

# 7 Top Issues Church Planters Face

*Report Prepared by Exponential and Ed Stetzer*

This report is adapted from a series of blog posts from [edstetzer.com](http://edstetzer.com), based on a research report from the Exponential.

## Introduction

I have partnered with my friend Todd Wilson, Director of Exponential, to do quantitative research alongside a group of well-known church planting leaders/experts who share their insights.

We listened to more than thirty national leaders with over 500 years of cumulative experience planting and working with hundreds of planters. Individual planter interviews, online surveys, and volumes of real world experience were also included in the discovery process.

Almost all of those who responded were connected to Exponential, which in many ways describes the sample: most (though not all) were planting contemporary churches in the way that is often described at the Exponential Conference. That means the report is influenced and shaped by its sample. So, this report won't be applicable to everyone in every context, but it will be helpful to many.

Although it is not a scientific study, it is a helpful one—filled with advice that every church planter should consider. This information will help you plant, or help you help others plant for the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom. As you see the names quoted in the report, you will see hundreds of years of church planting experience represented. Such wisdom is worth considering.

I planted my first church in Buffalo, New York in 1988. Ready for a blazing flash of the obvious? The world has changed since then, and so has church planting. Michael Rowe would likely classify church planting as a "dirty job."

I did not have much support back then. I was young and confident at a delusional level. I had little to read and no significant experiences or research from which to draw. I was left alone to try desperately to figure it out. God was there and blessed beyond what I knew or deserved. Yet I can't help to wonder how things could have been different... better for the Kingdom's sake... for the men, women, and children in inner-city Buffalo where I planted.

Today, I am amazed at the amount of solid help (coaching, websites, books, networks, training, etc.) a motivated church planter can find. Conferences like Exponential continue to provide environments for God to shape a new breed of planter -- equipped and prepared to make a difference for His Kingdom without losing family and sanity in the process.

Don't get me wrong, the job is still dirty -- very dirty. Leadership, finances, volunteers, systems, vision, evangelism, discipleship, and health of the planter and his family are jugular issues. The church planter graveyard remains ominously over crowded. Yet things are changing for the better.

This report includes some priceless information. No matter your role in the world of church planting, you will want to consider this research. God has the world on His heart-- we will post information and insights from the 7 Top Issues church planters face based on the research. I will unpack the following "top" issues as a result of our research over the days to come:

- Leadership Development and Reproducing Culture
- Financial Self-Sufficiency and Viability
- Launch Team Development and Mobilizing Volunteers
- Systems, Processes and Cultures
- Casting Vision and Avoiding Mission Drift
- Evangelism and Discipleship
- Spiritual, Physical and Mental Health of the Planter and Family

## **Top Issue 1 - Leadership Development and Reproducing Culture**

Planters face incredible pressure to find quality leaders quickly. Yet the limitations of money, critical mass, and spiritual maturity in new churches create an under-stocked leadership fishing pond. Planters can make critical mistakes as a result.

Think about the person who shows up on launch Sunday due to a postcard they just received in the mail. Your hope is that your first attendees will be people open to the first-time consideration of the gospel. And, that means people who are asking questions and starting their spiritual journey-- they are often not ready to be spiritual leaders since they are just considering things of faith.

Just before I wrote this section, we had our first preview service at Grace Church, where I am serving as lead pastor. (I am not leaving my LifeWay Research job; this is a volunteer role working alongside a full-time team.) We saw a couple hundred people come Sunday. Many of them are new, seeking, and sometimes hurting on that first Sunday. Most are not ready for leadership.

Simply put, many church planters find open people but often have few prepared leaders. Leadership development is the most frequently cited challenge of planters according to our research in this survey of church planting leaders and thinkers. Leadership issues included recruiting and developing leaders; implementing teams; creating a reproducible leadership development approach; developing a leader/oversight/elder board; hiring and leading staff; discerning changes required to facilitate growth; healthy decision making; and delegating and empowering volunteers.

So, based on our conversations and observations from those who responded to our qualitative survey of experts and planters (see the last earlier mention and appendix for methodology info), here are six key considerations church planters should consider and/or make in the process of developing new leaders:

1. **Lack of Experience** -- Many planters come from previous roles where more established leadership development and volunteer mobilization processes are in place. As planters, they are now responsible for implementing a new process from scratch, often with little help. They are responsible for creating momentum where none exists versus maintaining existing momentum. They need to be aware of their own lack of experience and the lack of experience on the typical

