

Hutz Hertzberg and Francis Lonsway

Church planting is a clear response to the gospel command to spread the good news. While the term “church plant” may not be shared across Christian traditions, its meaning and goal are universally embraced. What is also clear, however, is the fact that the establishment of a new plant does not guarantee its success. Likely the critical factor in denomination, free, or independent church expansion is the nature of the individual or team assigned or commissioned to spread the good news.

This article focuses on church planting in the evangelical tradition in the United States. There are no claims for other Christian traditions for all of North America or the rest of the world. We want to state the fundamental issues first, namely, why plant churches and why that is important. Then we want to explore how individuals central to the study of church planting have shaped the discussion over the last several decades. Finally, we want to offer what we hope will be helpful observations about the current studies and offer suggestions about further promising directions.

from the great commission to our time

The New Testament and church history reveal how the Gospel spread throughout the world with the establishment of new churches.¹ Stetzer reminds us that starting new churches “was the normal expression of New Testament missiology.”²

According to Olson, church attendance has stayed about the same in the United States from 1990 to 2004. However, during the same period, our population grew by 18.1% or more than forty-eight million people.³ This growth, unmatched by any measurable increase in church attendance, occurred in the face of what each of us knows and was well stated by Wagner, namely, that “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”⁴ Stafford, writing in *Christianity Today*, states it more starkly:

Today, church planting is the default mode for evangelism. Go to any evangelical denomination, ask them what they are doing to grow, and they will refer you to the church planting office. I have talked to Southern Baptists, General Conference Baptists, the Evangelical Free Church, the Assemblies of God, the Foursquare Church, the Acts 29 network, and a variety of independent practitioners and observers. I quit going to more because they all said the same thing: “We’re excited and committed to church planting. It’s the cutting edge.”⁵

Church planting is being energetically embraced, but it, along with the building of other Christian faith communities, has not kept pace with the growth of our population in the United States. Where do we turn? One possible and perhaps illuminating set of insights might come from the research that surrounds church planting.

on comes research

For a number of years, the selection of a church planter was based on a willing heart and a strong pulse. With little reliable research on the necessary characteristics and traits of successful church planters, churches and denominations often used a singular criterion—a willing volunteer! For some who wanted to serve in a congregational setting, this choice was, unfortunately, the

¹ Acts 9:31; 16:5.

² Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 52.

³ David Olsen, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 16–32.

⁴ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA, 1990), 11.

⁵ Tim Stafford, “Go and Plant Churches of All Peoples,” *Christianity Today* 51, no. 9 (2007): 69.

ministry of last resort. Start a church! The results of such a process, if they could be called such, were a high failure rate for church plants, accompanied often with a burned-out church planter and spouse, parishioner casualties, and wasted resources. Furthermore, there was scarcely a mention of the requisite competencies of church planters in any of the literature prior to the 1990s. Books devoted to church planting focused more on the “need” and “how-to” methodologies.⁶

Changes took place with the close of the decade. Schaller believes that the single most important factor determining whether a church plant remains small or grows is what he identifies as an “exceptionally competent minister.”⁷ Likewise, Thompson underscored the importance of engaging in research which identified the competencies needed for effective church planters:

Not only will knowledge of church planter competencies provide a basis for matching (church planters) abilities to task requirements, but also provide a basis for selecting persons who desire their greatest fulfillment from initiation functions.⁸

There are significant research contributions to church planting in both the evangelical and mainline Protestant traditions. To keep the focus sharp, the principal emphasis of this article is on the work of Graham, Ridley, and Thompson in the evangelical tradition. While key parts of their work will be presented, each author has made contributions beyond the sketches presented. Later in this article the work of Wood, with such denominational traditions as the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (USA), will be introduced in order to broaden our understanding of church planting and to provide a platform to offer suggestions to strengthen the goal of selecting church planters who are likely to succeed.

thomas graham and the center for organizational ministry development

A model adapted for the identification of church planters by Graham was originally developed during World War II to promote better selection of British officers. Graham founded and currently serves as president of the Center for Ministry Organizational Development (COMD) based in Colorado Springs. His basic methodology has been embraced by the Presbyterian Church of America, the Baptist General Conference, and the Vision 360 church planting network.

⁶ Ed Stetzer, “Do Church Planting Systems Help Church Planters? A Summary and Study of the System that Southern Baptists Use to Support Their Church Planters,” *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 15 (Winter 2004): 27–44.

⁷ Lyle Schaller, *Forty-four Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 42.

⁸ Allen Thompson, “Church Planter Competencies as Perceived by Church Planters and Assessment Center Leaders: A Protestant North American Study” (PhDdiss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995), 5.

