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

S. Joseph Kidder  
*Anders University, kiddersj@andrews.edu*

Dustin Serns  
*Anders University*

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

“Place after place is to be visited, church after church is to be raised up.”
—Ellen White

Church planting is a challenging enterprise. Realistic expectations are essential, and adequate support systems and coaching are helpful. Our research revealed that those who commit to church planting encounter significant obstacles, but as they depend on God, He answers with incredible blessings and rewards.

Based on data and interviews from the top four conferences in church planting over the last decade in North America, part two of this article will address three common obstacles to church planting and show how God transforms them into amazing opportunities.

Obstacle 1: We do not have the people to plant a church

Although many smaller churches feel they need to get bigger before giving birth, many examples show that God blesses efforts to step out in faith. In fact, faith is more important than size. Houston Northwest had about 125 people in attendance, but they went ahead and planted the Woodlands church about 20 miles north in 2007. At the end of 2012, the mother church had an attendance of 196, with 71 attending the daughter church.

Collaboration produces synergy. The small McKinney Spanish Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church recognized that their city was experiencing explosive population growth yet also saw a need for an English-speaking Adventist congregation. They had a facility to temporarily lend but no English-speaking personnel or leadership to plant a church. Just to the south, the Richardson SDA Church had the personnel and leadership to start a church but no place to worship. The collaboration of the two churches in 2012 produced a healthy new daughter church while adding excitement and vitality to the parent churches.

Pastor Dan Serns shared, “I’m praying that God impresses five percent of my members to become a part of the McKinney English SDA Church.” He shared the importance for congregations working together to reach more people: “While some might feel like planting another Seventh-day Adventist church would hurt other area churches by competing for members, in fast growing metro areas, there is plenty of population to reach for Jesus.”

Growth by multiplication: God’s free refills. God rewards mother churches that step out in faith by bringing them new people. The McKinney English SDA church plant was the tenth that Richardson SDA has been involved with in the past 14 years. When the Richardson SDA church started planting new churches in January 2000, its attendance was 551 people. After planting four churches and helping start six others, its attendance at the end of 2012 was 598. The combined attendance of all 11 churches at the end of 2012 was more than 1,700 people. Also, 1,257 people were baptized between 2002 and 2010. In July 2013, Richardson brought in its 800th member and currently holds the highest membership in the church’s 50-plus year history. From 2000 to 2013, the North Dallas population grew by about 12.5 percent while the Adventist membership grew 209 percent as a result of church multiplication. Richardson SDA is working to launch their next church plant soon.

Many examples attested that established mother churches grew back to their original size and more within six months to two years of planting.
McDonald Road SDA Church was a church of 800 to 900 members, located a few miles outside of Collegedale, Tennessee, in a rural area. They wanted to grow, so they selected a community and began outreach and Bible studies there. Four years ago, they planted the East Ridge SDA Church, with a core group of 80 to 100 people. Today, the church plant is healthy and growing, and God has given the McDonald Road SDA Church a free refill and more. Of all the churches we looked at, God refilled every mother church that moved forward in faith and planted a church.

**Obstacle 2: We do not have the money to plant a church**

Most conferences do not have extra funds to hire more pastors to plant churches. Mother churches often are concerned with losing the financial resources of their active members who leave. Our research revealed that church planting does not cause adverse financial effects to the conference nor the mother church but produces many opportunities for growth in faith and finance. Overall, the conference benefits from church planting.

*God pays lay planters.* Conferences do not have to rely on hired professionals to plant new churches. Of the top four conferences in church planting in the North American Division (NAD), all of them heavily utilize a lay-led church plant model. Allan Machado indicated that Florida has 87 lay pastors. Many of them have started new churches. Collectively they produced over $3 million in tithe, while the total cost of training, resources, and mileage compensation came to about $400,000 in 2012. Church planting was an investment for the Florida conference resulting in a net gain of over $2.5 million.

*God gives yield on the investment.* Gerson Santos, executive secretary of the Greater New York Conference at the time of the interview, said that three years ago, when the conference was experiencing severe financial difficulty, they decided to place an even stronger emphasis on church planting. They doubled the money allocated to evangelism and special projects. He started a small group for leadership development to train pastors and lay leaders to plant new churches.

