

More Churches Opening Than Closing Despite Lack of Widespread Involvement in Church Planting Efforts

Summarized, edited and posted by Bob Young

A recent study conducted by LifeWay Research in partnership with Leadership Network found that more churches are opening every year than those that are closing, a change from findings in recent years. This is good news, but is tempered by the fact that few churches are involved in church planting efforts.

LifeWay Research found that few churches were involved as primary sponsors of a church plant (new congregation) during the previous twelve months, and only a slightly larger number participated financially in partnership with other churches to help start new congregations. According to LifeWay Research President Ed Stetzer, 28% of the congregations surveyed participated in some way, financial or otherwise, in church plants. Within the 28%, about half partnered with other congregations in supporting the new church financially, while 12% took direct financial responsibility as primary sponsor of the new church.

“Although we see more church planting involvement, we need to see a much higher number of churches starting churches,” Stetzer said. “It is widely acknowledged that church planting is the most effective form of evangelism. It should be of great concern that only 28% of our North American churches helped start new congregations at all, including only 12% of those who took primary responsibility.

“For too long, churches have assumed that mission involvement and church planting is someone else’s responsibility,” Stetzer continued. “The ‘pay, pray and get out of the way’ mentality causes churches to pay someone else to do what God has called them to do—and that may be part of why so many have become cul-de-sacs on the Great Commission highway.”

Far more churches reported participating in missions than church planting, Stetzer noted. A full 85% of the pastors said their congregations prayed as a group for missionaries at least once a month during the previous year, and 74% said their congregations focused that prayer on a specific mission field or people group; 50% said their congregations conducted one or more short-term mission projects during the past year, and 20% reported their churches sent out missionaries who served 10 weeks or longer.

“We’re glad to see these numbers; prayer is where a heart for missions and church planting begins,” Stetzer said. “If God’s people are praying, they eventually will hear Him telling them to get their hands working directly in the fields that are ‘white unto harvest,’ but we have to help our people transition from short-term hands-on involvement to longer-term investment of their lives.”

Some of the other survey results also represent a cause for concern, Stetzer added. Among all Protestant churches surveyed, 5% provided one-time direct financial support, such as a cash gift, for a church plant, and 4% provided tangible support, such as equipment or rent-free meeting space.

Although most churches are not currently involved in church planting, there is evidence – increases in the number of church plants and the response to church planting events – to suggest a growing interest and involvement in church planting. According to new research reported in the recently released book *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* by Stetzer and Warren Bird, all types of church leaders can become movement makers.

Citing several of the practical examples in *Viral Churches*, Stetzer challenges churches to adopt future church planters as short-term interns; co-sponsor a new church by loaning people and resources; and provide coaching, whether directly or indirectly, for the leaders of recently launched churches.

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