Graham’s assessment center methodology uses multiple assessment techniques and assessors, situational exercises and simulations, and a structured procedure for making judgments about behavior.⁹ The emphasis of the model focuses on identifying the presence of predetermined competencies judged necessary for a successful church planter rather than on the nuts and bolts of the work itself.

Graham, with his staff, began by analyzing the activities performed by a cross-cultural missionary church planting team and, from that, developed a profile describing the gifts, skills, abilities, and traits desirable in a church planter. Among the original twelve factors they generated were 1) sense of call, 2) spiritual and psychological maturity, 3) goal/performance orientation, 4) creativity, and 5) cross-cultural adaptability.¹⁰ The second step was the creation of a domestic church planter profile of fifteen factors. Figure 1 sketches the competencies required of a church planter and a brief description of each.

While these factors appear to reflect substantive skills and traits, there was no research conducted to undergird them. They remain theoretical because the value of Graham’s work is limited by the development of the characteristics by agency

Figure 1¹¹
Graham’s Fifteen Factors Identified by Subject Matter Specialists

Competencies	Description
Dynamism	Has an inviting disposition
Self Image	Maintains emotional stability under pressure
Sensitivity	Cares for a person’s feelings and needs
Flexibility and Adaptability	Welcomes new possibilities
Oral Communication and Exposition	Preaches with confidence
Discipleship	Builds new believers in the faith
Evangelism	Shares his faith with the un-churched
Faith	Actively relies on God’s grace
Spirituality	Demonstrates a growing walk with God
Family Life	Displays a mutual family commitment
Philosophy of Ministry	Articulates a specific “style of ministry”
A Model of Ministry	Envisions a clear model for church planting ministry
Performance Orientation	Has the ability to get things done
Leadership Orientation	Equips and uses others in leadership
Planning Skills	Develops realistic action plans

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ Thomas Graham, “How to Select the Best Church Planters,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (January 1987): 74.

¹¹ Thompson, “Church Planter Competencies”, 8.

staff rather than from a research project which included actual church planters. There were no on-site participants, church planters, or missionaries who participated in the project.

charles ridley and the church planter performance profile

Ridley's research rests squarely on the assumption that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. Stetzer writes that "It is to Ridley's research to which most people refer when they speak of a church-planter assessment."¹² Ridley currently serves as a faculty member in the Counseling and Educational Psychology department as well as an Associate Dean at Indiana University, Bloomington.

Commissioned by thirteen evangelically-oriented denominational groups to identify the characteristics of successful church planters from their traditions, Ridley adapted a long-standing model used in business and industry. The resulting tool was the *Church Planter Performance Profile*, a list of thirteen critical performance dimensions and characteristics of effective church planters. Among the essential qualities were Visioning Capacity, Personally Motivated, Creates Ownership of Ministry, Relationship Building, and Responsiveness to the Community. Figure 2 presents the dimensions and provides a description for each quality.

With this list of essential qualities in hand, Ridley then used an interview to determine the likelihood that these qualities were present in prospective church planters. Both his church planter profile and behavioral assessment methodology continue to be the basis for much of church planter assessment in the evangelical tradition today.

Irrespective of this broad use, however, Ridley's actual research methodology and data are not included in his publications. Efforts by some researchers to obtain this information have been unsuccessful. The list of qualities seems to parallel that of Graham as to its origin, while the second part, interviewing prospective church planters, clearly advances the overall methodology. However, as Lollar, formerly with the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, notes, he has concern about the subjectivity of the scores derived from the church planter's responses to the trained interviewer.¹³

j. allen thompson and his church leader inventory

Currently president of the International Church Planting Center in Seattle, Thompson has been significantly involved with the assessment centers of the

¹² Ed Stetzer, "Do Church Planting Systems", 82.

¹³ Bill Lollar, Blog posting, accessed August 10, 2007; www.acts29network.org/acts-29-blog/the-planters-ultimatum.

Figure 2¹⁴

Ridley's Thirteen Essential Qualities for Church Planters

Essential Qualities	Description
Visioning Capacity	Ability to project, sell, and bring a vision into reality
Personally Motivated	Self-starter committed to excellence and hard work
Creates Ownership of Ministry	Instills a sense of personal responsibility for the growth of ministry
Reaches the Un-churched and Lost	Ability to connect with the un-churched and lead them to Christ
Spousal Cooperation	Creates a workable partnership that agrees on ministry and family priorities
Relationship Building	Takes initiative to know and deepen relationships with people
Committed to Church Growth	Values church growth as a means for developing more and better disciples
Responsiveness to the Community	Adapts ministry to the culture and needs of local residents
Utilized Giftedness of Others	Equips and releases ministry to the culture and needs of local residents
Flexible and Adaptable	Ability to adjust ambiguity, changing priorities, and multi-tasking
Builds Group Cohesiveness	Facilitates group collaboration toward a common goal
Demonstrates Resilience	Ability to sustain oneself through setbacks, losses, and failure
Exercises Faith	Demonstrates how one's convictions are translated into various decisions

Presbyterian Church of America from their beginning. This section of the article examines his two major research studies while acknowledging at the outset his equally important roles as a consultant and writer on church planting issues.

