

# RESEARCH BULLETIN

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*Church Plant Survivability and Health Study  
2007: Best Practices*

Ed Stetzer  
Phillip Connor

May 2007

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### **North American Mission Board**

Dr. Geoff Hammond, President

### **Missions Section**

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### **Center for Missional Research**

Ed Stetzer, Senior Director and Missiologist

Marilynn Kelly, Administrative Secretary

770-410-6386

Richie C. Stanley, Research Director

Jerry Chamness, Director of Consulting and Delivery Systems

Mike Cogland, Director of Missional Networks

Phillip Connor, Research Missiology Manager

Diane Browne, Administrative Secretary

7770-410-6332

## **Acknowledgements**

The 2007 Church Planting Survivability and Health Study, Church Planting Systems, was truly a team effort of both the Church Planting Group (CPG) and the Center for Missional Research (CMR) of the North American Mission Board. The study is the brainchild of Dr. Richard Harris, vice-president of CPG. The CPG provided many staff to contribute to the survey instrument including Joe Hernandez, Rod Earls, Ken Weathersby, John M. Bailey, and David Terry. Richie Stanley, Director for Research at CMR, provided considerable guidance to the research methodology for this study. Much appreciation is given to the 25-plus telephone interviewers, mostly students from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, who poured hours of time in calling hundreds upon hundreds of church planters. These interviewers would not have been discovered if it were not for Jerry Chamness, Director of Delivery Services, and his administrative ability to acquire these interviewers as well as negotiate their individual contracts month to month. Thanks is also extended to Diane Browne in the CMR office, who managed incoming interview data and provided interviewers with the most current contact data. Last but not least, Marilynn Kelly, team administrative secretary for CMR, performed the final edits on this report and we are extremely thankful for her assistance.

## Methodology and Response Rate

In September 2006, the Church Planting Group and the Center for Missional Research of the North American Mission Board (NAMB) jointly sponsored the Church Planting Survivability and Health Study. Its objectives were to identify the survivability rate for church plants among Southern Baptist church planters as well as factors that contribute to the growth and survival of church plants. For the purposes of understanding the state of church plant survivability and health in the United States as a whole, multiple denominations were invited to participate. Those denominations/networks accepting the invitation include: Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), Sovereign Grace Ministries, Baptist General Conference (BGC), Leadership Network (LN), General Baptists, the Wesleyan Church, New Thing Network, Assemblies of God (AG), Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA), Foursquare Church (FSQ), Christian Church, and Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. All denominations or networks that participated are considered evangelical.<sup>1</sup>

Among all denominations, including Southern Baptists, a total sample of 2,266 church plants was selected for potential interview. The criterion of selection was similar to the selection of Southern Baptist church plants in which the church plant had received church planting funding during the years 2000 through 2005. The larger denominations had a portion (43%) of their church plants from 2000 through 2005 selected, while all church plants were selected in those denominations with fewer than 50 church plants. The total of 500 surveys were completed for an overall response rate of 22 percent.

Through interviews, brief phone conversations, and extensive Internet searches, we were able to determine the survival of 2,080 out of the total sample of 2,266 church plants, representing approximately 92 percent. Out of those 2,080 church plants determined for survivability, 500 were ascertained by interview, 444 by a brief phone conversation or denomination verification, and the remainder by Internet searches. Those church plants that did not meet the criteria or whose continued existence could not be determined were removed from the sample.

For the first phase of this study, phone calls and interviews were conducted from September 15, 2006 through January 15, 2007, principally by seminary students. More than 25 interviewers were part of the process. The survey was conducted in English, Korean, and Spanish. Of those church plants surveyed whose primary ethnicity is known, 57 percent were Anglo, 17 percent Hispanic, 5 percent African-American, 6 percent multi-ethnic and 15 percent representing a variety of other language groups.

