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The Forgotten Movement: Church Planting Trends and Lessons (Part 1 of 2)

S. Joseph Kidder

Andrews University, kiddersj@andrews.edu

Dustin Serns

Andrews University

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S. Joseph Kidder, DMin, is professor of Christian Ministry and Discipleship, Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.

Dustin Serns, MDiv, is a missionary volunteer for SALT Ministries in Siem Reap, Cambodia.



The forgotten movement: Church planting trends and lessons (Part 1 of 2)

**“Upon all who believe, God has placed the burden of raising up churches.”
—Ellen G. White**

At the inception of the Advent movement, believers united to advance the cause of the gospel by entering new territory and starting new congregations. The Seventh-day Adventist Church experienced explosive growth, launching a movement that spread and continues to advance across the world. Today, 150 years later, the time has come to ask, How are we doing with raising up new congregations to finish the harvest in North America?

To answer this question, we decided to look at statistics of the last century about church planting. We hope that the findings from this study will benefit the global church. Some divisions are growing rapidly; others are not.² The North American population has multiplied, but has the church also multiplied to reach the rapidly growing populace?

Figure 1 presents our analysis of the population growth in the United States, Canada, and Bermuda³ and the net growth of Seventh-day Adventist Churches in the North American Division (NAD)⁴ in the last 100 years.⁵

Figure 1 shows that in 1913 there were 2,006 churches for 105 million

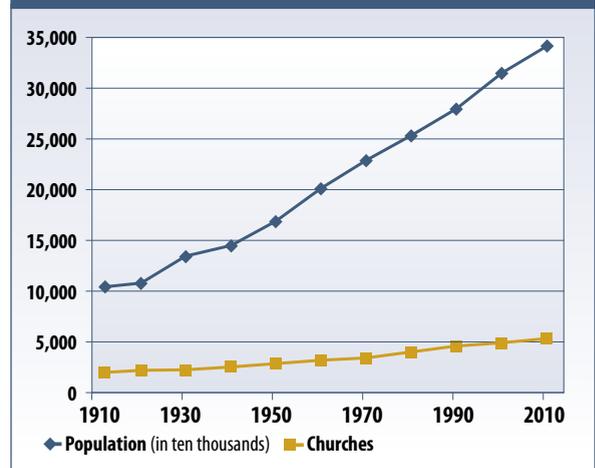
people, but in 2011 we have 5,332 churches for 342 million people. While each church needed to influence about 52,000 people in 1913, in 2011 each church needed to influence 64,000 people.

The data confronts the Church in North America with a staggering reality: *we are not planting churches rapidly enough to keep up with population growth.*

Established churches alone will never be able to accommodate the needs of the fast-growing population, especially in areas without an Adventist presence.

Reaching the population is possible. In the last century, the average growth in the number of churches in North America has been 1.03 percent per year. This number is in harmony with church growth expert Lyle Schaller’s 1 percent rule. According to this rule, each year, any denomination should plant new congregations at the rate of 1 percent of their existing total for “maintenance,” to avoid decline. If a denomination

FIGURE 1: Growth of population vs. net growth of churches in the NAD



wants to grow substantially, it must plant 2 to 3 percent per year.⁶

Figure 2 portrays what happens if approximately one in four churches plant a daughter church each decade. To illustrate this in the Adventist context over the last century, we projected a 2.5 percent growth rate of the number of churches per year (25 percent per decade).⁷

Figure 2 shows that if we had adopted a 2.5 percent rule, in 2011 we would have had more than three times as many churches (18,682) and dropped the ratio to one church per 18,000 people.

Through planting more churches, Seventh-day Adventists can improve the ratio of churches per population. Ratios are important because they reflect the number of people a church needs to influence in order to cooperate with God to fulfill the Great Commission. In other words, ratios identify the size of the mission field of each church. Dan Serns, who has planted at least one church in every district he has pastored (Texas, Kansas, and Washington) and now pastors the Richardson Seventh-day Adventist Church in Texas, shared his vision: “I believe we need a vibrant Seventh-day Adventist congregation for every ten thousand people.”⁸ This is in harmony with what Kevin Ezell discovered in his research on the Southern Baptist denomination: the church optimally thrives and grows when the ratio of churches to population drops below 10,000.⁹ Serns shared that new congregations are essential to expand the influence of the church for the kingdom of God.

Research of the ratios of Adventist churches per population for each decade revealed that while in some decades the church succeeded in lowering the ratio; the trend is falling behind.

