

NEW MODELS FOR NEW CHURCHES: WHAT WORKS?

Anyone with an internet connection can access Wikipedia and view the site's content—35 million articles in 288 languages as of this writing. The site's diverse content appeals to a huge audience and exemplifies what is called broadcasting, which targets one giant market. Another model, narrowcasting, seeks to reach a small niche market where the audience is, by nature, limited (i.e., by geography, demographics, or interests). These broad and narrow distinctions relate to the evolving history of church planting as well. Old planting models tended to use a broadcasting frame, whose leaders created a church for all comers, whereas newer models stem from a narrowcasting approach, where leaders design for a targeted group. Even the language used to describe what a church is reflects shifting strategies. Sometimes new churches begin as a worshiping community, a new ministry, or as a small-group initiative instead of broader designations such as congregation or church.

Types of New Ministries

A study of new ministries in six mainline denominations uncovered factors related to successful church planting efforts over the past ten years. Despite the wide variety of efforts, researchers grouped the new ministries into three major types.¹

Replication of traditional congregations. Planters modeled new churches after established ones but added modern music and informal practices. Located in new or growing areas, these congregations are mostly comprised of white worshipers. Representing about 30 percent of all new congregations in the study, about half were meeting in a sanctuary. In some cases, existing congregations sponsored a highly similar church in an alternate site. New church plants of traditional African-American congregations make up another subtype.

Immigrant congregations. One in four new church starts are comprised of recent immigrant worshipers. Many are mission projects of existing congregations

and some meet in another church's building on Sunday afternoons.

Alternative congregations. This third group is the largest (about 45 percent) and most diverse. Some design worship experiences to be seeker-oriented, others offer emerging styles,² and still others build relationships through small groups. Only about one in five alternative churches meet in a sanctuary, with most seeking a more informal space, such as a home, restaurant, storefront, school, or community room. In most cases, the target population is young adults who are not attracted to traditional churches and worship.

Who Starts New Churches?

New church starts usually begin in one of four ways.

Denominations. Generally begun as part of a national or regional plan, denominations (primarily the Presbyterian Church, Reformed Church, and United Church of Canada) started about one-third of new worshiping communities in the study. Denominations also provide



"THIRTY-SOMETHING, TECH-SAVVY PROFESSIONALS WHO ENJOY JAZZ, MOCHA LATTES, AND WALKS ON THE BEACH AT SUNSET MAY BE TOO NARROW A NICHE MARKET."

financial support for approximately 75 percent of new churches, though the amount of support differs based on the type:

- Immigrant congregations receive the most support: typically about 60 percent of their budget, with additional financial support from a sponsoring church.
- Traditional churches receive some denominational support, though most (44 percent of their total budget) comes from their core members.
- Alternative churches receive the least support from their respective denominations, with only about one-third receiving financial assistance.

Group of laypersons. A committed group of laypersons begins another one-third of new church starts. This approach is favored by the Christian Church and is the most frequent model for starting traditional churches.

Pastor. One in five new churches is begun by a pastor who felt called to start a new church. The pastor model is most associated with alternative congregations.

Sponsoring congregation. This approach is most commonly associated with new immigrant churches.

Assessing the New Models

Most factors that predicted growth for new congregations in the past no longer do so. A few aspects are weakly associated with successful church plants or relate only to more traditional congregations. What do successful new ministries have in common?

Greater potential for growth over time. New ministries are small and slow growing. Weekly attendance at services averages about fifty-five people. Generally, eight to ten years pass before the congregation establishes a healthy financial and lay leadership base. As time goes by, the range of congregational sizes in new ministries increases because some new plants grow and others remain stable. Yet new ministries exhibit stronger overall growth patterns than all existing congregations (about 67 percent of new plants show growth compared to growth in 40 percent of existing churches).

Greater success attracting young adults. New congregations draw twice the percentage of young adults—ages eighteen to thirty-four—as do established churches. The study found that nearly a quarter of the new ministries have no members over age sixty-five.

Greater racial and ethnic diversity. Nine out of ten existing congregations in the study attract primarily white

worshippers. In new ministries, only half of the congregations could be characterized as predominately white. The remaining half draws worshippers from many different groups and substantial numbers of new immigrants from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia.

What Doesn't Matter

Many features considered essential in the past are no longer related to a congregation's impact as a new worshiping community. None of the following aspects showed up as significant predictors for long-term viability: more resources and money initially, better facilities, more advertising, more programs, more follow-up of guests, a location in a growing community, a full-time pastor, or a more experienced pastor. However, a workable plan for starting a new ministry does include: knowledge of the core values and key behaviors of the community, a specific plan for engaging people and making disciples, a strategy for financial sustainability, and some benchmarks for assessing the ministry's impact.³

Are We Church Planters Too?

The Gospel has always been contextual—reaching individuals, then their families and friends, and then their local communities. Developing new ministries requires localized, specialized, and customized strategies. The concept of narrowcasting builds on a specific calling to be a witness in a particular context.⁴

Before you or your congregation begin thinking about whether a new church start is for you, consider the following questions. Is it part of our congregation's vision to start new churches or worshiping communities? Are we local, regional, national, or international partners in efforts to develop new congregations? What kinds of people or groups are unlikely to be reached by our church but could be connected to a new church ministry?

1. All material drawn from the research of Dr. Marjorie H. Royle, "New Congregational Development in an Age of Narrow-Casting," Center for Progressive Renewal, 2014 (http://progressiverenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/New-Congregations-Narrow-casting_Final.pdf). The six study denominations: Christian Church (DOC), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Canada, and the United Church of Christ.

2. See Cynthia Woolever, "What Can We Learn from the Emerging Church Movement?" *The Parish Paper* (April, 2010).

3. "Starting New Worshiping Communities: A Process of Discernment," Guide produced by the Presbyterian Mission Agency, 1001 Worshiping Communities, 65.

4. *Ibid.*, 23.