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<sup>1</sup> An evangelical Christian is a person who believes that Jesus Christ is the sole source of salvation through faith in Him, has personal faith and conversion with regeneration by the Holy Spirit, recognizes the inspired Word of God as the only basis for faith and Christian living, and is committed to biblical preaching and evangelism that brings others to faith in Jesus Christ.

The second phase of the study involved further surveying and the addition of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). The survey and sample criteria used in phase one were retained for use in phase two, as were many of the interviewers. Phase two telephone interviews were conducted March 1 through April 30, 2007.

Factor analysis is frequently employed in this report to denote those statistically significant factors associated with higher church attendance, baptisms, or church plant survivability. The procedure for determining these statistically significant factors is regression analysis. *Significant* implies that the factor has a probability value (p-value) less than 0.05 (5%) or a 1 in 20 chance that the described conclusion is a statistical anomaly. These factors should be taken seriously and deserve attention. For all factor analysis, percent evangelical Christian for the community in which the church was planted was controlled. More than 100 factors were tested. Factors not listed were found to be statistically insignificant. A complete list of these statistically significant factors by denomination is found in table 1 and table 2 in the appendix at the conclusion of this research bulletin. Please note that denominations with a smaller number of completed surveys will naturally have fewer statistically significant factors than denominations with a larger number of completed surveys.

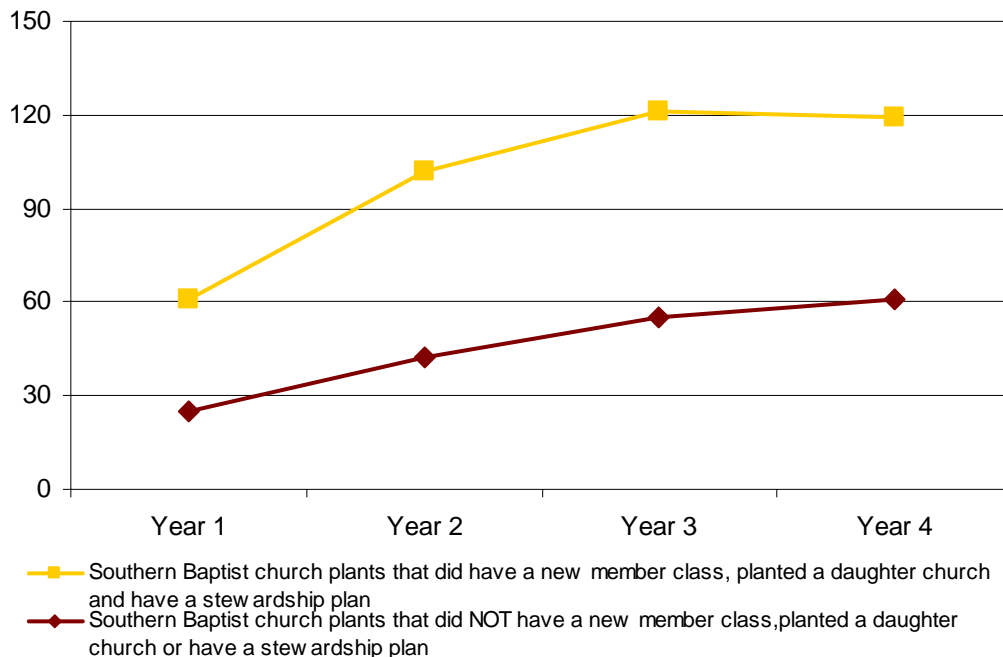
As a means of compiling these results into categories, this research bulletin groups similar factors into church planting systems found to be at work within particular denominations. For the most part, systems highlighted in this report are unique to that particular denomination. These groupings include: church strengthening system, supervision/peer/mentoring system, public proclamation and communication system, full time church planter system, public ministry to felt needs system, assessment system, staff team system, and church planter experience system.

## Church Strengthening System

Assimilation of new church members into the church body and the discipleship of new converts are keys to the maintenance and growth of a church plant. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that variables such as having a new member class, using a church covenant, and having a proactive stewardship plan are reasonable indicators of a church strengthening system for denominational church planting. It may come as a surprise, however, that planting a daughter church within three years of the church plant's inception is also an indicator of church strength. In the majority of cases in our study, planting a daughter church actually increases baptisms and church attendance.