- team. Our church planting leaders were concerned that they often lacked that awareness.
2. **Feeling the Need for Speed (Volunteers)** -- My friend, Stephen Gray said, "Every plant is a new adventure full of excitement and potential doom... they need to have nerves of steel and thick skin" [Stephen Gray with Trent Short, *Planting Fast Growing Churches*, St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2007 p. 23]. Planting can be lonely and messy. Amid the long hours and hard work, it is easy for planters to conclude that any "warm body" interested in helping is an answer to prayer. Planters tend to put leaders in place prematurely based on availability. More established churches are slower, vetting potential leaders before delegating responsibility.
  3. **No Core Leaders** -- Many planters lack a strong leadership team, leader/staff/elder team, or other structure early in the church's life. Thus, they can lack an accountability team for the first few years. This can result in an increased burden of responsibility, a lack of ongoing encouragement, no one to "watch their back," a lack of advice on key decisions, and a lack of peer fellowship.
  4. **Feeling the Need for Speed (Paid Staff)** -- In the absence of experience and a proven staff selection process, planters tend to hire too quickly (similar to consideration #2). Planters also lack the experience to fully understand the pitfalls of hiring family members and friends. Dealing with bad hires adds further strain and discouragement, creating setbacks in momentum. (Keep in mind that we recognize we are talking about a specific kind of church plant there and this will not apply in all cases.)
  5. **Need for Resources** -- Volunteers and financial resources are critical in the early days. The senior pastor of the average U.S. church (about 85 people) is at staff capacity. If a church waits until they can afford a second staff person, they face the prospect of losing momentum due to a senior pastor working beyond capacity. Then leadership barriers prevent them from growing and hiring more staff. Studies show the average new church has about 40 people the first year, placing a huge financial strain on the planter and delaying additional staff hires. When dealing with the type of church plant we are discussing here, this is a major challenge. (Note: other models, like a house church, would not have the same issues, but that is for another study.)
  6. **Realities of Reproduction** -- Planters have probably heard that if a church does not plant another church in their first three years they likely never will. Many have a vision for being a reproducing church and developing a reproducing culture. But the realities of implementation are discouraging. The same barriers (experience, budget, leadership shortage, spiritual maturity, momentum, etc.) can cause the reproduction vision to move from vision to pipe dream.

Having a realistic (not pessimistic) view of the leadership obstacles should inform planters and their support systems (networks, denominations, churches). Great questions that reflect these realities can inspire better systems, strategies, and preparation to plant healthy, evangelistic, multiplying churches for the glory of God.

The experts we surveyed believe that leadership issues are the greatest challenge faced by church planters. Now, let me say that this is not a scientific quantitative survey, but rather an informal qualitative survey, now combined with our (Todd, me, and the Exponential team) advice and input but flowing from their responses and in the contexts of their plants.

## **Top Issue 2 - Financial Self-Sufficiency and Viability**

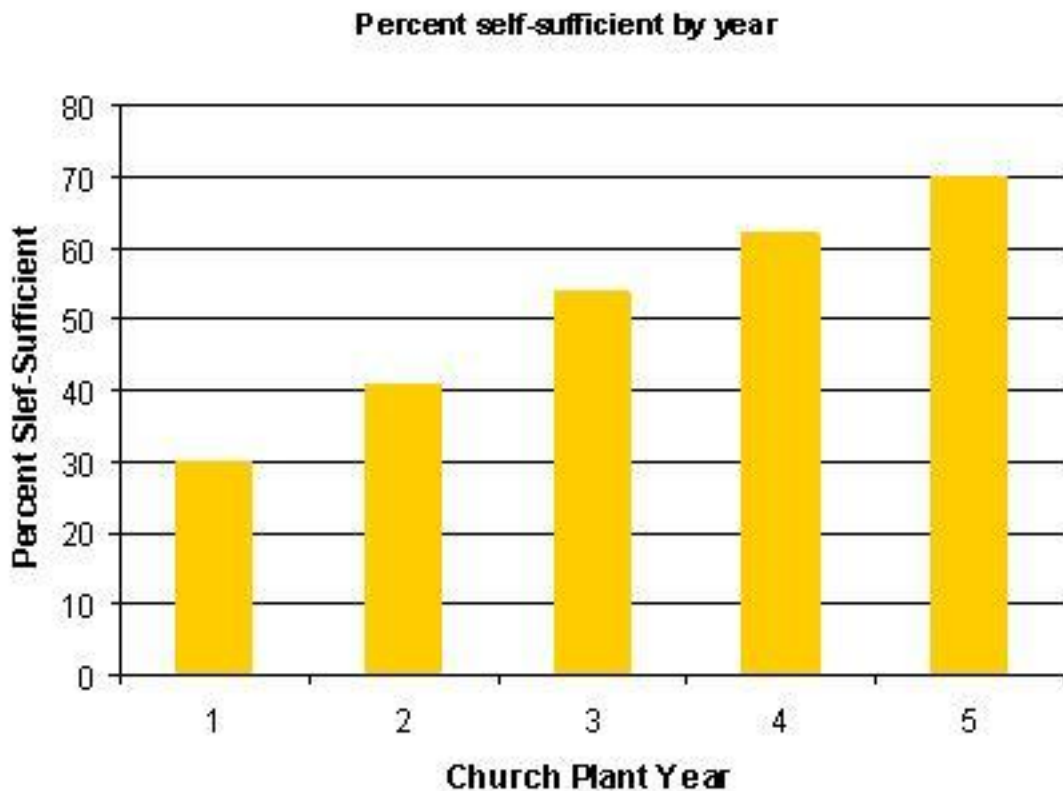
In surveying these leaders, leadership development was the first issue, but finances were a close second in frequency. Again, I'd remind you that this sample points to a certain type of planter and

plant. We appreciate and affirm non-vocational and unpaid approaches. But, in the majority of plants, finances are a challenging and ongoing concern.

