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**Do Church Planting Systems Help Church Planters?
A Summary and Study of the System that Southern Baptists
Use to Support Their Church Planters¹**

Ed Stetzer, Ph.D.

Does the presence of a church planting system assist in the growth of new churches? Anecdotal information has existed for years. It seemed to many that church planters did better when they were screened, had mentors, met with other planters, etc. However, there has been no large-scale study on the subject until now.

In the Southern Baptist context, our system is called the Church Planting Process.² The system was developed SBC Home Mission Board (now the North American Mission Board) staff, particularly Joe Hernandez and Charles Chaney, in partnership with Bob Logan. (The Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention was dissolved in 1997 and reincorporated as a new organization, the North American Mission Board.)

Charles Chaney, the Home Mission Board (SBC) Church Extension Vice President when the Church Planting System (CPS) was developed, considered the CPS “the most important contribution of my life.”³ Richard Harris, the current Vice President of the reorganized Church Planting Group, changed the name of the CPS, sharpened its focus, and indicated that the newly named Church Planting Process (CPP) was the fundamental system around which the Church Planting Group was staffed.⁴ The system has evolved into a denomination-specific resource, but still has much in common with other models used by other groups.

The Church Planting Process was developed with the intent

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of providing resources and relationships to help church planters succeed. The CPP has been in place, to varying degrees, since 1996. There is now adequate information to answer the question, “Has it worked?”

In order to determine if the CPP had worked, this author undertook a three-year study of the impact of church planting systems on SBC church planters. The study was funded by the North American Mission Board in partnership with a Ph.D. dissertation of the author. The study follows the development of church planting systems specific to the SBC context.

The North American Mission Board is the leading agency for church planting training in North America today. Their willingness to undertake this project evidences how seriously the leaders view the church planting task. There was a substantial body of data found in the reactions and successes of the church planters themselves. The primary methodology of this study was to analyze the responses of surveyed church planters. Therein was substantial *measurable* information. A secondary purpose of this study was to analyze what other factors, beyond the CPP, have impacted the success or failure of church plants. The study included 601 written survey responses and included up to 400,000 individual pieces of data.

Below are some of the results of a study that analyzed the impact of these church-planting systems on the growth of 601 new churches over a four-year period. This was the largest study ever focused on North American church planting. This is a qualitative exploratory study, providing an overview of trends analyzed more thoroughly in the complete project. There were a substantial number of church planters who had participated in the CPP, and there were also a substantial number who had *not* participated during the same time frame. Both the test group and the comparison group existed simultaneously in similar settings—a strong resource for an effective study.

The study specifically addressed questions related to the Church Planting Process and its impact. These CPP questions included, but were not limited to:

1. How effective was Charles Ridley’s assessment process as a screening and indicative tool for church planters?
2. How effective was Basic Training for church planters and does this effectiveness vary by context?
3. Did regular mentor meetings help church planters to grow larger churches?

4. What impact did regular supervision have on the attendance of new churches?
5. Did networks of church planters help church planters?

The study has limitations. First, it addressed the results found in the 601 respondents. The research was not a study of *all* SBC church planting. Instead, it is a study that contacted every funded church planter with a survey (on multiple occasions). Approximately 2500 church planters were contacted. Over 6000 surveys were sent out since several copies were sent out to those who did not respond.

Those who returned surveys were:

1. more likely to be English speakers (though we did translate some),
2. more likely to be literate since the initial survey was written,
3. more likely to have a favorable feeling about the denomination (since they responded to us), and
4. more likely to want to present a favorable view to the denomination (since the survey was from an agency that funded them).

Approximately one-third of the respondents identified themselves as ethnic or African-American. The survey included respondents in Canada, the United States and its territories.

At almost every point, the presence of certain system factors correlated with larger attendance. These are not direct relationships—“doing” the system does not guarantee success, but the church planting systems provide tools to assist new churches to be more successful. This brief summary cannot and does not include the metrics used of the caveats included. Those are included in the full study.

Below are descriptions of each of the components of the Church Planting Process that directly impact the church planter. There are other components not included in the study. For example, the Multiplying Church Network is a resource to assist churches to plant churches, but it has not direct contact on the planter. Therefore, it is not included in the study. Below the description of each component are the statistical results of the study.

