507	1623	276	10,467	6.45
9 plus	9.70	36,285	3742	767	25,520	6.82

Yrs Existence	wor/bap	Tot Wor	Tot Bap	Tot Mis	Tot SS	SS/bap
0-2	7.73	28657	3705	938	17151	4.63
3 thru 6	9.45	43950	4650	925	27037	5.81
7 +	10.21	54792	5365	1043	35987	6.71

Mission Findings

It takes fewer worship attenders and Sunday School attenders to baptize one person in younger missions than in older missions. This can be seen clearly in the charts when years are grouped together. An oddity is in year 0. I believe there are at least three factors, which contribute to this oddity. (1) the church planter and possible few core members are seeking to locate additional core members not focused on evangelism, (2) the planter has few contacts and

is in the process of getting settled into community and develop relationships, and (3) the planter is heavily involved in corporate matters and denominational requirements.

There is a gradual but steady reduction in effectiveness in baptisms in the mission as it ages. Some missions reported being as old as 183 years. I am confident that the vast majority of the 767 missions over 9 years old were churches at some point, but have reverted to ‘missions status’.

Again, I believe that it is safe to assume that people who attend Sunday School are more likely to be members of the mission and more likely to have a higher level of commitment to the mission than those who only attend worship services. If this is true, the older missions are much more likely to be have participants who are more focused on the internal affairs of the new missions status and are less likely to be connected with lost people.

Years in Existence (mission6)	Bap/100 Worship Attenders	Bap/100 SS Attenders
0-2 years	12.9	21.6
3-6 years	10.6	17.2
7+ years	9.8	14.9

Smaller Churches

A friendly debate often occurs related to the overall effectiveness of megachurches in comparison to smaller or minichurches. The following chart highlights the findings related to size and baptisms over a five year period of time in a study by Christian Swartz.

Megachurches	Minichurches
Average size: 2,856	Average size: 51
On avg. won 112 people to Christ over 5 years	On avg., won 32 people to Christ over 5 years

By far the megachurches won many more to faith. However, the implication is that minichurches were statistically 1600% more effective in evangelism. This statistic does not take into account the many other contributions make to expansion of God’s kingdom, but it does

communicate the extreme value of small churches. These statistics compiled by Christian Swartz were based on a survey mailed out to 1000 churches worldwide of which between three and four hundred churches responded to the survey.³⁹

Cost

Starting new churches will reach more people for Christ at a lower cost than older existing churches. Logan and Ogne said, “Planting new churches is by far the most cost-effective means of evangelism. You will win more converts at a lower cost through new churches than established congregations.”⁴⁰ People are more valuable than any amount of money, but churches do have to set priorities. In newer churches it does cost fewer dollars to baptize a person than in older churches.

This does not mean that churches should not maintain their buildings or build larger buildings, but it should give leaders pause as to the decision making question a church should be asking when it is setting financial and human priorities. In a winter 2002 electronic newsletter, Warren stated his belief that the last large church monuments had been built in the US. Too often the build or not to build question is asked in light of the impact on the individual local church when deciding to attempt to build a larger single church or become involved in church planting. However, church leaders should also ask a larger question related to how the decision will impact the Kingdom of God in that particular area and ultimately the world.

Perspectives and Principles for Planting in America

Struggles are not always bad, as they almost demand that we reexamine what we have held to be important. It is through persevering that our faith is tested and purified. As the church

³⁹ Christian Swartz, Natural Church Development, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁰ Robert E. Logan and Steven L. Ogne, Page 1-3 in “Church Planter’s Toolkit”, Church Smart Resources, 1991.

in America struggles, we, the church, are presented with a gift of reexamining what really matters to God and determine what we are doing that may be hindering the purposes of God.

America is a difficult mission field in that it has characteristics of being both pre-Christian and post-Christian. Most denominations have struggled to be successful in turning around churches that have been in decline to the point that they effectively minister in their surrounding communities. Some denominations are turning to church planting to help save their denominations and hopefully more importantly as a strategy to reach lost people who God deeply loves. However, church planting cannot simply be starting more churches like the existing ones. Church planting will require that we plant different kinds of churches as we think outside the box.

Much of what we have called church in America is simply cultural Christianity, void of the real life and vitality of Christ. Because God is on His throne, He is in control and His church will have victory in time. However, much of which is of man that we have claimed is of God will simply die. The question for those ministries will be, how can we live again in a different form after we are gone. Church planting is the final hope for many churches that will cease to exist in their present form inside the next 20 years.

Based on his research from attempting to contact 84 denominations about their efforts in church planting, Elmer Towns summarized what he sees as the new principles for church planting in America.

- Recognize that traditional American church methods that are geared to American suburbia and rural areas will not generally work in Urban America.
- View the United States as a secular mission field and develop an urban strategy that is local to national, not the reverse.
- Apply successful foreign Church Growth concepts to urban United States.
- Develop a church planting strategy that encourages creativity in methodology, yet Biblical in principle.

- Give general permission to deliver the gospel (unchanging principles) in innovative fashion (new methods) that is effective in each localized urban setting.⁴¹

Conclusions

New churches must reach new people to survive, preferably unsaved. New members are required for the mission to become financially, numerically, and organizationally viable. This is not true for existing churches that can continue to meet as usual without doing evangelism. This is not true of financially comfortable established churches. Church planting keeps the church on its missional or apostolic edge.

Over time there is a natural, but unwanted, values slippage for any organization, including a church. Most churches start with a high priority and value placed on impacting the lives of lost people and the lost world. However, the longer churches exist, the harder it is for the church to think beyond itself and into the lost world outside its walls.

Church planting is an effective evangelistic strategy. Statistics prove that younger missions and churches consistently baptize a higher percentage of their average worship and Sunday School attendance. Church planting is a cost effective and wise strategy to reaching America for Christ.

We live in a mission field. We are not doing church with a home field advantage. This absolutely demands that we plant new churches, different expressions of churches for our diverse population. Church planting is not easy and will not cure all the ills of the 21st century church of America. However, church planting is a vitally important component of our evangelism strategy.

⁴¹ Elmer Towns, "Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America" The Journal for the American Society of Church Growth, Volume 9 Spring 1998, p. 47.