In our conversations, the financial issue was a big concern for many planters. We found that money management in the church, and personally for church planters, are ongoing concerns. Internal giving (and the lack thereof) and external fund raising are other concerns. Often these issues are not confronted but avoided, which can lead to all sorts of personal and ecclesial disasters for the planter. And, put on top of all that, for most planters the administrative/financial part of ministry is what they enjoy least.

The financial strains of planting represent one of the most significant challenges for planters. Many planters come from a relatively safe and stable job (including pay) into an entrepreneurial, risk-taking endeavor with an uncertain future. Often planters are thrust into fund-raising for the first time in their lives with little or no training. Many plants take years to become financially self-sufficient, relying on other churches and donors. The journey to financial self-sufficiency often places a heavy burden on the church planting family.

In *Viral Churches*, Warren Bird and I talked about the need for financial self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is almost always assumed as a goal (and rightly so, from a missiological perspective). For centuries, it has been a missiological axiom that churches should start and get to the point where they support themselves (and, among other things, reproduce themselves). But, as this chart shows, it can take awhile.



The chart shows the percentage of church plants that reported they were self-sufficient at each year mark (assuming they were still in existence, with about 2/3 of those started in year one still existing in year four). (You can see *Viral Churches* for all the research info.)

So, what are the big considerations? Here are a few based on the interviews and observations. There are several things to consider, but here are five ways to break this down.

1. **The BiVo Challenge** - The financial realities of planting leads many planters to be bi-vocational. Let me say that I am a big proponent of bi-vocational ministry. But, that is generally not the goal of most church planters (though I think more should consider it, but that is not this project). Employment presents a unique set of challenges for planters and families. For many bi-vocational planters, fulfilling the work for their full-time position becomes the necessary priority-- you need to be a faithful employee. Outreach, ministry, and service, however, are also important and are limited as a result. A fully-funded lead planter is generally assumed to be the goal, and most would say that it is best for the church and the planter when possible. I would say it this way: *if* the plan is to have a full-time pastor, it is best to *start* with a full-time pastor, if you have a plan and resources to get to full-time *status* before running out of full-time *funds*. We have some good statistical evidence that there are some positive outcomes with full-time pastors starting churches using this approach.
2. **Tension Over Talking/Teaching About Giving** - Tom Nebel and Gary Rohrmayer tagged this one as "Church Planting Landmine #7" in their helpful book, *Church Planting Landmines*. Often with good intentions, they overreact to the perceptions of lost people. No doubt, money issues need to be handled differently in church. So with those concerns they avoid talking about money at all (which robs people of the giving experience). Conventional wisdom is that people new to church do not give much during the early years. But you have to wonder if one reason they are so slow is because church planters overreact on this issue.
3. **Limited Budget Experience** - Most planters lack training and experience in budgeting. While many have been involved in preparing a budget for an individual ministry in a previous job (e.g. student ministry, worship ministry, etc), few have been responsible for an entire church budget including the process of turning vision into a financial plan. Some planters become paralyzed and have trouble moving forward while others blindly move forward without a budget. For bi-vocational planters, the budgeting process is often simply allocating salary to their part-time planting work since there are little to no additional funds to be budgeted.
4. **Flow of Funds Trap** - Related to consideration #3, the lack of experience causes another issue. Planters who raise considerable funds for a large launch face a common trap -- misunderstanding the difference between cash flow forecast (i.e., having the right funds at the right time) versus total cash commitments, which are not limited to a specific schedule. The result is that some planters over commit funds at specific times even though they've raised enough total funds.
5. **Personal Financial Impact** - Like many who start new initiatives, planters often drain their savings and retirement accounts to pursue their dreams. Putting start-up costs on personal credit cards is also more common than you might believe (and a really bad idea). Not only does this cause incredible stress for the planter and family, but good strategy can be sabotaged. Planters know that the ultimate answer to the financial need is in the harvest. So, launch day is often hurried with an eye toward generating offering to offset personal investments and ministry needs.

## Top Issue 3 - Team Development and Volunteer Mobilization

The church planting experts and church planters cited building teams and mobilizing volunteers as major challenges.

When starting churches such as those we have discussed, core (launch) team size becomes more important in larger, well-funded starts where more defined ministries are provided at the start. Mobilizing volunteers is an issue regardless of size of the launch team. Whether it is the well-funded, full-time planter or the part-time, bi-vocational planter, both expand their ministries' impact through volunteers.

The research project identified five key considerations in launch team development and mobilizing volunteers.