Based on the aggregate of Southern Baptist church plants surveyed, church plants that had a new member class AND planted a daughter church more than doubled their average yearly worship attendance over those church plants that did not employ these church strengthening factors (see figure 1). Similar to the attendance figures, baptisms among Southern Baptist church plants increased substantially when a daughter church was planted AND the church plant had a proactive stewardship plan. This is especially the case for years 2 through 4 of the church's existence.

Figure 1 – Mean annual church plant attendance, SBC



The Baptist General Conference also had statistically significant results for higher baptisms when new member class and stewardship plan factors were tested. Those BGC church plants having a new member class AND a stewardship plan nearly double their annual baptisms while the BGC church plants that did not employ these strategies did not realize such an increase in baptisms.

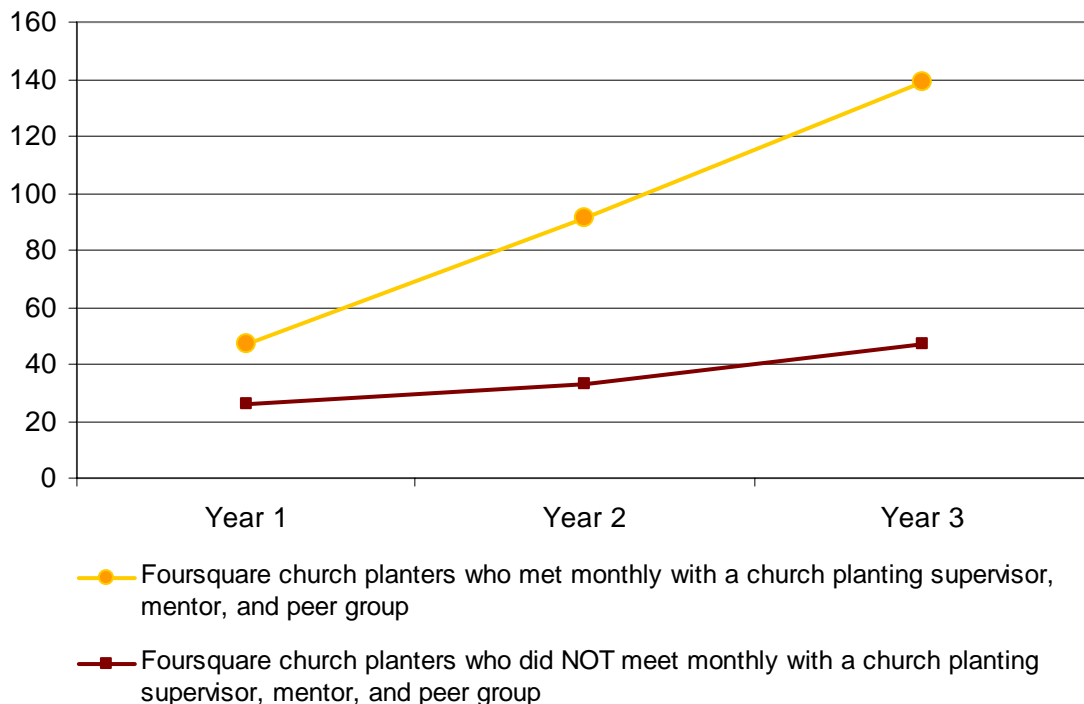
A statistically significant factor for higher attendance and baptisms among the Evangelical Free Church of America was the use of a church covenant for new members. Within the EFCA church plants alone, mean annual church plant attendance nearly doubles for those EFCA church plants that use a church covenant over those EFCA church plants that did not use this church strengthening strategy.

## Supervision/Peer/Mentoring System

Church planters need encouragement and guidance during the church planting experience. This was found to be true in our study when comparing supervision/peer/mentoring or coaching systems across denominational lines. The impact these factors have on church plant attendance and baptisms is substantial.

