

**UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHURCH PLANTERS:
A RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

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abstract

This article is the second and concluding article derived from the doctoral research project on young, male church planters initiated by Hertzberg with statistical and analytical support by Lonsway. Its goal is to recap the major initiatives in the research on church planters in the evangelical tradition and to cite their strengths and limitations, to summarize the research design and findings from Hertzberg's research using the researcher's *Church Planter Questionnaire* and the Stage II Casebook of the *ATS Profiles of Ministry* Program, and to offer a set of recommendations to strengthen and broaden the research in this vital area of church growth.

The challenge is to thoughtfully sort through the research on evangelical church planters, examine the strengths of significant projects, review the strongest current findings, and propose the next steps. The first two parts of this task were completed in our recent article in this journal, while the third has been presented in a 2008 doctoral dissertation and published in a recent issue of *Theological Education*.¹

¹ Hutz Herzberg and Francis Lonsway, "Whither Church Planting?"; Hutz Hertzberg, doctoral dissertation; and Hutz Hertzberg and Francis Lonsway, "Young Evangelical Church Planters," *Theological Education*, Volume 43, no. 2, (2008).

The heart of this article focuses on the final element, suggested next steps in this important body of work.

an essential recap, part i

Thomas Graham, Charles Ridley, and J. Allen Thompson are pioneers in exploring the character traits of evangelical church planters. H. Stanley Wood chose the same focus with his work for several mainline Protestant traditions, among them, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Reformed Church in America. The impetus for exploring this topic is not merely academic, that is, simply an opportunity to research a set of interesting questions. It is practical for at least three reasons. It is at the heart of the gospel message, tied into the continuing ferment within the evangelical movement to spread the Good News, and lastly, because of its expansion beyond the evangelical community to mainline Protestant and the Roman Catholic communities. As an example of this, Fred Barnes writes of his and his family's journey from a traditional Episcopal church to a new church plant. Titled "When the Pastor Says It's A Time to Sow," Barnes recounts his move from a 277-year-old traditional Episcopal church in northern Virginia to a church plant in a 600-seat auditorium nearby. Everything was new—the people, the focus, and the developing structure. Their new pastor was strongly influenced by Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan, who facilitated more than 100 church plants in New York and other cities around the world. Barnes observed:

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Church planting is a burgeoning movement among evangelicals who are conservative in doctrine (but not fundamentalist) and inclusive in their outreach to nonbelievers and lapsed Christians. It's a growing missionary field.²

In the mid-1980s Graham and his staff developed a profile which described the gifts, skills, abilities, and desirable traits for a church planter. It was excellent work, but three factors limit its power. The precise research methodology which led to the Fifteen Factors template has not been shared, nor did it include any instrument that had been "normed." This therefore would have given some objectivity to differences asserted to exist between church planters and non-church planters. There was also no effort to build the factors utilizing responses from individual church planters.

² Fred Barnes, "When the Pastor Says It's a Time to Sow," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2009.

Ridley avoided part of Graham's problem when building his own instrument, the *Church Planter Performance Profile*. While he applied his instrument as a gauge to assess prospective church planters, the methodology and data analysis have not been shared, nor was there any assessment tool used which would have been seen as an independent lens on the desirable set of characteristics for prospective church planters.

Thompson's work in the mid-1990s resulted in the *Church Leader Inventory (CLI)*. The goal of his research was to identify competencies, namely, the common core of values, behaviors, and attributes held to be positive characteristics of church planters.³ Unfortunately, his initial project is somewhat top heavy, much like an inverted pyramid. His ten dimensions rest on a small sample of twenty-nine church planters who responded to twelve open-ended questions, followed by a three-day consultation of ten church planters and three leader-trainers.

78 It is important to note the progression achieved in Thompson's research. While he, as his predecessors, developed an assessment instrument, this time the research methodology has been clearly and ably presented. The importance of this added feature cannot be minimized. It opens the way for subsequent research to strengthen the sample by broadening it. It lacks only a larger sample, a comparative group, and a non-intrusive, normed instrument that would highlight differences in the responses between actual and prospective church planters.