A careful examination of the data in figure 3 reveals the following:

1. The best ratio was one church per 48,500 people in 1921.
2. The worst ratio was one church per 67,000 people in 1971.
3. There were four decades in which the ratio improved: 1910s, 1930s, 1970s, and 1980s.
4. The worst ratio in history (1971) was counteracted by a massive church planting movement in the 1970s that continued into the 1980s.
5. The current ratio (as of 2011)¹⁰ is one church per 64,000 people.
6. Today, the ratio is much closer to its worst in history than to its best.

Just as the Advent movement made great strides in church planting in the 1970s¹¹ to overcome the worst ratio in history, we need a massive church planting movement today. Established churches must be activated to plant

churches that will, in turn, plant new churches. “As churches are established, it should be set before them that it is even from among them that men must be taken to carry the truth to others and raise new churches.”¹² This paradigm shift must happen in the church on all levels. We believe that any pastor, administrator, member, conference, and church can be part of the solution.

Figure 4 shows that if the Seventh-day Adventist Church had planted at the rate of 2.5 percent per year, the number of people each congregation would need to influence would be about 18,000. This number would begin to approach a far more manageable ratio for fulfilling the Great Commission in North America. Instead, the ratio today is 64,000 people for each church.

Interpreting the data

For the past century, the NAD has grown an average of 35 churches per year. Taking into account the 59 conferences in the NAD, that is an average of about 6 churches per decade per conference. That means each conference has grown by about half a church (0.6) per year. This rate could be tripled if one additional pastor in each conference planted a church this next year.

The data reveals that Seventh-day Adventist church planting in North America is an exception rather than an expectation. In the last decade, there was a net increase of 399 churches. If we assumed that each came from

a distinct mother church, then this increase would suggest that only eight percent of churches in the NAD planted a church. That means 92 percent of churches in NAD have not planted within the last ten years. The potential for growth is almost unlimited! If even an additional 8 percent planted churches this decade, the year 2021 would see nearly 800 new Adventist congregations faithfully sharing Jesus with thousands who desperately need Him. The harvest in North America desperately calls for every Adventist to be involved in a massive church planting movement.

In order to reach Schaller’s 2.5 percent growth rate in churches for the next decade in North America, we need to experience a net growth of 1,333 churches. That is an average of 133.3 churches per year. Divided between

FIGURE 2: Projected net growth of churches at 2.5 percent growth per year

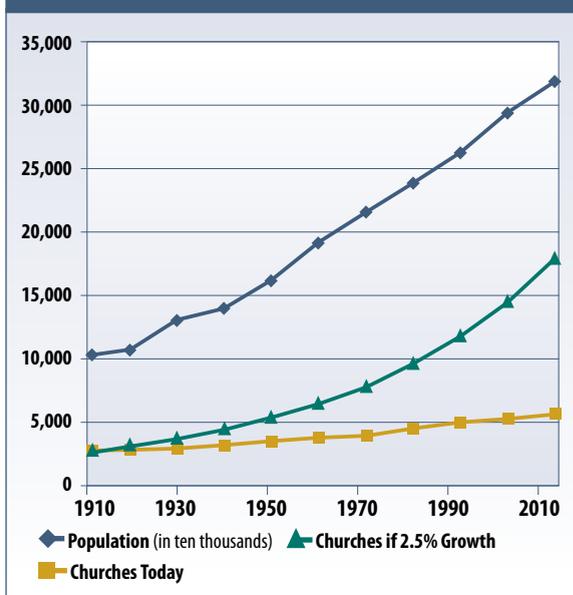


FIGURE 3: Ratios of one Seventh-day Adventist Church per population

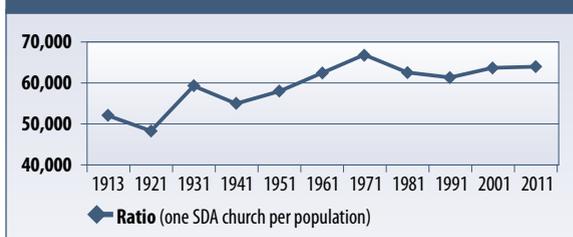
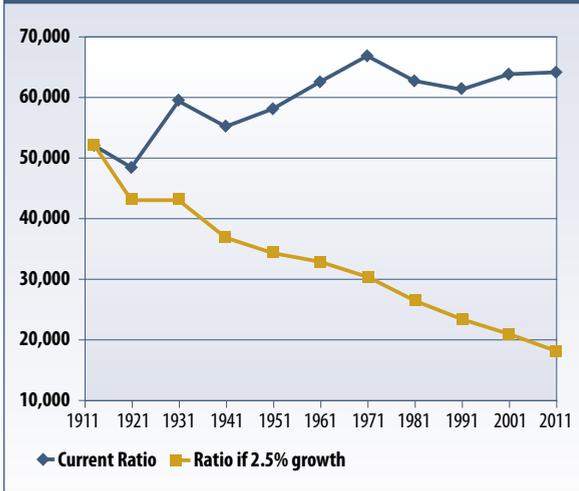