1. **Healthy Launch Teams are Mission Critical When Seeking to start in the Way We Discussed.** -- In his book, *Planting Fast-Growing Churches* [link], author Stephen Grey identified 21 differences between fast growing churches and struggling ones. Among these was the importance of healthy launch teams. Grey found that 88% of fast-growing churches had a launch team in place before launch compared with only 12% of struggling churches.
2. **Church Planting is a Team Sport** -- When a planter and family move into a community without team members, the risk factors increase. That which is difficult becomes even more so. For "parachute drop plants" where the planter has few existing relationships, team building and volunteer mobilization can be slow and difficult.
3. **Pre-Launch Tasks vs. Relationships** - Most planters are good at relationship building. However, planters report that they spend a disproportionate amount of time in the pre-launch phase focused on administrative details (e.g. facilities, marketing, equipment, legal issues, etc). These administrative issues compete with the time needed to build relationships and teams. The paradox is that strong teams can help with the endless details associated with launching a church. However, unavoidable administrative details limit a planter's time available for relationship and team building.
4. **A Core Group of Believers is not always a Good Thing** -- This may sound like a contradiction to # 2 but hear me out on it. When partner churches provide core teams it can be a win. But a planter must be aware of the challenges. Having a team of volunteers in place before the planter arrives has its pitfalls. Often the team expects the planter to adapt his or her vision to fit the team's desires rather than submitting to the planter. The planter needs to provide visionary leadership, and the partner churches' volunteers must be prepared to operate differently while helping the plant.
5. **New Church Core Teams Experience Fallout** -- A painful reality of the early days of church planting is that core team members leave. Many planters report discouragement resulting from the loss of good friends from their core team. Losing half of the planting launch team within the first years is common. Planting is hard work. Weary volunteers can end up searching out existing, stable churches to call home. The planter should be emotionally and spiritually prepared for relational losses.

Awareness of the issues and intentional strategies are critical for launch team and volunteer mobilization. Planters tend to put too much confidence in their ability to relate to people as the solution to every challenge in church planting. More is needed, specifically a plan and the development of leadership skills.

## Top Issue 4 - Systems, Processes and Cultures

Planters usually begin their planting journey with great intentions. Their strengths tend to be relationships and their passion is often looking toward Sunday mornings. With certain exceptions (large start-up teams, ideal locations, well funded) churches will not maintain the momentum that most church planters are seeking.

Start up is not easy, but it is often when the church has the most receptivity in the community. Openness and response people create a sense of momentum. But, that momentum must be transferred to systems. In new contemporary churches, intentional systems, processes, and cultures are critical to long-term impact in new contemporary churches.

My friend Darrin Patrick explains that in an interview we did a few months back. In regards to church planting, I asked him, "Why do most churches stay small?" Darrin explained:

Largely because most pastors don't know how to build systems, structures, and processes that are not contingent upon them. Most pastors can care for people, but don't build systems of care. Most pastors can develop leaders individually, but lack the skill to implement a process of leadership development. When a pastor can't build systems and structures that support ministry, the only people who are cared for or empowered to lead are those who are "near" the pastor or those very close to the pastor. This limits the size of the church to the size of the pastor.  
(<http://www.edstetzer.com/2010/09/church-planter-with-darrin-pat.html>)

Yet, now it seems that most planters know the importance of creating healthy systems, processes and cultures in the type of churches we have been discussing. In most cases, their focus is to reach lost and other unchurched people and see the church grow numerically and in spiritual maturity. Nowadays, most planters link a growing church with healthy systems, processes, and cultures. The terms, though different, are often used interchangeably.

In this study, the most commonly cited areas of importance for these systems include reproducing leaders; generosity; externally focused, missional living; small groups; worship planning; strategic planning; and evangelism.

Rather than focus on those systems, let's look at five key considerations when addressing the issues of systems and processes.

- 1. God's Part and Our Part** -- Healthy systems, processes and cultures enable and facilitate growth, but don't cause it. The Apostle Paul explained that we cooperate with God in the

planting and watering of the seeds, but that it's God who makes the seeds grow. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6 HCSB). Establishing healthy processes, systems and cultures is part of that cooperation.