Assessment

The Ridley Assessment has become the standard resource to

provide a reasonable analysis of the church planting potential of aspiring church planters. This four-hour behaviorally focused interview is used by many evangelical church planting denominations and agencies.

It was Charles Ridley who created what is known as the Assessment System today. Ridley explains the process in a 1996 HMB publication:

During the mid 80s when I taught at Fuller Theological Seminary, I was approached by Carl George. Many denominations were struggling with the lack of performance of church planters. Carl ask [sic], "What can we do to improve performance?" I suggested that the problem was not performance but selection up front. We pulled together a consortium from several denominations. I conducted a job analysis to determine the benchmark. From this we developed the Church Planter Performance Profile.⁵

The Fuller Institute commissioned Charles Ridley to conduct a church planter study. Thirteen denominations partnered in 1998 to study both successful and unsuccessful church planters. They sought to discover what skills were necessary for church planters to be effective. Ridley initially came up with a list of forty-six to forty-eight qualities. Bob Logan reduced this list to thirteen in the "Church Planter's Toolkit."⁶

According to Ridley's system, an assessor would meet with the candidate and spouse for four hours and ask behavioral questions to discover certain patterns. According to Ridley, those patterns were indicative of church planter characteristics common to successful planters.

Home Mission Board materials at the time emphasized the importance of good selection by explaining:

1. Selection is ministry. . .
2. Existing methods in religious organizations are seriously flawed. . .
3. Good decision making requires competency. . .
4. To have competency one must be trained. . .
5. To benefit from training requires motivation, effort, and a teachable spirit. . .
6. Not everyone will become a highly competent decision-maker. . .
7. Personnel selection rests on well established and de-

defined principles. . .⁷

The assessment process sought to discern thirteen characteristics from thirteen categories:

1. Visioning capacity
2. Intrinsically motivated
3. Creates ownership (of ministry)
4. Relates to lost unchurched people
5. Spousal cooperation
6. Effectively builds relationships
7. Committed to church growth
8. Responsive to community
9. Utilizes giftedness of others
10. Flexible and adaptable
11. Builds group cohesiveness
12. Resilience
13. Exercises faith⁸

Each category included definitions and questions. One resource described each category as follows:

1. Has a Visionizing Capacity—which involves the capability of sensing the call of God to plant a church and putting together a vision of what God wants to accomplish and selling that Vision effectively to other people.
2. Is intrinsically motivated—that means a self-starter who is willing to start from nothing to plant a church.
3. Ability to create ownership of ministry—that is having the ability to gather people to whom the vision can be sold and owned by others.
4. Ability to relate to the unchurched—meaning that the Church Planter must understand the psychology or mentality of the unchurched. He must be able to connect and relate to those who have yet to accept Christ.
5. Spousal Cooperation—the spouse must agree with the vision and values and fully cooperate as a partner in the ministry of church planting. Some couples function as a church planting team and share differing ministry skills.
6. Effective relationship building—by working with the people they enlist and accepting them as indi-

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- viduals.
7. Committed to Church Growth—believing that the task involves both making more and making better disciples “teaching them to do all” God has commanded. This growth will result in extending the Kingdom of God and result in more churches.
 8. Responsiveness to the community—this means that planters will study the community until the culture is understood and needs are known. Then a ministry designed to meet those needs can be used to bring the lost to Christ.
 9. Utilization of the giftedness of others—allowing others to use their own gifts in the ministry of the new church.
 10. Flexibility and adaptability—be able to “roll with the punches” because a church planter can count on constant and abrupt change.
 11. Building a cohesive church body—develop a network for assimilation of people into the new congregation and having the ability to deal with conflict tactfully and skillfully.
 12. Resilience—one who can bounce back from a failure. It is not bad to get knocked down. A church planter must be able to get up and try again and again.
 13. Exercising Faith—that is to believe that God is building His church and that He is using the Church Planter in the process.⁹