FIGURE 4: Ratios of SDA Churches per population as projected with 2.5 percent net growth per year



59 conferences, that is an average of 2.25 churches per conference per year. It will require significant intentionality to move from 0.60 to 2.25 churches per conference per year. However, this mark is very achievable considering the top four conferences in church planting in the last decade averaged 5.15 churches and companies per year (see table 1). A massive church planting movement in North America is definitely within reach.

What could a church planting movement look like?

To gain a realistic understanding of what a massive Adventist church planting movement might look like, we conducted research to see where successful church planting is taking place in North America. To limit our research sample, we identified and analyzed the top conferences in church planting in the last ten years.¹³ Only 4 out of 59 conferences showed a net increase of at least 45 churches and companies during that time.¹⁴

Renew or plant?

In our research, we discovered one of the greatest roadblocks to church planting is the need for renewal in the vast number of plateauing and declining Adventist churches in North America. Experts make the case that a lack of church planting is one of the major causes

of decline.¹⁵ Ellen White mentioned that many churches and members who are dying spiritually would experience renewal by spreading out to reach new areas.¹⁶ Renewal comes by focusing on the mission, developing disciples, and taking great steps out in faith. As the spirituality of the church members increases, they naturally become more aware of the harvest around them and seek training (discipleship) and structure (ministry and church planting) in order to reach them.¹⁷

Our study revealed that one of the best ways to experience church renewal is through planting another church. We believe that the Holy Spirit can lead any Adventist church to plant another within ten years, and many may be ready much sooner.

In the interviews we conducted, we could not find any mother church that suffered as a result of planting a church to reach the harvest. Contrarily, many examples showed that they were renewed and came away with more people and resources than ever before. Five years ago, the Hollywood Spanish Seventh-day Adventist Church¹⁸ in Florida was meeting in a small rented facility and experiencing decline. They were “stuck in the same” every Sabbath until they experienced a reawakening to the needs around them. The leadership placed a new emphasis on mission and discipleship through preaching, education, and

continually bringing the importance of reaching the community before the people. The church shifted their focus from inward to outward and decided as a church body that they were going to begin planting new congregations.

“As soon as they put their heart into mission, they started to grow and multiply,” shared Allan Machado, Hispanic coordinator for the Florida Conference.¹⁹ An Adventist businessman saw God at work and bought them a new five-million-dollar church building. After moving into the building, they struggled financially to maintain it. They decided to trust God and continue planting new churches anyway. After five years, they have planted four churches and have worship services in English and Spanish. Their membership today is close to 300, while the combined membership of all five churches is about 1,000. Hollywood Spanish Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of many churches we studied that experienced renewal as they stepped out in faith through church planting.

The new movement

Beginning an Adventist Church planting movement in North America requires participation on all levels. Everyone has a role to play. “Upon all who believe, God has placed the burden of raising up churches.”²⁰

Our research of the top four conferences in church planting revealed that a variety of models were successfully implemented. Gerson Santos, vice president for the Greater New York Conference, noted, “The city is so diverse, that I don’t think we can have just one model.” The following models used by the top four conferences in the last decade illustrate the role that every

TABLE 1: Top four conferences in church planting, 2001–2011

Conference	Churches	Companies	Total
Texas	31	26	57
Georgia Cumberland	22	31	53
Greater New York	40	8	48
Florida	13	35	48

level of the church can play in a massive church planting movement:

Member initiated models:

1. Members start small groups at their houses that meet during the week and witness in their community. As the groups grow and multiply, one to four groups may combine and begin meeting Sabbath mornings for worship.
2. A Seventh-day Adventist group not connected to any church works with the conference and/or a mother church to organize as a company.

Mother church initiated models:

1. One mother church elects a leader and core group to work toward planting a daughter church.
2. Two or more churches work together to plant a daughter church.
3. A mother church “plants” by starting a new worship service (either at the same facility or a new location) in order to reach a new demographic.
4. A Sabbath School class grows and becomes a new church plant.
5. A church speaking one language plants a church that speaks another: Spanish planting English, English planting Portuguese, etc.
6. A church with elderly population hosts or plants a youth or children’s church.