In the 18 months before our interview in October 2013, they planted 17 various types of churches, including youth-led churches, ethnic churches, multiethnic churches, traditional churches, and urban mission centers. At least one-third of them seek to reach secular, postmodern professionals. Santos emphasized that the only costs incurred during their church planting thrust were the meals provided for the leadership development small group and mileage reimbursement for lay planters. Though the conference sacrificed financially, God blessed: 70 percent of their debt was paid back during that time. The most exciting part for Santos was not the financial growth but the Kingdom growth they experienced. “Baptisms are going through the roof! Last year was the best year in the New York mission ever!”

Churches that plant generate more money to be used in God’s mission. For example, in the Texas Conference, the tithe of the Richardson SDA church was $688,253 in 1999 ($948,492 adjusted to 2012 dollars) before being involved in planting 10 churches in 14 years. At the end of 2012, the combined tithe of all 11 churches was about $2.24 million in 2012. In all four conferences we studied, God provided significant financial dividends on their investment in church planting.

*The local church benefits from church planting.* God does not need money. Tom Evans, who oversaw the planting of more than 100 churches in the Texas Conference, confirmed that: “Church planting does not have to cost the mother church anything. Some choose to assist in paying for the first evangelistic meeting, resources, or a few months of rent to jumpstart the daughter church, but many successful church plants begin with nothing.”

In San Antonio, Texas, the Scenic Hills SDA Church planted the Fil-Am International SDA Church in 2003. Although the mother church did not give any financial support to the plant, both mother and daughter churches have thrived. Sam Palomero, the lay leader of Fil-Am International, said that, though they started with 25 people—now, ten years later, they have 185 in attendance. “We are packed to the max now.” Palomero stated that in 2012 the church produced over $180,000 in tithe and $62,000 in local church budget.

Like many churches, Scenic Hills was afraid of losing the financial support of key leaders who were going to plant the new church. They were in the middle of a building project, and some felt they needed to keep all the personnel and resources they could. Despite this obstacle, they decided to go ahead, in faith, with the plant. Rodney Mills, current pastor of the Scenic Hills SDA Church, said: “Planting did not make a dent in the finances of the mother church. In fact, through planting we grew in both finances and members.” Now the attendance of the mother church is around 400. They are launching a Spanish church of about 120 people in March 2014 and have formed a Portuguese group.

Our research of the top four conferences in church planting revealed that from 2000 to 2012, while at times temporary financial sacrifices were made, no mother church experienced unrecoverable financial difficulty because of planting a new church.

**Obstacle 3: We are too busy with our programs to plant a church**

Many churches pour significant time, energy, and resources into a wide range of programs and activities. While constructive programs are necessary for every church, it is important not to lose sight of their purpose. We discovered that church planting is the best “program” a church can do for (1) evangelism, (2) discipleship and spiritual growth, and (3) reclaiming inactive members.

*The best program for evangelism.* Church planting provides clarity and
focus in mission. The potential to reach the harvest is the best reason to plant a new church, both for the mother church and the daughter church. Extensive research in the Texas conference revealed that church plants had significantly better health than did established churches, rating among the top 15 percent of all churches surveyed in the United States. Their strongest category in the Natural Church Development (NCD) survey was Needs Oriented Evangelism, with top questions affirming, “We encourage new Christians in our church to get involved in evangelism immediately,” and “I try to deepen my relationships with people who do not yet know Jesus Christ.” The church plants’ priority of evangelism was also reflected in their church budgets. Evans noted that “most church plants in Texas contribute at least 25 percent of their local church budget for evangelism. . . . Most established churches allocate less than five percent of their budget to evangelism.”

Although smaller and newer churches may not use the same kinds of programs as larger, established ones, they actually have higher potential to grow. The vice president of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference, Jerry Fore, has an extensive analysis of his conference for over a decade that confirmed this phenomenon: “I discovered that the more established the church, the more members it takes to produce one baptism. On the other hand, the younger the church, the higher their potential for growth.” This could be due to a number of factors, such as the necessity of reaching the harvest, vitality in the young church’s life cycle, and flexibility in methods and approaches.

Just like children, churches can best hit their “growth spurt” while they are still young.

The best program for discipleship and spiritual growth. Church planting is a breeding ground for leadership development in both the plant and the mother church. “Our main goal,” said Santos, “is making disciples. As people grow, you need to put them in a place where they can use their passion and new skills that they will develop. That would be a new church.” He told about a church of elderly people in New York City that decided they wanted to do something for young people, so they offered their chapel downstairs. Within months, Fusion, a youth-led church, was planted, and young disciples stepped up into leadership roles. “The head deacon is 16 years old and the head deaconess is 13.”