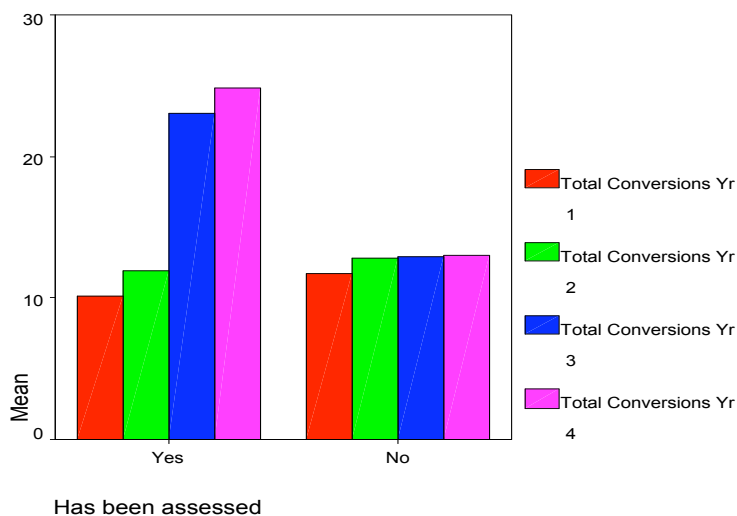
This study compared the mean attendance of the churches of planters who were assessed and compared the attendance of those who were not. This means comparison was made over four years.

The comparison was between those who were assessed and those who were not. It was not a comparison of those who had passed and those who had failed the assessment. There were too few who had failed the assessment in order to obtain a useful sample. Thus, some of those who would have passed had they been assessed are included in the “not assessed” category.

The results are as follows: There is an observable attendance increase among the assessed church planters. At each year, the church planters who were assessed lead churches that are approximately 20% larger than those who were not assessed (aver-

aged over a four year period). The third year is the most substantial with a 27% difference in church size. Assessment has been an effective process to screen candidates.

Assessment seems to be a strong indicator of evangelistic effectiveness. For example, those who have been assessed have a substantially higher mean of conversions in their new church as illustrated below:



Assessment is a good indicator of church planting and evangelistic effectiveness. The assessment has become one of the key factors in the current version of the Church Planting Process. Every SBC-related state convention uses it as a screening tool, although not all candidates are required to participate.

Boot Camp / Basic Training

Boot Camp, or Basic Training in the SBC context, is a central part of the church planting system. Basic Training is described as:

. . . an intensive four-day event for teams that include the church planter and spouse and their assigned mentor. This training will focus on learning and doing what is crucial to the early preparation process for a planned new start. When the basic training is completed, each team will have a written plan that includes:

1. a vision/purpose statement
2. guiding core values
3. the targeted people group for the start
4. the kind of church that is planned
5. the process to be used to gather and prepare a core group
6. the general launch plans
7. the expected final results (along with measurable milestones along the way)¹⁰

The session outline as it exists today includes Overview, Prayer, Vision, Core Values, Focus Group, Mission Statement, Relationships, Evangelism, Core Group, Leadership Development, Worship, Small Groups, Master Plan, Administration, and Mileposts.¹¹ Most church planting organizations hold similar events for beginning church planters.

A central tenet to the Basic Training methodology is that it is not model specific. In other words, participants in Basic Training are not instructed in techniques but in principles. This enables the Basic Training materials to be used in many different ethnic, socio-economic, and educational settings. The materials tend to be very basic. The church planters and their teams are forced to work through the smaller details of the church plant. This enables them to exercise basic planning principles. Conversely, in cases where church planters are using the same model (i.e. planting a traditional, Sunday School based, church), much of the planning is already elsewhere and could be duplicated.