For instance, Foursquare church planters who met monthly with a church planting supervisor or mentor saw a dramatic increase in church plant baptisms over those Foursquare church planters who did not meet monthly with these individuals. In fact, the increase in annual number of baptisms is around 150 percent during years 1 and 2, and much higher in year 3. When adding in the monthly meeting of a church planter peer group, Foursquare church plant attendance soars far above those Foursquare church planters who did not engage in a similar supervision/peer/mentoring system.

Figure 2 – Mean annual church plant attendance, FSQ





## **Public Proclamation and Communication System**

Announcing the church plant to the community appears to be a significant system for the church growth of a new church plant. When comparing Southern Baptist church plants that met in a school and used mailers to Southern Baptist church plants that did not, mean annual church plant attendance is much higher for the former group. In fact, the increase in church plant attendance approaches 100 percent for most years.

## **Full-Time Church Planter System**

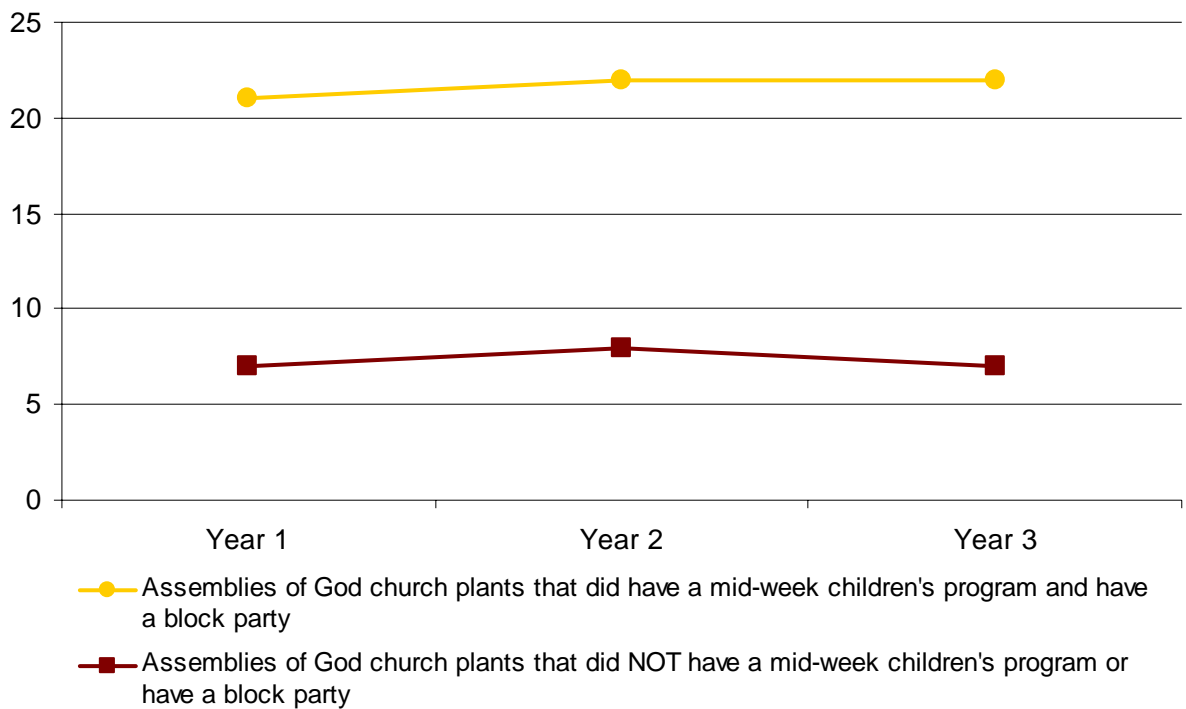
It probably comes as no surprise that a church plant having a full-time lead church planter on staff increases attendance. Since the survey did not directly ask if the church planter was compensated for full-time hours, responses to other questions help identify their situation. A couple of indications that they were full-time and receiving ample compensation are: (1) they received medical insurance with the majority of premiums paid by the church plant or denomination, and (2) they felt the financial compensation was adequate for their family's needs. When comparing Southern Baptist church plants, mean annual church plant attendance is higher among those church planters with these factors present than those without. This is especially true during years 3 and 4 of the church plant.