Wood's research opens additional chapters. This is the first significant study beyond the evangelical community. It also has a large sample size. His survey was completed by more than seven hundred pastors from seven mainline denominations. It consisted of fifty-eight questions. Both the sample size and the survey instrument mark a significant improvement in the effort to assess traits of church planters. Church planters who were judged "effective" or "extraordinary" ranked the importance of skills or traits from a list of items generated by the researcher, with the end result being Wood's nine qualities necessary for church planters. Wood nevertheless states the limitation of his work:

It is important to remember that these characteristics are derived from the analysis of focus-group discussions; they are neither psychometric measures nor behavioral indices. For that reason, their power and ability to inform is both limited and focused.⁴

The progression, indeed the sophistication of the research, has been impressive over the last two decades. Because the quest to identify critical characteristics of

³ Allen Thompson, "Church Planter Competencies as Perceived by Church Planters and Assessment Center Leaders: A Protestant North American Study" (Ph.D., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995), p. 9.

⁴ Stanley H. Wood, ed. *Extraordinary Leaders in Extraordinary Times*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2006), p. 50.

church planters is so important, so too, is our understanding of where we have been and what we have yet to do. We remarked in the conclusion of our last article:

The ultimate goal of each of the researchers and their various efforts has been to strengthen the ministry of church planting. For this they are to be recognized and applauded. Their weaknesses, too, are evident: failure in one instance to involve the very ministers whom they were studying, an unwillingness to share research methodology, a small sample size and, in each case, lack of an instrument independently designed to measure characteristics, attitudes, and abilities.⁵

This leads us to the next milestone, the doctoral research of Hertzberg and its core findings which were published in *Theological Education*.

an essential recap, part ii

The 2008 doctoral research project by Hertzberg benefitted substantially from the previous decades of research. It also moved the marker closer to identifying a clearer set of personal characteristics and vision for ministry which distinguish church planters from non-church planters. Two key sources present the research design, findings, and implications of this project.⁶

More than one hundred denominational leaders from evangelical traditions in the United States were asked to identify effective, young, male church planters. Their responses yielded a pool of 240 church planters who in turn were contacted by the researcher. On a parallel track, the researcher received clearance from The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and three of its evangelical seminaries to use the results of the Stage II Casebook from ATS' *Profiles of Ministry Program* to compare the responses of their graduating seminarians with those of the young church planters.⁷

The *Profiles of Ministry Program* (PoM) celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2005. Introduced in 1964, the research protocols used in the original *Readiness for Ministry Program* were replicated in 1988 after fifteen years of use and again in 2005. The instruments, with their revisions, have been used by a host of theological seminaries and church organizations in North America. It was precisely these features, namely, the length and breadth of use, systemic evaluations, revisions, and

⁵ Hutz Hertzberg and Francis Lonsway, "Whither Church Planting?" *Great Commission Research Journal*, 1:1, (Summer 2009), 97.

⁶ Hutz H. Hertzberg, "Personality Characteristics and Ministry Perceptions of Younger Evangelical Church Planters," (Ph.D., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2008); Hutz H. Hertzberg and Francis A. Lonsway, "Young Evangelical Church Planters," *Theological Education*, 43:2, 2008.

⁷ The three evangelical seminaries included Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, Dallas Theological Seminary, and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

adaptations, that were central to the researcher's decision to ground his project with this proven, reliable set of instruments.

Among the PoM's instruments is its Stage II Casebook with 528 seven-point item responses.⁸ The *Church Planter Questionnaire*, designed principally to gain key demographic information from the church planters, was also used.

More than two-fifths (43.5%) of the twenty-three characteristics measured by the Stage II casebook yielded statistically significant differences between the characteristics and traits of church planters and the graduating seminarians. The scores were presented in the study as they have been in the PoM research, namely, as either 1) personal characteristics or 2) perceptions of ministry.