Thompson's 1995 doctoral study was titled "Church Planter Competencies as Perceived by Church Planters and Assessment Center Leaders: A Protestant North American Study." The principal purpose of his research was to identify competencies, namely, the common core of values, behaviors, and attributes held to be positive characteristics of church planters.¹⁵ His research explored church planting competencies identified by both church planters in the field and

¹⁴ Charles R. Ridley, *How to Select Church Planters* (Pasadena, CA, 1988); Charles R. Ridley, Robert E. Logan, and Helena Gerstenberg, *Training for Selection Interviewing* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart, 1998).

¹⁵ Thompson, "Church Planter Competencies", 9.

experienced assessors of church planters. His study revealed that both groups identified similar competencies and characteristics needed by church planters. These were grouped and ranked in three different clusters, including spiritual life qualities (e.g., prayer, spirituality, integrity), church planter skills (e.g., leadership, evangelism, preaching), and personal traits (e.g., conscientiousness, resiliency, flexibility).¹⁶

Thompson's most recent research built naturally on his earlier work and again involved the PCA. His work has produced an inventory that is richer and broader than his previous profiles. The resultant *Church Leader Inventory (CLI)* is an interactive 360-degree instrument developed by the leaders of the Presbyterian Church of America, Redeemer Church Planting Center, and the International Church Planting Center. It includes:

116 action and behavior-based questions that are designed to measure 35 competencies in 10 areas: integrity, family life, missional engagement, personal spiritual dynamics, gospel communication, emotional stability, managerial courage, visioning capacity, learning agility, and expectancy of results. The inventory also includes 32 actions and attitudinal questions designed to evaluate behaviors that may hinder or destroy effectiveness.¹⁷

Figure 3 presents the ten dimensions covered by the inventory and their description.

The overall structure of the *Church Leader Inventory*, unfortunately, was built on a small sample of twenty-nine church planters who responded to twelve open-ended questions. The second step of the research consisted of a three-day consultation of ten church planters and three leader-trainers.¹⁸

where does that leave us?

In a field as important as church planting, we do not want to rely solely on theory. We want to test every assertion to add a level of confidence so that when we talk about characteristics contributing to a successful church plant, we have the data to support it. This approach does not diminish the groundbreaking work of Graham. It simply asks, "What proof is there that the characteristics generated by his staff are valid and reliable?" Nor does it diminish the work of Ridley. While his list of traits and characteristics is similar to Graham's, he nonetheless applied the model to interviewing prospective church planters. Unfortunately, his research is not open

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124–126.

¹⁷ Excerpted from a flyer describing the *Church Leader Inventory*, 2007.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

Figure 3¹⁹

Thompson's Ten Church Leader Inventory Dimensions

Dimensions	Description
Integrity	Responsible; ethical; inspires trust
Personal Spiritual Dynamics	Prayerful; walks with God; sense of call
Missional Engagement	Gathers and cares for people; cultivates missional culture; embraces diversity
Visionizing	Motivates others; develops teams; manages vision
Gospel Communication	Redemptive preaching; enables worship; communicates effectively
Learning Agility	Deals with ambiguity; quick learner; adjusts strategies; self-developer
Emotional Stability	Able to negotiate stress; opportunity-minded; confident
Family Life	Healthy family; growing marriage; partnership with spouse
Expectant of Results	Action-oriented; perseverance
Managerial Courage	Effectively selects, directs, and evaluates people; practices conflict management

to review and the questions about validity and reliability remain. Thompson's work advanced the field further. Although his sample is small, he actually solicited the responses of church planters and church planting supervisors in designing his list of competencies for a successful church planter. His method was direct. Thompson worked with church planters to uncover what they consider key dimensions for anyone entering the ministry of planting churches.

H. Stanley Wood, however, shows us the next step that needed to be taken, namely, to establish a benchmark for effective or extraordinary church planters and use that as a template for prospective individuals considering this special ministry.

h. stanley wood and his founding pastor church development survey

Wood is the Ford Chair, Associate Professor of Congregational Leadership and Evangelism, and Director of Field Education and Integrative Studies at San Francisco Theological Seminary. His survey was completed by 704 pastors from seven mainline denominations and consisted of fifty-eight questions. Among the denominations were the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Reformed Church in America.