As a confirmation of this previous finding, Assemblies of God church plants with church planters who received these benefits also experienced a sizeable increase in church plant attendance over those Assemblies of God church plants that did not demonstrate these factors. Depending on the church plant year, the Assembly of God church plants whose church planters were full-time, received medical insurance, and felt their compensation was adequate were 4 to 5 times greater in their church plant attendance compared to those Assembly of God church plants without these characteristics present among their church planters.

## Public Ministry System

There are many indicators for public ministry to perceived needs within the community; however, the mid-week children's program and block party factors in Assemblies of God church plants were among the statistically significant factors for higher than average baptisms. Mean annual baptisms in Assemblies of God church plants nearly triple when they conduct mid-week children's programs and have block parties (see figure 3).

Figure 3 – Mean annual church plant baptisms, AG



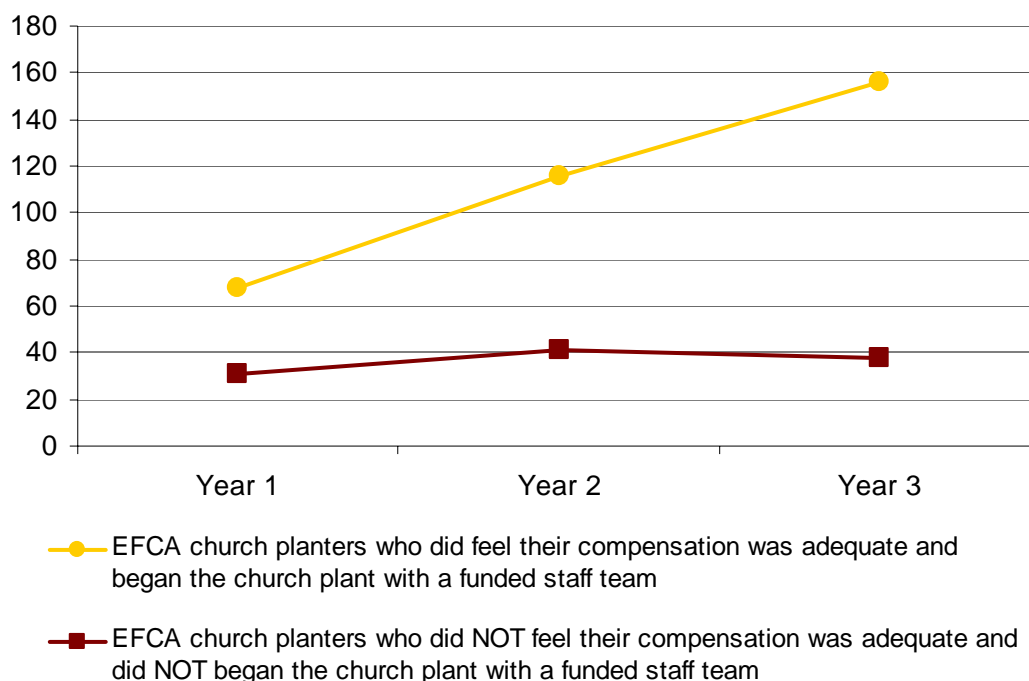
## Assessment System

Many denominations employ church planting assessment programs for their church planters; however, it is only Presbyterian Church of America church plants who saw a statistically significant difference in church plant attendance when their planters were assessed. In fact, this factor was PCA's most significant factor for higher church plant attendance.