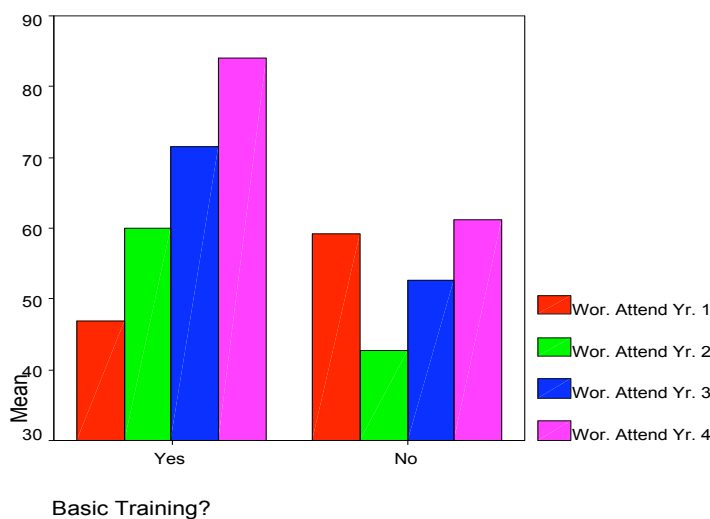
This is not the same as many church planting systems in use today. Most church planting training assumes a common (or at least similar) plan. Thus, the focus is on how to plant a certain kind of church. The SBC/NAMB Basic Training seeks to be principle driven and avoids such model-specific training.

A second tenet of the system is that it is a workshop and not a seminar or a lecture. The majority of time is spent in activities. These activities take place on large sheets of paper placed on the wall and on post-it notes.

Post-It[®] notes enable church planters to think through the process in a logical sequence, the third basic tenet of Basic Training. The entire process is intended to give the planter a series of steps, jumpstarted in Basic Training, that are completed over the next several months. Basic Training as a whole is focused on the final tenet—helping church planters to think through the proc-

ess.

After analyzing Basic Training, a large sample is available, though that sample is smaller than that in the Assessment category. This was caused by the omission of the Basic Training question from some early surveys. This question had to be asked in follow-up phone calls and only 304 answered this question. Of those who answered the question, 66 percent indicated they had participated in Basic Training, and 34 percent indicated they had not. The results are as follows:



The bar graph does present a few challenges. First, the first year results may seem counterintuitive, but they are not when analyzed more closely. Those who were the least likely to participate in Basic Training were ethnic church planters. Ethnic church planters are also most likely to begin with a large core group, therefore, a large part of the non-participating sample would begin with a larger core group.

However, the most substantial information is found in the second year and following. At years two through four, the churches led by those who have completed Basic Training are larger than those who have not completed Basic Training.

Year	Gap
2	6%
3	30%

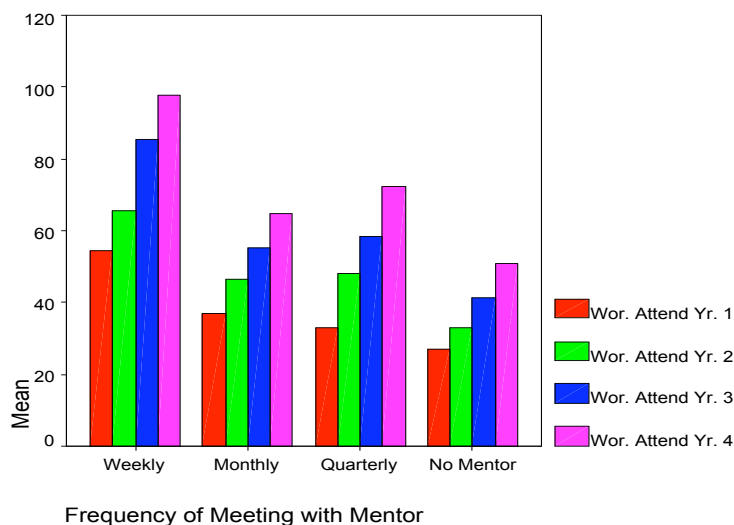
Some have questioned the value of Basic Training for planters involved in certain preexisting models. This frequently has been an issue with those planting Purpose Driven (PDC) or Seeker Churches. Strong evidence supports the idea that Basic Training makes a major impact on PDC church plants. Not only are the Basic Training participating Purpose Driven church plants substantially larger when they participate in Basic Training, but Worship attendance in year four also indicates a .05 statistical significance. Boot Camp / Basic Training make a significant impact on the mean attendance on planters using all models.

Mentoring / Coaching

The survey asks if the church planter met “regularly” with a Mentor or Supervisor. In the SBC context, we separate the role of mentor and supervisor to maximize the effectiveness of each. Mentors can be true mentors without being connected to the supervisory (and thus salary, etc.) part of the relationship.