2. **A Fix-It Mentality** -- Most planters tend to ask good questions regarding systems and processes including, "How do we reach more people?" or "How do we keep moving forward?" The answer may include the creation or revising of a system or process. But a narrow focus can lead planters down the wrong path when they conclude, "If we just fix [fill in blank], then we will grow." Issues are often much deeper.
3. **Assessing Health** -- Systems, processes and cultures will emerge from the pre-launch phase. The only question is whether they are healthy or unhealthy. Will they create leverage for growth and momentum, or will they create barriers and obstacles, adding to a planter's stress?
4. **Pre-Launch Behaviors** -- The pre-natal phase in a mother's womb is vital to an infant's health after birth. The things a mother does and does not do during this time have lasting impacts. Likewise, the things a planter does and does not do during pre-launch phase have lasting impact for years to come. Planters either intentionally create leverage through the establishment of healthy systems, processes and cultures, or they risk creating barriers and obstacles.
5. **Urgency and Accountability** -- When building a new house, most localities require an occupancy permit before a family can move in. A permit guarantees that the basic systems (i.e. water, sewer, electrical, lighting, etc.) are healthy and functioning. There is no equivalent standard or requirement in new churches. As a result, many new churches are birthed with the equivalent of no water, no electrical and no lights. Basic systems might include disciple making, evangelism, leadership development, and volunteer mobilization. The "Tyranny of the Now" and the lack of accountability structures impacts a planter's ability to create healthy processes and systems in three ways:
  - **Capacity** -- Everything tends to fall on the planter's shoulders. Although the planter would like to slow down and "do it right," a planter often gets caught in the urgent accepting, living with unhealthy systems. Many planters recognize the dysfunctional cycle, but get stuck in it, further adding to the stress and discouragement.
  - **Choices** -- Leaders make daily choices to focus on production or production capacity (in the work or on the work). Sometimes it seems that production never stops, easily consuming all of the planter's time. Sunday to Sunday pressure alone can be overwhelming. Making wise choices is one of the keys to managing the roles. Building healthy systems, processes and cultures is a function of good strategic planning around available capacity.
  - **Time** -- Time is one of a planter's most precious resources. Starting a new church involves hundreds of tasks. Most of these tasks do not involve connecting with lost people or building healthy system. That can be a stretch for a lot of planters and a great source of stress.

Systems, processes, and culture are essential. Sustainability and fruit are almost always advanced when a planter understands that importance.

## **Top Issue 5 - Casting Vision and Avoiding Mission Drift**

One recurring theme was around the church plant losing sight of their direction. Respondents



expressed vision casting and avoiding mission drift in several different ways. Eliminating pressure from "churched" people; navigating distractions from "good ideas"; making decisions consistent with mission; defining priorities for growth; and balancing evangelism and discipleship (Issue #6) were challenges leaders confronted to avoid mission drift.

Here are four key considerations:

1. **Clarity** -- The concept of "drift" implies leaving a clearly defined and understood standard. Planters should not assume that because their expectations are clear and compelling in their minds that they are clearly understood by the rest of the team.
2. **Core Values** -- Most planters have a strong sense of mission and vision that drives them. These same planters often have less clarity about their core values that shape what they do and how they do it (the compass that guides their north direction). Will Mancini described the task of what he called "High Definition Leadership" as "constantly bringing the most important things to light." [Will Mancini, *Church Unique: How Missional Leaders Cast Vision, Capture Culture, and Create Movement*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008, p. 52]
3. **Mission, Vision, and Values** -- The pre and post-launch phases are vital to establishing core values that create a strong foundation. Although not explicitly articulated in their responses, it appears planters tend to confuse or interchange what most people refer to as the concepts of vision (dream of preferred future state), mission (corresponding activity) and values (non-negotiable principles). The result is a lack of personal clarity internally before the external challenges that cause mission drift begin.
4. **Ministry Philosophy** -- Mission, vision, values and leadership culture form the foundational elements of a plant's philosophy of ministry. Ideally, a planter's ministry philosophy is clearly defined before starting. However, for many planters, it is a work in progress. As a consequence, the philosophy of ministry can be more influenced by negative shaping factors such as scarcity culture, "church people" on the team, and peer comparisons. In *Planting Missional Churches*, I call this danger "vision hijacking."
5. **Non-Negotiables** -- Most planters do not have the capacity, financial resources or team needed to develop a comprehensive strategy. Instead they narrow their focus to three to five "table banging" priorities they will be "mean" about in the early days of the church. The limited number of priorities becomes the filter for saying "yes and no" to ministry initiatives and is vital for avoiding drift.

Although I've not been prescriptive in this report, I do recommend taking a look at Will Mancini's free Clarity Quiz (<http://www.churchunique.com/Websites/churchunique/Images/clarity%20quiz.pdf>) to help you continue to assess your work. Accountability through networking is vital to address every issue planters face.

## Top Issue 6 - Evangelism and Discipleship

I've spent years in the church planting world and continue to find myself benefiting from study and reflection on how people plant churches. As I have said before, this research is based on a certain kind of church planting and is not applicable in all cases. But, based on our analysis over the years, it will be applicable to many.

You can do a lot of things wrong and God can still bless your new church. All of us who have planted "successfully" will confess at times that God blessed in spite of our leadership and strategies, not because of it. But, there are issues that I had to navigate and every church planter will when

planting in the most common ways. Eventually resolving those on some level was mission-critical.

I believe that the 7 Top Issues Planters Face can be invaluable to you as a planter. Take the list seriously. Discuss it with your leadership team. Develop strategies and action plans. Addressing these issues will not guarantee success but can serve as predictors for progress of your planting efforts. Addressing them strategically will put your new church in the best position to "succeed" for the cause of Christ.

Evangelism and discipleship does not automatically happen in a new church. That is unfortunate for some aspiring planters. All of us struggle with our view of lostness no matter how long we have been in the faith. Too many planters think that the reason lost people have not come to Christ is because they have not found the right church yet. Thus, a mythological equation is formed: lost culture + relevant church plant service = instant harvest.