Personal Characteristics. Five of the eight characteristics measured in this area of the Stage II casebook yielded significantly different responses between the church planters and the graduating seminarians. They were "Acknowledgement of Limitations," "Perceptive Counseling," "Mutual Family Commitment," "Ministry Precedence over Family," and "Belief in a Provident God." Hertzberg and Lonsway noted that:

In this cluster, church planters had three scores that set them apart from graduating seminarians. Their scores indicated that they were more likely to acknowledge their limitations, stronger in the importance they gave to spouses and children, and less likely to allow ministry to take precedence over family. Graduating seminarians, on the other hand, had higher scores in one-to-one counseling and in their belief of a provident God.⁹ (see Table 1)

Perceptions of Ministry. The PoM Stage II casebook also measures the relative importance of three broad categories of approach to ministry: Conversionist Ministry, Social Justice Ministry, and Community and Congregational Ministry. There were five statistically significant scores for church planters and graduating seminarians among these measures as well. They were "Total Concentration on Congregational Concerns," "Aggressive Political Leadership," "Balanced Approach to World Missions," "Building Congregational Community," and "Sharing Congregational Leadership." Church planters had higher scores in aggressive political leadership, a part of a social justice ministry, and in their approach to world missions. The seminarians, on the other hand, had higher scores in their focus on congregational concerns, building congregational community, and in sharing congregational leadership. (see Table 2)

⁸ The Profiles of Ministry Program has sets of instruments for those beginning theological studies (Stage I) and for those completing their graduate level programs (Stage II). Both stages use a casebook and an interview. Stage II adds a field observation form.

⁹ Hertzberg and Lonsway, *op. cit.*, p. 72

Table 1

Differing Personal Characteristics

<i>PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS</i>	<i>Church Planters</i>	<i>Graduating Seminarians</i>
	<i>N = 46</i>	<i>N = 186</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Responsible and Caring		
Personal Responsibility	2.88	2.77
Acknowledgement of Limitations	4.55*	4.32
Involvement in Caring	4.05	4.07
Perceptive Counseling	2.79	3.14*
Family Perspective		
Mutual Family Commitment	4.63*	4.35
Ministry Precedence over Family	1.93	2.29*
Personal Faith		
Belief in a Provident God	2.82	3.06*
Potential Negative		
Self-Serving Behavior	2.49	2.48

* Responses significantly differ from one another ($p < .05$)

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Table 2

Differing Perceptions of Ministry

<i>PERCEPTIONS OF MINISTRY</i>	<i>Church Planters</i>	<i>Graduating Seminarians</i>
	<i>N = 46</i>	<i>N = 186</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Conversionist Ministry		
Assertive Individual Evangelism	4.26	4.13
Precedence of Evangelistic Goals	3.31	3.21
Total Concentration on Congregational Concerns	2.54	2.94*
Law Orientation to Ethical Issues	3.15	3.04
Theologically-Oriented Counseling	3.77	3.71
Social Justice Ministry		
Aggressive Political Leadership	3.67*	3.29
Active Concern for the Oppressed	3.01	2.98
Interest in New Ideas	3.32	3.43
Community and Congregational Ministry		
Pastoral Service to All	3.73	3.78
Relating Well to Youth	3.35	3.30
Encouragement of World Missions	3.98	3.90
Balanced Approach to World Missions	4.41*	4.13
Building Congregational Community	3.20	3.57*
Conflict Utilization	3.56	3.47
Sharing Congregational Leadership	3.16	3.41*

* Responses significantly differ from one another ($p < .05$)

Final Remarks. The analysis of the data from Hertzberg's research provides tantalizing possibilities for discussion. Each finding was analyzed and suggestions for interpretation were presented in the dissertation and in the journal article cited above. The research design, built upon the earlier research projects, points to some new directions. An explicit set of suggestions is the focus of the final section of this article.

suggestions for the next critical steps

Evidence gathered since the mid-1980s suggests that the call to be a church planter in the evangelical tradition is unique. The work began with the development of a profile which described the gifts, skills, abilities, and traits desirable in a church planter (Graham), to a list of critical performance dimensions and characteristics of effective church planters (Ridley), to a set of church planter competencies as perceived by church planters themselves (Thompson). Wood followed the last methodology and applied it to nine mainline Protestant denominations.

However, it is quite one thing to separate church planters from the family of pastoral ministers and theorize about what makes them unique. It is a fundamentally different approach to compare church planters and other ministers in light of their responses to a common instrument. This is precisely what Hertzberg has done and, in so doing, has shed light on a set of characteristics in which the responses of church planters and a large sample of graduating seminarians were shown to be different in important ways.