Other organizations have used the term “coaching.” Coaches are often a combination of mentor/supervisors. Though there are some conflicts inherent within such a combination, the statistics should still hold true. A pre-1996 Home Mission Board workgroup discussed the challenge of mentors being involved in “proficiencies.” These proficiencies were listed on a form that the planter and mentor would review—focusing on areas that needed improvement. The proficiencies included issues like “providing nurture and care” and “move easily from one culture group to another.” The document from this work group indicated that the mentor would “need to instill a vision in the church planter for the work.”¹²

The study indicates that mentoring does matter, but meeting weekly makes more of an impact. There is a clear benefit in meeting with a mentor weekly. The church planter was asked to define the frequency of the meeting with a Mentor and with a Supervisor. The question addressed frequency of meeting with Mentors. The results were significant. By the fourth year, those who meet with a mentor weekly lead churches that are more than twice the size of those without mentors.



Results were not just measured statistically. The issue was often mentioned in the “comments” section of the surveys. A church planter from Wapello, IA, met monthly with a mentor. He explained, “I believe my survival in this church plant stems from my wonderful support system of sponsor churches and especially my mentor relationship with a seasoned pastor.”¹³

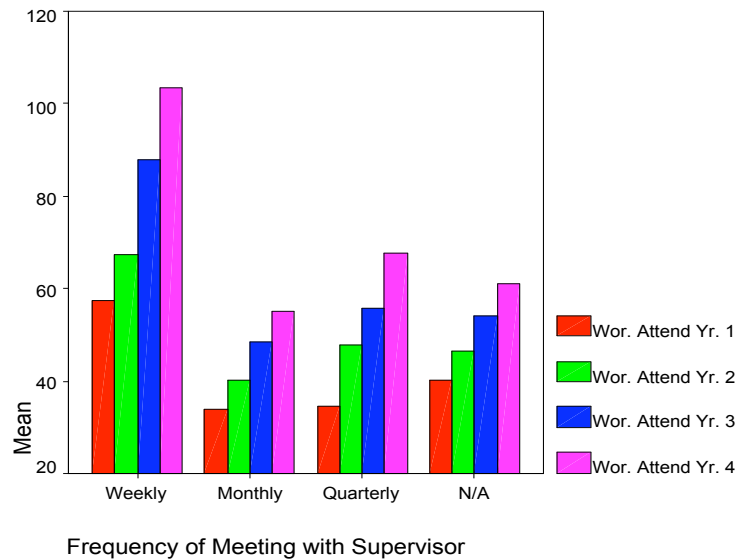
In Overland Park, KS, a church planter explained:

The major factor at play in us closing down had to do with the fact that I was in effect, a “lone ranger” church planter in those days. . . . The other important thing to note, is that the Church Planter Apprentice program was not really an “apprentice” program. I had no mentor. In my humble opinion, church planting in that system was simply asking those of us with the least experience to do a ministry that is arguably the toughest assignment in leadership that I know of. For that reason I believe in sending out an experienced guy with a true apprentice.¹⁴

In many responses, church planters expressed their appreciation for a quality mentor. The lack of a quality mentor was also a frequent comment.

Supervision

Supervision had similar positive results. Churches led by church planters involved in weekly supervision meetings led churches that were substantially larger than those who did not. The graph below helps illustrate this reality:



Similar to mentoring, a weekly supervision meeting is the best stewardship. Supervision does matter, but meeting weekly makes more of a difference. Meeting with a supervisor may indicate a heavy involvement by the sponsoring entity---the planter would probably have a close relationship with the supervisor.

Church Planter Networks

According to the early materials developed by Bob Logan for the Home Mission Board, a Church Planter Network would help to:

1. Resource planters, spouses, and key leaders of new churches.
2. Maximize results and minimize failures.
3. Save church planting supervisor's time and energy.
4. Help recruit prospective church planters.
5. Provide access to state-of-the-art church planting information and tools.