Conference initiated models:

1. The conference focuses on an area where there is little or no Adventist presence and sponsors a church planter to begin working there.
2. The conference identifies a lay-pastor and works with them to establish a new church.
3. The conference creates a Center of Influence to reach a city. For example, the Greater New York Conference converted an Adventist Book Center downtown into a juice bar café where people meet to have a Bible study and fellowship at lunchtime as well as worship services on Sabbath.

These are a few of many examples of how every level of the church can

get involved in a church planting movement. The common thread throughout all the conferences and churches we studied is that new church plants should be raised up to answer God’s mission. Successful church plants came out of a mission-driven consciousness, not out of conflict or dissension. All four conferences were very intentional, having allocated conference personnel and resources and developed strategic plans for church planting.

We discovered a correlation between church planting and membership growth. The top four conferences in church planting from 2001 to 2011 were above the NAD average (1.8 percent per year) in membership growth (Texas: 4.2 percent, Georgia-Cumberland: 2.8 percent, Greater New York: 2.4 percent, Florida: 2 percent). The significant numbers of baptisms and professions of faith per year in the top four conferences are evidence of the connection between church planting and evangelism (Texas: 2,279; Georgia-Cumberland: 1,130; Greater New York: 1,369; Florida: 2,365). All four conferences saw church planting as an invaluable key for reaching the harvest.

Reoccurring themes and lessons we learned

While the second part of this article will give more specific examples, we noticed some major recurring themes in our interviews and research. Here are some of the lessons we learned:

First, *anything you do is better than nothing*. Even talking about it or starting a new small group is a step forward in church planting. Once the concept has gained some momentum, you can work to identify and mentor the potential leaders.

Second, *church planting is a result of making disciples*. As people grow in their passion for God, they need new opportunities to use their energy and abilities in witness and service. A church plant provides abundant opportunities for involvement in ministry.

Third, *lay-led planting was more common, effective, and affordable*. The greatest investment you can make

toward church planting is in the spirituality and leadership development of a few key people.

Fourth, *church planting creates synergy for both mother and daughter churches*. Focusing on the mission and building new leaders brings renewal for the mother and equips the daughter. The churches that plant receive rich blessings and experience growth in number, health, and finances.

Fifth, *conferences that implement an intentional church planting strategy experience significant growth*. Effective strategies include appointing a church planting coordinator for the conference, recruiting and training lay leaders, coaching church planters, utilizing demographics studies, and allocating funds for special church planting projects.

Conclusion

The Seventh-day Adventist Church sprang up as a movement with the goal of fulfilling the Great Commission by rapidly entering new territory and raising new congregations. However, an evaluation of church planting over the last 100 years suggests that the church planting movement in North America has been largely forgotten. The challenge to reach the rapidly growing population in North America is great, but through the power of the Holy Spirit and intentionality among all levels of the church, the challenge is within reach. Planting new churches is essential for the growth and vitality of the Adventist church in all parts of the world. Every new church is a visible monument to God’s heart for humanity and able to reach distinct people groups and communities with the everlasting gospel. The vision for a massive church planting movement is daunting, but even a small step in that direction can be multiplied by the power of the Holy Spirit.²¹

(Part 2 will appear in the December 2014 issue). 

1 Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1932), 315.

2 For example, from 2001 to 2011 the Southern Asia Division grew by 8.1 percent in churches and companies per year, and the