Their involvement in street corner ministry has resulted in many conversions and baptisms, even from people involved in gangs. The church started with 19 members and now has an attendance of 60 actively involved young people. “You remain in the church if you are involved. If you are not involved in ministry, you will come as a visitor.” Within one year, Fusion planted the Zion youth-led church across town in Broadway Manhattan.

Members find spiritual growth through involvement. Walton Zibanayi told his whole experience with God has grown in many ways through being involved as the leader of the McKinney English SDA plant. One of these areas was giving. “When I was at Richardson with 750 members,” he said, “it was easy to give the offering call and still not be convicted personally to give more.” He returned tithe but felt his finances did not permit him to give any more for offerings. “With the new church, we realized that we had to personally give to pay our bills. We started giving tithe plus an extra 10 percent for offerings. Three weeks later, I got a new job that gave an 80 percent increase in my salary.” He said that though he was hoping only for an extra 10 percent salary increase, God gave him so much more. “Our family always struggled to pay all the expenses before. Now we don’t even worry about it so much. God has taken care of us.” Walton rejoiced how God had taught Him to be faithful.

The best program for reclaiming inactive members. Churches across North America struggle with the reality that many of their members have become disenfranchised, disconnected, or inactive. Church plants give those individuals a mulligan—a chance to start over again. Jerry Fore shared his research from analyzing church plants in his conference: “It is harder for people to move into a mother church that is so well established in the status quo. New church plants have the opportunity to establish different structure and titles for programming.”

New plants are attractive to people because they are generally open to new ideas and provide opportunities for spiritual growth but without any previous unfavorable memories or baggage. When the Collegedale Community church planted a new group less than ten years ago in an area surrounded by Adventist churches, some were afraid of losing members and tithe to the new plant. Collegedale Community specifically sought to reach inactive Adventists in the community; it now has an attendance of over 1,200. Eventually all the churches in the area recovered and continued to grow. “Looking back,” Fore noted, “there have been no catastrophes in tithe or membership like some expected. In fact, there has been no decline in the Collegedale area at all.”

In all the conferences we studied, God used church plants to reclaim inactive members. Palomero, the lay pastor of the Fil-Am International Church in San Antonio, Texas, acknowledged that many of the members of his church were inactive before coming and finding a place to connect with God.

Conclusion

We have looked at three significant obstacles to church planting: lack of people, lack of money, and busyness with programming. We saw that when churches were faithful to God, He transformed their obstacles into opportunities and blessed them with more than they ever had before. Planting a church requires a tremendous step of faith, but the opportunities God provides far outweigh the risks. Through church planting, God adds people to His family, provides more money for mission, brings effective evangelistic focus, fosters spiritual growth, and reconnects
Ten simple ideas to get started in the local church

1. Develop a heart for the lost. They matter to God and must matter to us.
2. Cultivate a church-planting philosophy. Study the subject in the Bible, the writings of Ellen White, and some practical books to develop your church’s position on church planting.
3. Keep praying that God will enlarge your territory by expanding your influence and evangelistic outreach through church planting.
4. Educate your leaders and congregations about the value, needs, and benefits of starting a new church through sermons, board meetings, newsletters, etc. Commit as a church to work toward planting.
5. Claim the promise in Matthew 9:37, 38 that God will “send out workers into the harvest field” by bringing you leaders who will take on this project. Invest deeply in their spiritual growth and leadership development.
6. Identify, elect, and mentor the church-plant leader and core group. The core group can begin planning, evangelism, and recruiting future members while continuing involvement in their home church(es).
7. Get the training you need. For training events and resources, go to www.nadi.org.
8. Study the demographic needs and trends of your area to determine the best location to plant a new church. The only way to reach the people in any community is to plant a church there. Work to connect any Adventists in that area with the new plant.
9. Set aside some resources to help the young church secure a building to buy or to rent and/or to purchase evangelistic supplies and equipment.
10. Develop the strategy that best fits your church. Set it in motion and move forward in faith. Pray consistently for the harvest and for God’s leading and blessing.