## Staff Team System

Many church plants begin with a fully staffed church planting team prior to the launch of the church plant. Such a church planting team is sometimes compensated financially by resources exterior to the church plant itself. This strategy or system appears to be significantly associated with higher than average attendance among Evangelical Free Church of America church plants. As evidenced in figure 4, the presence of this staff team system increases church plant attendance among EFCA church plants twofold in year 1 and nearly fourfold by year 3 compared to EFCA church plants not employing this strategy.

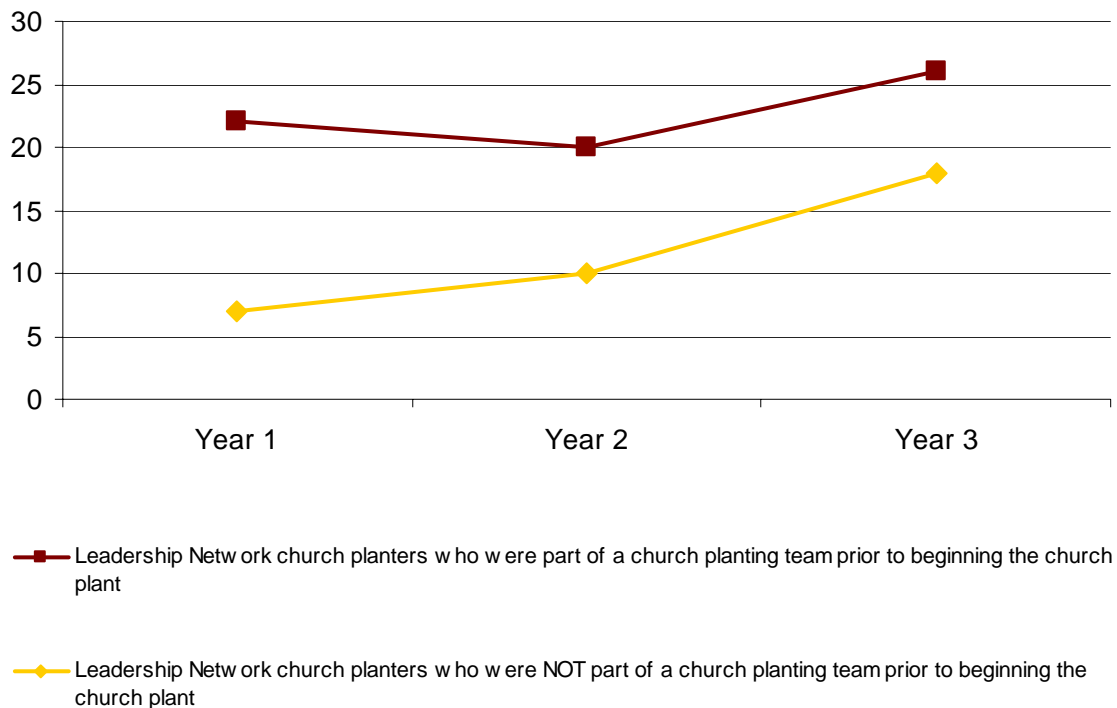
Figure 4 – Mean annual church plant attendance, EFCA



## Church Planter Experience System

Church planters start churches with a varied level of experience; however, it appears that church planters with previous experience as part of a church planting team are more effective in growing a church plant. When reviewing church planters affiliated with Leadership Network (LN) – a network of church plants representing four other networks (Fellowship Arkansas, Northwood Church, New Hope Hawaii, and Acts 29) – it was discovered that church planters with previous church planting experience as part of a church planting team out pace their counterparts without the team experience. As reported in figure 5, those with church planting team experience prior to the launch of the new church plant nearly double their baptisms each year as compared to those without this experience. Although not viewed graphically, church plant attendance is also twice than that of LN church planters with team experience as compared to those LN church planters without such experience.