So, they sincerely set out with a new formula that will fill the local middle school gymnasium or movie theater with lost people. They have a vision of lost people streaming *en masse* through the doors on launch Sunday shouting, "I found it!" No wonder that planter will spend the majority of the week getting the production ready. The band, slides, movie clips, coffee and donuts, are all a part of an environment that helps people feel at home. But at the end of the day, the demanding grind of an attractive church can potentially take away from the pursuit of those far from God.

Simply put, when you have an attractive plant it can end up solely with an attractional strategy. The end result will be that you "sell" a new and better church (product) to consumers of religious goods and services.

It is possible (and even common) to spend too much energy focused on only one aspect of the church plant: the Sunday morning crowds. There are many solutions, including opening up new lanes to all kinds of church planting, something Warren Bird and I discuss in *Viral Churches*.

One solution is to personally invest significant time in relationships with lost people and new believers. The sermons may need to be simpler with less "special effects." The band may need less programmatic direction and more relational investment with you. At the end of the day, the core team and lead planter must personally invest heavily in the harvest. Not only is that great for the moment (for those lost people, etc.) but it creates the culture for the future of every person who connects with your church. The long term future of the new church is in the harvest, not a Disneyfied Sunday morning experience.

Most planters I know start new churches to reach lost people and grow disciples. Planters we talked to highlighted five challenges to evangelism and discipleship:

- (1) Multiple time demands detracted from time needed for evangelism and discipleship.
- (2) Discerning how to practice faith (James 1:27) in a way that represents all God is doing in world not limited to direct evangelism only. Examples include hunger relief, assistance and adoption efforts.

- (3) Living incarnationally and engaging in today's culture.
- (4) Implementing a deliberate evangelistic and disciple-making strategy.
- (5) Making small groups work.

Here are two observations that will help you work through these challenges to evangelism and discipleship:

**1. Distracted by the Planting Process** - The paradox for the planter is that what drives to plant -- a heart to reach lost people -- is often hindered by planting the church. Challenges cited by planters in this area appear connected to the first five issues in this report. Specifically developing leaders, mobilizing volunteers, building teams, financial resources, and building healthy systems all divert a planter's focus to things other than evangelism and discipleship.

They are a part of making disciples but can be programs executed with a focus on process rather than on people.

The desire to engage people incarnationally and build relationships is met with the reality of the challenges that tug on the planter's time, energy and focus. Yet as previously mentioned, these values must be lived out. Difficult decisions need to be made about what will really be important. It is essential to keep the unchurched before you and your team. Keep the issue on the table for everyone in your core team -- make yourself accountable to them as well as making them accountable to you.

**2. The Internal Scorecard** - A nagging sense of falling short of the dream in the area of evangelism and discipleship can significantly contribute to a planter's discouragement. The planter's tolerance level for the pressures and disappointments of planting is higher when lives are being changed.

In some ways, it's like parenting. When our kids respond by grace and through faith to Jesus and live for Him, it's easier to deal with disappointment over less important areas of their lives. Evangelism and discipleship are core values for most planters and should bias the internal scorecard more than many other factors.

Church planter networks that value reaching people provide great environments to help. The tension planters feel to get it all done and invest in lost people is common (thus Top 7 material). The great news is that in every region, somewhere there is a planter being used by God to get it done. Time with someone like that will give you insight on how to stay focused and work toward gospel impact.

## **Top Issue 7 - Spiritual, Physical and Mental Health of the Planter and Family**

The previous six key issues create a heavy burden for planters and their families. Most planters indicate that planting is one of the hardest things they've ever done. Those who survive are quick to highlight how discouraging and lonely it can be. But they are also quick to point out how rewarding it is. In some ways, it is the best of times and in others it is the worst of times.

Planters who responded often stated that they faced struggles in the areas of personal health: (1) the battle to overcome pride, self-reliance, drivenness and an uncoachable attitude; (2) loneliness and isolation; (3) mistrust; (4) lack of rest; and (5) maintaining joy. Although most planters understand the importance of making personal development and family nurturing top priorities, these things often get lost in a planter's busyness.

The result is a fragile foundation for dealing with the discouragement and loneliness of planting. Eventually, unresolved family of origin issues or weaknesses in the marriage will surface, often in the midst of the planter's other struggles. Don't be fooled: if you have a buried or current family crisis, church planting demands that you deal with it.

In my own life, I have found that the times we planted turned cracks in our marriage into fissures. God used it to force us to grow up and grow together. Also, at times, I had to get away just to refocus on the things of God. In church planting, it's easy to get so focused on the work of the Lord that you lose focus on the Lord of the work.

Understanding the first 6 of the 7 Top Issues provides a good picture of the environment where planters pursue their calling. The environment will likely include times of discouragement and loneliness. Their faith is challenged. God often uses the challenges for good to grow the planter and his family or Satan can use to bring them down.

