

Study: Thousands of Churches Closing Every Year, but There Is a Silver Lining

America is launching new Protestant churches faster than it loses old ones, attracting many people who previously didn't attend anywhere, new LifeWay Research studies show.

More than 4,000 new churches opened their doors in 2014, outpacing the 3,700 that closed, according to estimates from the Nashville-based research organization based on input from 34 denominational statisticians.

And on average, 42 percent of those worshipping at churches launched since 2008 previously never attended church or hadn't attended in many years, LifeWay Research finds in an analysis of 843 such churches from 17 denominations and church planting networks.

The church planting study indicates newly planted churches are more effective than existing ones at drawing people who aren't connected with a church, said Ed Stetzer, LifeWay Research executive director.

"In winning new converts to Christ, church plants are light-years ahead of the average church because of their focus on reaching the unchurched," Stetzer said.

Characteristics of Success

Successful church launches have several factors in common, the 2015 National Church Planting Study shows:

- Meeting in a public space. New churches meeting in schools have significantly higher worship attendance than other new churches, report more new first-time commitments to Christ and are more likely to become

financially self-sufficient.

- Focusing on outreach. New churches offering sports leagues, social gatherings and children's special events are significantly more likely than other startups to be congregations with a majority of people who previously did not attend church.
- Supporting their leaders. Adequate compensation and health insurance for the church planter are linked to higher worship attendance and a greater likelihood of financial independence for the new church.
- Starting more churches. New churches that invest in church planting and launch at least one additional new church in the first five years report higher worship attendance and more new commitments to Christ.

"Healthy new churches have an outward focus from day one, communicating every month that the goal is to be a multiplying church," Stetzer said.

Back to Basics

Though some pastors bristle at new churches coming into their community, they have more to learn—and less to fear—from the startup down the street, Stetzer said.

One lesson is the value of time-tested methods. While most church plants use the Internet for outreach, 77 percent say word of mouth and personal relationships are the most effective forms of publicity. Only 6 percent say social media is most effective. Nearly two-thirds of new churches (63 percent) say Bible study is their primary small group activity.

"It's not the most innovative things that matter most. It's the nuts and bolts," Stetzer said.

"An existing church can take notice and ask, 'Hey, are we doing those things? Are we making sure people in the community know we exist? Are we inviting people to come and making them

feel welcome and all those things a church plant does?'"

In addition, Stetzer said, new churches can attract demographic groups that may be largely unreached by existing ones. Sixty percent of church plants aim to reach a cross-cultural or multiethnic group of people from the outset.

"It takes multiple methods to reach a diverse population," Stetzer said. "The United States from its founding has been a very diverse population. A one-size-fits-all church has never been part of the American equation.

"As much as ever, we need different approaches to reach different types of people."

Additional reports from the study will be available at .