6. Generate prayer support for new church development
7. Produce a unifying visitation and increasing momentum for church planting through a network of churches.¹⁵

Church Planter Networks are led by conveners. Conveners “gather, launch, lead and multiply Church Planter Networks.”¹⁶ The Church Planter Network (CPN) is a gathered group of church planters, spouses, mentors and selected lay leaders from the new plants. The CPN will serve as the nurturing activity for those involved in a new church plant. This activity should involve and/or lead to:

1. Mentoring
2. Developing a Peer Support Group
3. Praying Support
4. Learning and Experiencing Helps for Church Planters
5. Developing Plans for the Church Plant
6. Creating Healthy, Growing and Reproducing Churches
7. Interacting between Group Participants¹⁷

There is a substantial amount of overlap between the Basic Training and the Church Planter Network. In part this is because both of them come from common sources. There is also an intentional overlap between the two. One description of the Church Planter Network explained:

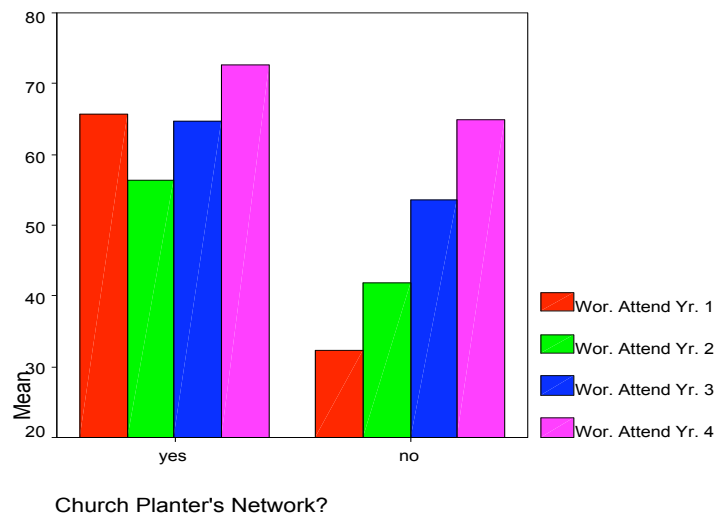
In the Church Planter Network there is some planned redundancy [sic] for participants who have attended Basic Training. The CPNs are not limited to those who have attended a Basic Training event. The three of the early sessions, Visionizing, Focusing, and Core Group Development draw extensively from Basic Training material. There are several reasons for this:

1. These are not simple topics that most planters complete in the first round of study
2. It gives the church planters an opportunity to review and revise what was done in Basic Training based on better understanding of the field.
3. It allows planters who have not been through Basic Training but are participating in a Network opportunity to deal with these foundational issues.
4. It provides the planters who have had some experi-

ence with these topics opportunity to share their learning with others.

5. After Basic Training a lot of “on the job training” needs to occur. Most of that additional training will be best provided in a “just in time” format.¹⁸

The study compared the mean attendance of those who participated in a Church Planters Network with those who had not. This means comparison is made over four years. The results are as follows:



There is a clear difference between the bars, but the results are not as consistent as the others. If there is a positive impact, it seems to decrease over time. By the fourth year, there is little difference. Since many tend to end their participation after the second year, this may help evidence the need for a follow-up to the church planters network.

The CPN is probably the least known of all the CPP components. One church planter in Phoenix, Arizona, suggested in his survey, “A monthly seminar with all the new church planters! Sharing one another’s problems and victories; different experienced pastors’ input.”¹⁹ Ironically, that is the purpose of the CPN (sans the “seminar”).

Some church planters questioned the material that was being used. A planter in Waite Park, Minnesota, explained, “The

church planter network meetings were not helpful. The material is too brief for the time allowed. In Minnesota where I served, the distance to mentors and supervisors is a hindrance."²⁰

The Church Planter Network meetings did impact the mean attendance. This is particularly evident in the first two years. It is less evident in the third and fourth year. Since the North American Mission Board materials only include two years of meetings, this may be the reason. (Few Church Planter Networks last more than two years.) More study is needed on this point.