What ought to be the design of the next study? How can one gain more insight into the personal characteristics and ministerial vision of church planters? Should such a project be possible, it would potentially enable the churches to gain insight into the special gifts for other ministries as well, for example, congregational and pastoral ministry, preaching, and domestic and international missions. Two key modifications in the research design, sample size and a different instrument, might help unlock some of the unique traits of prospective candidates. In so doing, these modifications will provide ways for churches and seminaries to better identify, nurture, and support those whom they see as the future of the church's mission.

Sample size. The Hertzberg research was able to identify a pool of 240 church planters. This is clearly a large enough sample. However, when the church planters were contacted, the rate of usable responses was only forty-six, less than a fifth (19.2%) of the group.

What happened? The denominational leaders did the job of identifying a pool of church planters and providing essential contact information to the researcher.

The researcher, in turn, contacted the young church planters, providing them with a cover letter, two research instruments, incentives for completing the material, and a return envelope. The two instruments were the brief *Church Planter Questionnaire* (CPQ) developed by the researcher and the Stage II Casebook of the *Profiles of Ministry Program*. There was an attempt to follow up each participant who had not returned the material within the time designated.

We can grant that everyone is busy whether in ministry or not. We can also grant that the young church planters may not have seen the potential impact of their participation for future church planters and, consequently, set the materials aside in order to attend to more pressing or immediate work. It is likely, too, that the study group did not have time to devote to what is probably a three- to four-hour long completion of the casebook. One can surmise all of the above reasons and more. The net effect, however, was the same. The sample size of the responding church planters was not as large as had been sought.

What are the remedies? First, the prospective pool of respondents needs to be convinced that the next project is worth their time, both for themselves and for the ministry of church planting. Second, steps need to be taken to be in telephone contact with the sample pool to monitor the progress of their response to the survey instruments. It may well be that a longer horizon for completing the materials needs to be built into the study design and that horizon be developed in light of the liturgical as well as the calendar year. Third, the next project needs to use an instrument as powerful as the casebook but one that does not take as much time to complete.

Key instruments. Hertzberg's Church Planter Questionnaire (CPQ) is a useful instrument. It could be redesigned to yield distinct categories of responses thereby increasing the ease of mining the data. The principal instrument, the *Stage II Casebook*, ought to be replaced by the more concise *Profiles of Ministry Survey*.

The instruments developed for the *Profiles of Ministry Program*, both Stage I and Stage II, rest on the research of the survey. The current version differs only slightly from the original survey instrument used in the original research *ATS Readiness for Ministry Project* in the mid-1970s. While the casebook assesses twenty-three personal characteristics, traits, and viewpoints, the survey assesses thirty-eight, nearly two-thirds more (65.2%). The length of time to complete the survey has been estimated at one and one-half to two hours versus the three and one-half to four hours it takes to complete the casebook. The difference in time between the two instruments is that the casebook requires reading a case study in its entirety before choosing a particular response. On the other hand, the survey asks how important each of the 308 items is to a prospective minister

with responses on a seven-point scale from “Highly Important” to “Not Applicable.”

There are four advantages to choosing the *Profiles of Ministry Survey* as the principal research instrument in the next study. First, responses to the instrument over its lifetime exceed 10,000.¹⁰ Second, the survey requires half the time to complete compared to the Stage II casebook and, third, the survey yields scores on nearly two-thirds more characteristics. Finally, the return rate for the three national surveys stands at approximately forty-five percent.¹¹ The percentage achieved with this instrument gives further support for its use in the next project.

looking to the next project

84 What we have outlined in this article is a series of markers indicating what research has been done in the area of church planting in the evangelical tradition and offering an outline for further research. Such an effort, if undertaken, would serve the church well. It would help candidates explore their gifts and abilities as they reflect on their call to ministry and aid seminaries and denominations seeking to identify prospective candidates for church planting. Finally, it would help church leaders, strengthened by a better idea of what characteristics and traits for which they should look, in calling and nurturing ministers graced to spread the Good News.

Both researchers are ready to support such an effort.

¹⁰ There were 5,169 usable responses in 1973–74; 2,607 in 1987–88; and 2,433 in 2002–2005. The total number of respondents was 10,209.

¹¹ The response rate in the original survey was 45.0%, 45.1% in the 1987–88 administration, and 43.7% in the thirty-year study.

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