¹⁹ Allen Thompson, *Church Leader Inventory: a PCA Qualitative and Quantitative Study* (Seattle: International Church Planting Center, 2007), 38–39.

Focus groups followed up church planters judged “effective” or “extraordinary”.²⁰ The label included “those pastors who started and sustained new churches that achieved the highest membership growth within their respective denominations and those pastors who were able to attract and assimilate formerly un-churched persons into active church membership.”²¹ These church planters ranked the importance of skills or traits from a list of items generated by the researchers. They included “catalytic innovator” and “vision caster,” each defined by Wood and his team. Figure 4 lists and describes each of the nine qualities.

Wood offers a helpful caution on his work when he writes:

It is important to remember that these characteristics are derived from the analysis of focus-group discussions; they are neither psychometric measures nor behavioral indices. For that reason, their power and ability to inform is both limited and focused. These factors can tell us relatively little about what is conclusively ‘true’ about effective new-church development. They can, however, give us quite powerful indications about what those who are doing new-church development effectively consider to be conclusively true.²²

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Figure 4²³

Wood’s Nine Qualities Necessary for Church Planters

Qualities	Description
Catalytic Innovator	Charismatic leader; tenacious perseverer; risk-taker; flexible-adapter; self-starter
Vibrant Faith in God	Deep and sincere faith; reliance on God, His calling and provisions
Visionary/Visioncaster	Ability to see wider vision; visionizing capacity
Empowering Leadership	Equipping people for ministry; staffing as team building
Passion for People	Respecting people; knowing one’s community; developing local ownership
Personal and Relational Health	Healthy self-love for body, mind, and spirit; nurturing, healthy family
Passion for Faith-Sharing	Passion for evangelism and discipleship
Inspiring Preaching and Worship	Preaching with passion, authenticity, boldness; worship that touches people
Administrative Skills	Ability to recognize the need to think more administratively; add and use gifts of others

²⁰ Stanley H. Wood, ed., *Extraordinary Leaders in Extraordinary Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2006), xii-xiii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²² *Ibid.*, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 34.

Used in mainline denominations, Wood's research has received little attention in the evangelical community for whom Graham, Ridley, and Thompson have been the standard bearers. However, it represents an important addition to the literature on church planting and should be considered alongside the work of these other pioneers.

strengths, weaknesses, and where to go from here

The ministry of church planting deserves our finest effort. It is unlikely that the gap between population growth and church attendance in the United States will shrink. There are too many societal forces buffeting an individual's commitment to Christ. Nonetheless, we should be able to increase the likelihood that an individual called to church planting has a reasonable chance to succeed.

We have explored a natural development in the quest to help individuals and church officials assess the characteristics and traits deemed central to the ministry of church planting. We have marked progress from a staff analysis of competencies (Graham), to a list of qualities judged essential for a successful church planter (Ridley), to a study of a small sample of church planters and church leaders who identified competencies in ten areas (Thompson), and finally to a large sample of ministers who identified effective and successful church planters (Wood).

The ultimate goal of each of the researchers and their various efforts has been to strengthen the ministry of church planting. For this they are to be recognized and applauded. Their weaknesses, too, are evident: failure in one instance to involve the very ministers whom they were studying, an unwillingness to share research methodology, a small sample size, and in each case, a lack of an instrument independently designed to measure characteristics, attitudes, and abilities.

All of the research has been valuable. It simply needs to be improved with the goal of shedding more light on the unique ministry of church planting. A reasonably robust sample size, an independent instrument with a history of usefulness in ministry preparation, and a comparison of effective church planters with an independent population of individuals preparing for ministry form the basis of a doctoral research project recently completed at Trinity Evangelical Theological Seminary. The results of this research by one of the authors of this article (Hertzberg) will be presented in the next issue of the Journal.

Hutz Hertzberg is a graduate of Wheaton College and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Ph.D.) In addition to providing pastoral leadership for The Moody Church ministries and staff, Dr. Hertzberg serves as the Senior Protestant Chaplain for Chicago O'Hare and Midway Airports. He is also actively involved with several church planting initiatives domestically and internationally.

Francis Lonsway has earned a graduate degree in theology from Assumption Seminary, and a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. Author of research monographs and numerous articles in the area of theological education, Dr. Lonsway recently retired from his role as Director of Student Information Resources of the Association of Theological Schools. He is also Adjunct Associate Professor in Management at the Louisville Metropolitan Campus of Webster University.