- South American Division grew by 4.9 percent per year. During that time period, the General Conference as a whole grew by 3 percent in churches and companies per year (Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, accessed January 20, 2014, www.adventiststatistics.org).
- 3 Population estimates taken from "Population Estimates: Current Estimates Data," United States Census Bureau, accessed September 20, 2013, www.census.gov/popest/data/index.html; "NPG Interactive U.S. Population Map," Negative Population Growth, accessed September 20, 2013, www.npg.org/facts/us_historical_pops.htm; Statistics Canada, accessed September 20, 2013, www.statcan.gc.ca/start-debut-eng.html; "Population of Canada," *Wikipedia*, accessed October 10, 2013, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_of_Canada_by_year; and "Bermuda Demographics Profile 2013," *index mundi*, accessed October 10, 2013, www.indexmundi.com/bermuda/demographics_profile.html.
 - 4 All church statistics taken from the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, accessed October 10, 2013, www.adventiststatistics.org. The net growth of churches accounts for church plants minus churches that close or merge.
 - 5 We did not include Seventh-day Adventist companies in order to remain consistent because of insufficient data. In 1913, the denomination reported the number of churches and companies, but between 1914 and 1996 the number of companies was not recorded in the official archives. Although a few individuals point out that there are some companies of considerable size in the NAD, we see this fact offset by the significant number of very small churches.
 - 6 Lyle Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 12.
 - 7 A contemporary example of this growth rate from the world church in the last decade (2001–2011) is the Inter-American Division, which experienced a 2.4 percent increase in churches and companies per year. During that time period, the membership grew from 2,078,226 to 3,403,718, or 6.4 percent per year. This illustrates the correlation between church planting and membership growth.
 - 8 Dan Sems, telephone interview, November 15, 2013.
 - 9 Kevin Ezell, "Why We Need More Churches," North American Mission Board, accessed November 25, 2013, www.namb.net/Population_Church_Ratios/.
 - 10 The most recent year available with full church statistics at the time of this research was 2011.
 - 11 For extensive church planting research conducted through the 1970 and 1980s, see Roger Dudley and Clarence Gruesbeck, *Plant a Church, Reap a Harvest* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1989). Monte Sahlin also adds that one of the significant reasons for growth in church planting during that time was the church's response to the rise of immigrant groups in North America and the importance of addressing their needs (telephone interview, October 10, 2013). This is an illustration of an intentional church planting movement that aims to reach the ever-growing population.
 - 12 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1872), 205. Ed Stetzer affirms this principle, calling for churches not only to plant daughter churches but to aim to become "grandparent churches" (Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* [San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010], 31–47).
 - 13 Research drawn from Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, www.adventiststatistics.org. The most current results available measured from 2001–2011.
 - 14 Statistics taken from the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, accessed October 10, 2013, www.adventiststatistics.org, and interviews conducted with conference officials, pastors, and lay leaders.
 - 15 Aubrey Malphurs argues that church planting is the key to survival as a denomination (Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004], 32–38). Lyle Schaller makes the case that the lack of church planting is one major cause of the decline of mainline Protestantism (Schaller, *44 Questions*, 24–26). The same scenario is true for Adventism.
 - 16 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 244.
 - 17 For more details on simple strategic steps to move toward church planting, see part 2 of this article.
 - 18 For examples of this principle from other ethnic demographics, see part 2 of this article.
 - 19 Allan Machado, telephone interview, October 22, 2013.
 - 20 White, *Medical Ministry*, 315.
 - 21 Church planting is a difficult endeavor. Claiming territory for Jesus most certainly solicits opposition from many sides. Those who commit to church planting encounter significant obstacles, but as they depend on God, He answers with incredible blessings and rewards. Part 2 of this article will address three major obstacles to church planting based on data and interviews from the top four conferences in church planting.

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Inspired insights from Ellen G. White on church planting

1. "Upon all who believe, God has placed the burden of raising up churches" (*Medical Ministry*, 315).
2. "New churches must be established, new congregations organized. At this time there should be representatives in every city and in the remote parts of the earth" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, 24).
3. "In all countries and cities the gospel is to be proclaimed. . . .
"Churches are to be organized and plans laid for work to be done by the members of the newly organized churches" (*Evangelism* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946], 19).
4. "Place after place is to be visited, church after church is to be raised up" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, 20).
5. "The need for a meeting-house where there is a newly formed company of believers, has been presented before me in a panoramic view. . . .
"The establishment of churches, the erection of meeting-houses and school-buildings, was extended from city to city, and the tithe was increasing to carry forward the work. Plants were made not only in one place, but in many places, and the Lord was working to increase His forces" (*Gospel Workers* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1915], 435).
6. "Let not the work of establishing memorials for God in many places be made difficult and burdensome because the necessary means is withheld" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, 132–133).
7. "The people who bear His sign are to establish churches and institutions as memorials to Him" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, 105).
8. "God's workers are to plant the standards of truth in every place to which they can gain access. . . . Memorials for Him are to be raised in America and in foreign countries" (*Selected Messages*, bk. 1 [Washington DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958], 112).
9. "Many of the members of our large churches are doing comparatively nothing. They might accomplish a good work if, instead of crowding together, they would scatter into places that have not yet been entered by the truth. Trees that are planted too thickly do not flourish. They are transplanted by the gardener, that they may have room to grow and not become dwarfed and sickly. The same rule would work well for our large churches. Many of the members are dying spiritually for want of this very work. They are becoming sickly and inefficient" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, 244).
10. "This gospel missionary work is to keep reaching out and annexing new territory, enlarging the cultivated portions of the vineyards. The circle is to extend until it belts the world.
"From town to town, from city to city, from country to country, the warning message is to be proclaimed, not with outward display, but in the power of the Spirit, by men of faith" (*Evangelism*, 19).