2 The challenge of reaching the rapidly growing population in North America is calling for a massive Seventh-day Adventist church planting movement to awaken on all levels of the church. Part one of this article, published in the October 2014 issue of Ministry, analyzed the net growth of Adventist churches compared to population growth in the last century. To gain a realistic view of a church planting movement, we conducted research on the top four conferences in church planting in the last decade in the North American Division (NAD). In the process of analyzing these conferences (Texas, Georgia-Cumberland, Greater New York, and Florida), we discovered powerful ways that God overcomes obstacles to move His work forward.
3 For additional reading on perceived obstacles to church planting, see Russell Burlitt, “Myths of Church Planting,” Reckoning a Lost Passion, (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1999), 98–101.
4 Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Statistical Comparison by Pastoral District, December 2012, 10.
5 McKinney grew a total of 224 percent from 2000 to 2009 and was ranked as the second fastest growing city in the United States. For the full article, see Dan Eakins, “Frisco, McKinney Top Two Fastest Growing Cities in America,” Star Local News, February 14, 2012, accessed October 15, 2014, go.dallasnews.com/news/2012/mblt/14/frisco-mckinney-top-fastest-growing-cities-america/.
6 Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Statistical Comparison by Pastoral District, December 2012, 5.
7 It generally takes a new church plant a year or two to become established and bring results. The first church that Richardson planted was Metro North (since renamed Fairview Mesquite), on January 1, 2000.
8 We limited our study of North Dallas, Texas, to include Richardson, Plano, McKinney, and Frisco because that is where the churches were planted. Data from City-Data.com, accessed January 28, 2014, www.city-data.com.
9 The Richardson SDA Church is one example that has followed the principle of church multiplication. Ed Stetzer argues that churches should not only plant daughter churches but aim to become “grandparent churches.” See Stetzer, Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 31–47. Ellen White affirms, “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.” White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 3 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1872), 206.
11 This strategy is in harmony with Stuart Murray’s argument that multiple kinds of churches are needed to reach different kinds of people, especially in a postmodern age. See Murray, Church Planting: Laying Foundations (Scottsdale, AZ: Harold Press, 2001), 156–80.
12 Dr. Vernon Santos, telephone interview with author, October 4, 2013.
13 Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Statistical Comparison by Pastoral District, December 2012, 5, 6.
14 Tom Evans, interview with author, October 21, 2013. This observation confirmed the continued validity of Dudley and Gruesbeck’s findings in 1989. In a comprehensive study of the Seventh-day Adventist church plants in the 1970s and 1980s, they discovered that receiving financial aid from another church did not make a notable difference on the growth and success of the church plant. “The differences given are too small to be significant” and “only a minority of churches surveyed received such aid.” Roger Dudley and Clarence Gruesbeck, Plant a Church, Reap a Harvest! (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1989), 39. Lyle Schaller argues, “The less we make our church plantings dependent on subsidy, the more-dependent they’ll be.” Direct or indirect financial aid can be addictive to both the giver and receivers.” Schaller, 44 Questions for Church Planters (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 141.
15 Sam Pakomeno, telephone interview with author, October 4, 2013.
16 NCD is a Natural Church Development survey that checks the health of a church and its potential for growth. The higher the church score, the healthier it is. When the church tests high in the area of evangelism, it is an indication that it is evangelistic in nature. Church plants usually score very high in this area. For more information regarding an Adventist version of the survey, contact the North American Division Evangelism Institute (NADI), www.nadi.org.
18 Dudley and Gruesbeck also discovered that newer churches had flexibility and vitality and were able to effectively reach the harvest. See Dudley and Gruesbeck, Plant a Church, Reap a Harvest!, 17–27. Russell Burlitt writes about the life cycle of a church and how as it grows older it will ultimately need renewal. See Burlitt, Waking the Dead (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2004), 33–35.
20 Our research affirmed this well-established church planting concept. Dudley and Gruesbeck observed, “Numerous studies have shown that 60 to 80 percent of new adult members of new congregations are persons who were not actively involved in the life of any worshiping congregation immediately prior to joining that new mission… Some of these new adult members are youth who once dropped out of the church in their teens or early twenties. Later, as parents, they want their children to have some religious training. Preferring not to attend their parents’ church, these young adults look for new types of worship and new experiences of renewal. Other former attenders do not want to come back to the church where they are embarrassed to return or fear that other members will not accept them. On the other hand, such people find acceptance in a new congregation where believers are used to welcoming new members.” Dudley and Gruesbeck, Plant a Church, Reap a Harvest, 20. See also Lyle Schaller, 44 Questions for Church Planters, 27, 28.