Conclusion

The Church Planting Process passes the impact test. Those church planters who participate in the Church Planting Process led churches that evidence larger mean attendance than those who do not. This means attendance impact is seen in every category. Furthermore, in some cases, the impact is statistically significant, indicating a clear relationship between the tested factor and increased mean attendance. With the exception of the Church Planters Network, the connection is very clear. In the case of CPN, the evidence is not as clear and needs further study.²¹

Investments in church planting systems are just that—investments. These investments produce larger churches and, perhaps more importantly, more healthy planters. This study does not answer every, or even most, church planting questions. However, it does tell us that church planting systems do work.

Writer

Stetzer, Ed. Address: Ed Stetzer has personally planted churches in New York and Pennsylvania. He served as a seminary professor, trained pastors and church planters on five continents, and currently directs the Nehemiah Project of the North American Mission Board to recruit and train church planters. His Ph.D. dissertation investigated the essential components for biblical church growth in new churches. His book, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, helps church planters to start and grow biblically faithful and culturally relevant churches. He has coauthored (with Elmer Towns) *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging Church* (forthcoming, Fall 2004) which helps churches to determine a theology of methodology.

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Stetzer's church planting website is www.newchurches.com.

NOTES

1. This is a condensed analysis of a 300 page study, Edward J. Stetzer, *The Impact of the Church Planting Process and Other Selected Factors on the Attendance of Southern Baptist Church Plants*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003.

2. The system was originally called the Church Planting System. This name was in use through most of 1997. The name was changed to the Church Planting Process in 1997. When referring to the Church Planting System, it signifies the resource in its pre-1997 development. When referring to the Church Planting Process, this refers to the post-1997 version or the entire process (1994 to present).

3. Charles Chaney, phone interview by author, 23 December 2002.

4. Richard Harris, email from Richard Harris to author, 3 January 2003.

5. "Church Planter Performance Profile," in *Initial Assessor Training Church Planting System, Extension Section: Scottsdale, AZ, 13-15 August, 1996*, by the Home Mission Board, 3.

6. "Am I a Church Planter? A Self Assessment Test," in *Church Planting System V Notebook*.

7. "Church Planter Performance Profile," 2.

8. Ridley, *How to Select Church Planters*, 7-11.

9. "Am I a Church Planter? A Self Assessment Test."

10. "Church Planting System Overview: Cooperative Missions Ministries," in *Section IV Basic Training notebook*.

11. *Basic Training for Church Planters*, n.p.

12. "Mentoring Apostolic Church Planters and Using the Proficiencies" Workgroup discussion notes, Home Mission Board, Alpharetta, Georgia, 8 December, 1995 (December 1995, Home Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, Alpharetta).

13. Church Planter, Wapello, Idaho, 2001, North American Mission Board Survey Form, Church Planting Group Self Study, North American Mission Board, Alpharetta, GA. Note: Between the years of 1999-2002, 601 church planters participated in a survey conducted by the North American Mission Board. For reason of anonymity, they will be referenced only by their city and state.

14. Church Planter, Overland Park, Kansas, 2002, North American Mission Board Survey Form.

15. Logan, "Convening Church Planter Networks" Note: The lower left of the page indicates "Source: *New Church Incubator Conference Training Notebook* by Ogne and Logan," 2.

16. Logan, "Convening Church Planter Networks" Note: The lower

left of the page indicates "Source: *New Church Incubator Conference Training Notebook* by Ogne and Logan," 5.

17. Joe Hernandez, "Introduction to the Church Planter Networks (CPN): Church Planter Helps, Church Planter Networks," Under tab "CPS Introduction," Church Planting System IV. Church Planting Systems, Extension Section, Home Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, Alpharetta.

18. Gerald Colbert and Gerald Raynor, "Church Planter Network Resource: Church Planter Networks. Why They are Needed and What They Can Do." Church Planter's Network: Field Draft Copy from the North American Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, Alpharetta, 2.

19. Church Planter, Phoenix, Arizona, 2002, North American Mission Board Survey Form.

20. Church Planter, Waite Park, Minnesota, 2002, North American Mission Board Survey Form.

21. Beyond the church planting systems analysis, this study suggests hundreds of variables for use in analyzing the success or failure of church planting. The study sought to find other measurable factors that impact the attendance of new churches. Due to space limitations, this information is not included here.