The following is a possible sketch of what the church planting journey may look like:

- Planter is called and a dream emerges. Excitement builds and plans formulate.
- Fulfillment and pursuit of the dream requires an expanding team of people to join the planter in the journey. Team members are harder to recruit than anticipated, and the team formulates much slower than intended. Often, the new church births with a smaller team than planned. Additionally, leading the team of "messy" people takes more time and energy than expected.
- A smaller team means more responsibilities for the planter and spouse. The burden can be intense, especially when a planter discovers that not everyone has as high a commitment as the planter does.
- Financial shortfalls limit ministry opportunities. The average planter wakes up wondering if funds will be available for salaries and expenses. At the same time, guilt emerges that the ministry appears "stuck" and not growing. Fundraising can take significant time, competing with the other ministry demands vital to growth.
- The "tyranny of the urgent" makes it difficult to invest measurable time in capacity building. As a result, systems, processes and cultures tend to reactively define themselves rather than the planter proactively shaping them. The result is inefficiency and ineffectiveness built on

- unhealthy processes. Weak processes require more hours to accomplish the same results.
- A crisis of belief emerges. The planter's dream seems so distant from reality. Comparison with other leaders, discouragement and loneliness set in. Things seem to be shaped more by circumstances and other people more than by the planter's dream.
  - Adding more fuel to the fire, the planter continually questions the new church's effectiveness at reaching lost people (versus transfer memberships) and senses the discipleship process isn't really resulting in transformed lives.
  - Planters typically have a big vision when they are called to plant. The euphoria often gets muted after launch as the planter faces numerous challenges. The "lack of" (scarcity environment) is discouraging and can feel like the "death of a dream," especially when no relief appears in sight. The disconnect between the planter's dream and the current reality further amplifies the discouragement.
  - Spiritual warfare kicks into full swing, including comparisons with other success planters. Many planters lack fellowship with other peers and coaching. The planter has no one with whom to share burdens. In many cases, planters avoid sharing with their spouse in an attempt to protect them. However, the spouse is often the first to sense something is wrong.

Many families find themselves asking, "Should we quit or should we persevere?" Critical support environments for planters and their families are key. A fully engaged partner church that cares for the entire family unit is essential. Babysitters, Christmas bonuses, and financial sponsorship for marriage enrichment are a few ways to create a foundation for health. Accountability from partners is also essential. Coaching and mentoring for the planter and family is also a plus.

Every planter, spouse, and even partner church pastor should read *Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion* by Wayne Cordeiro. The book gives the greatest gift a planter needs-- permission to be human.

## Conclusions

As I have mentioned several times, this research is not applicable to every situation, but it is probably applicable to most. The sample and the experts we queried were planting in a certain way and the answers (and issues) flow from that.

So, what can we learn from it?

I make no promises, but the likelihood of planting a healthy, evangelistic, multiplying new church will be much greater if you take steps to cement action and energy toward these 7 issues discussed in this report.

If you are a planter, let me encourage you to think long-term. Don't make the mistake of focusing on these areas for a few months and then dropping them. Most of the issues have no quick fix-solution and will have impact on your influence as long as you are planting.

If you are planting a church you need a coach (yes, maybe even a paid one). The coach (or mentor) can help planters focus on goals and actions steps related to all 7 issues. I know that may overwhelm you, but you are investing in viability. How much will it cost you personally if the church plant closes? We all know that the cost goes far beyond dollars and cents for all involved.

Take a close look at the following highlights from this report. Several things come to mind as I look through the report.

- The challenges of planting commonly result in discouragement and loneliness. The importance of the right point leader (called and wired) is critical in light of the obstacles and challenges of church planting.
- The church planter and family are vulnerable to discouragement and loneliness that comes as a result of spiritual attacks. A solid foundation of faith in God, a surrendered life, and a healthy marriage are critical issues for the lead church planter.
- A rigorous assessment process (sometimes including assistance from a trained clinical psychologist) is important. Key pillars of most organizations' support systems such as assessment, training and coaching are vital.
- Spousal support systems should be added to church planting systems in the future. Most planting organizations focus on pre-launch and launch phases of church planting. Significant opportunities exist for serving planters, their families, and their teams in the post-launch phase.
- Peer-to-peer relationships and church planter networks are vital to meeting the planter's needs of support, encouragement and accountability.
- In this type of plant, getting systems in place is key before going public. Planters should have the following milestones in place before launch: (1) clarity of ministry philosophy (vision, mission, values, leadership culture); (2) solid team of leaders committed to the cause; (3) fundraising support for the planter's family in place; (4) non-negotiable priorities that shape the initial ministries of the church and create a filter for saying "yes" and "no"; and (5) solid core processes and systems in key areas such as discipleship, evangelism, leadership development, and planning.
- Church planting mentors and coaches who speak into the planter's life on a regular basis are important.
- A key issue is discerning the painfully difficult decision between quitting or persevering with the plant during critical times. The "Top 7 Issues Planters Face" research provides a credible template to build systems and processes that address all the issues, thus creating more effective church planting environments.
- Accountability through networking is vital to address every issue planters face. Sadly too many planters try to make it alone reading books and websites.