Figure 5 – Mean annual church plant baptisms, LN



## APPENDIX

Table 1 – Factors Associated with Higher Church Plant Baptisms

Factor Description	SBC	BGC	EFCA	PCA	AG	FSQ	LN	ALL v1†
meeting in a school in subsequent years	x							
meeting in a church building in the first year						x		
meeting in a hotel in the first year	x							
meeting in a community hall in subsequent years	x							
meeting in a church building in subsequent years						x		
mailing invitations to services, programs, events								x
conducting a block party for the community					x			x
engaging in ministry evangelism	x							x
conducting children's special events								x
conducting a weekly children's program					x			x
conducting new member classes		x			x			x
starting at least one daughter church within three years	x			x				x
having a proactive stewardship development plan	x	x						x
using a church covenant signed by new members			x					
delegating leadership roles to church members								x
leadership training for new members								x
being provided a church planter mentor, coach, or supervisor						x		
receiving funding from the denomination			x					
receiving lay people on loan from the sponsoring church							x	
receiving funding from a single individual or foundation			x					
perceiving that financial compensation received met basic needs of planter			x					
being full-time as a church planter					x			x
being full-time and paid full-time as the church planter			x					
arriving with a staffed team funded by exterior sources				x			x	
being assessed prior to planting the church								x
having the church planter's expectations realized		x						
meeting at least monthly with a church planting supervisor						x		
meeting with a church planter mentor at least monthly		x						
having previous experience as part of a church planting team							x	
<b>Completed Surveys</b>	255	53	66	34	127	36	38	500
<b>Response Rate</b>	29%	21%	20%	21%*	17%	21%	20%	22%

"x" indicates statistically significant factor (p-value<0.05) for denomination.

SBC – Southern Baptist Convention; BGC – Baptist General Conference; EFCA – Evangelical Free Church of America; PCA – Presbyterian Church of America; AG – Assemblies of God; FSQ – Foursquare; ALL (v1) – results from all denominations in February 2007 report

\* Unlike other denominations, PCA data did not provide phone numbers for contacts; therefore, those church plants of whom no phone number could be found were removed from the sample. This accounted for the removal of 37 contacts making the total sample size 161.

† These factors were found in version one of the church planting study and does not necessarily represent an analysis of all church planters from all denominations in this table.

Table 2 – Factors Associated with Higher Church Plant Attendance

**Factor Description**

meeting in a school the first year  
 meeting in a school in subsequent years  
 meeting in a theater in subsequent years  
 meeting in a church building in the first year  
 having a facility that is highly visible  
 using door hangers for communicating the church plant  
 mailing invitations to services, programs, events  
 conducting a block party for the community  
 engaging in ministry evangelism  
 conducting children's special events  
 conducting new member classes  
 starting at least one daughter church within three years of the church plant  
 having a proactive stewardship development plan  
 using a church covenant signed by new members  
 delegating leadership roles to church members  
 receiving demographics and/or research expertise from denomination  
 receiving funding from the sponsoring church  
 sponsoring church permitted church plant to meet in its building  
 receiving lay people on loan from the sponsoring church  
 perceiving that the financial compensation received met basic needs of planter  
 receiving health insurance - premiums paid by church or denomination  
 being full-time as a church planter  
 being financially compensated as the church planter  
 arriving with a staffed team funded by exterior sources  
 being full-time and paid full-time as the church planter  
 being assessed prior to planting the church  
 having the church planter's expectations realized  
 meeting at least monthly with a supervisor who guides in church planting work  
 having previous experience as part of a church planting team  
 meeting with a church planter peer group at least monthly  
 meeting with a church planter mentor at least monthly  
 receiving planting training as the church planter prior to the church plant  
 having the church planter's geographic roots near the church plant setting  
 having the church planter parents less than 300 miles from the church plant

SBC	BGC	EFCA	PCA	AG	FSQ	LN	ALL v1†
x							x
x							x
x							x
					x		
				x			
x							x
				x			x
x							x
x				x		x	x
x	x			x			x
x	x						x
		x					x
							x
x						x	
		x					
		x	x				
						x	
x		x		x			
x				x			x
				x			x
							x
		x				x	
	x						
			x				x
	x						x
					x		
					x		
					x		
		x					
	x						
			x				

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255	53	66	34	127	36	38	500
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