## National Leaders Participating in the Exponential Survey

- Brett Andrews, Veteran church planter and Senior Pastor, New Life Christian Church, Centreville, Va.
- Mark Batterson, Veteran church planter and Senior Pastor, National Community Church, Washington, D.C.
- Marc Bigelow, President, Stadia New Church Strategies
- Brian Bloye, Founder, Westridge School of Church Planting and Launch Network
- Nick Boring, Director, Vision 360 North American Church Planting
- Phil Claycomb, Founder, Nexus Church Planting
- Artie Davis, Founder, Comb Network and Director, Sticks Conference
- Dave Ferguson, Founder, New Thing Network
- Jon Ferguson, Co-Founder, New Thing Network
- Brent Foulke, Director, Church Planting Assessment Center and Stadia New Church Strategies
- Doug Foltz, Director, Project Management for Stadia New Church Strategies
- Pat Furgerson, Director, Passion for Planting
- Stan Granberg, Director, Kairos Church Planting
- Bob Harrington, Director, Church Coaching Solutions
- Tom Herrick, Director, Titus Institute
- Billy Hornsby, Director, Association of Related Churches (ARC)
- George Johnson, Executive Director, Christian Evangelistic Association
- Ron Johnson, Director, Accelerate Alliance
- Debbie Jones, Director, Bloom!
- Tom Jones, Executive Director, Stadia New Church Strategies
- George Klippenes, Director of Church Planting, Evangelical Free Church of America
- Mac Lake, Director, Launch Network
- Shawn Lovejoy, Co-Founder, ChurchPlanters.com
- Will Mancini, Founder, Auxano
- Eric Metcalf, Director, New Thing Network
- Tom Nebel, Director of Church Planting, Converge Worldwide
- Larry Osborne, veteran planter and Senior Pastor, North Coast Church, Vista, California
- Darrin Patrick, President, Acts 29
- Steve Pike, Director of Church Planting for Church Multiplication Network (Assemblies of God Church Planting)
- David Putman, Co-Founder, ChurchPlanters.com
- Mark Reynolds, Redeemer Church Planting Center and City to City Alliance
- Gary Rohrmayer, President, Converge MidAmerica
- Jim Sheppard, Founder, Generis
- Ed Stetzer, Veteran church planter, author, Founder, NewChurches.com, President, LifeWay Research
- Brent Storms, Executive Director, Orchard Group
- Greg Surratt, Veteran church planter and Board Member, Association of Related Churches
- Ron Sylvia, Director, Next Church Planting
- Scott Thomas, Director, Acts 29
- Gailyn Van Rheenen, Founder, Mission Alive
- Craig Whitney, President, Emerging Leadership Initiative
- Paul Williams, Chairman, Orchard Group
- Todd Wilson, Director, Exponential

- John Worcester, Veteran church planter and Director, San Diego Church Planting Alliance



## Authors

**Ed Stetzer** serves as the president of LifeWay Research and LifeWay's missiologist in residence. He has planted several churches and transitioned declining churches. He has trained pastors and church planters on five continents, holds two masters degrees and two doctorates, and has written dozens of articles and books. He serves on the faculty of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago and Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. His church planting books include *Planting Missional Churches* (B&H, 2006) and *Viral Churches* (2010, Jossey-Bass, with Warren Bird). He is currently lead pastor of Grace Church, a new church planted in 2011.

**Todd Wilson** is on staff as the church planting director at New Life Christian Church in Centreville, Virginia. New Life has planted more than 75 churches through active involvement in a number of national support ministries for church planters, including Passion for Planting, Church Marketing Solutions and PlanterApp.com. Wilson has also provided leadership for the startup of several multi-site campuses of New Life. Wilson is an entrepreneur at heart and loves dreaming about and starting new things to advance the Kingdom. He serves as the director of Exponential, a non-profit organization that seeks to serve the church planting community as a national advocate. Exponential seeks to attract and inspire Kingdom-minded leaders to engage their time, talent and treasure in catalyzing a movement of healthy, high-impact faith communities. Exponential oversees the Exponential Conference, the world's largest gathering of church planters, and the Exponential Book Series in partnership with Zondervan and Leadership Network. See [Exponential.org](http://Exponential.org) for more information.

*Exponential is a non-profit organization that seeks to serve the church planting community. Exponential seeks to attract and inspire Kingdom-minded leaders to engage their time, talent and treasure in catalyzing a movement of healthy, high-impact faith communities. Exponential oversees the world's largest gathering of church planting leaders each year at the Exponential Conference. This survey was conducted to help provide programming that best fits the needs of church planting leaders who attend the conference. If you are a planter, or know other planters, Exponential 2011 is designed with more than 90 national speakers and 200-plus workshops addressing top church planting issues. For more information, go to [ExponentialConference.com](http://ExponentialConference.com).*