

RESEARCH REFLECTION

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Church Planting and Survivability

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Statistics are a dangerous thing. Some use them well; some use them badly; but most evangelical leaders use them—and church planting is no exception.

One of the statistics that is frequently cited but never sourced is the survivability and health of church plants. I’ve heard quite an array of statistics—but one of my favorites is that often repeated “80 percent of new churches fail in the first year.”

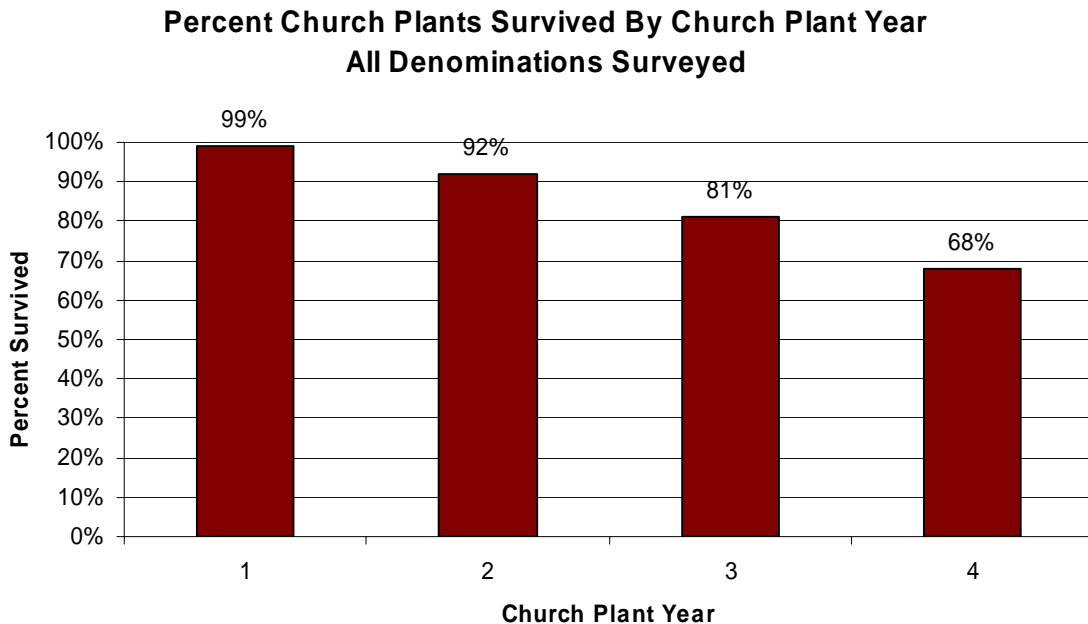
Well, not so fast.

It is not easy to determine how many actually fail, but it is an important question. We decided to try to help inform our churches and partners about what is really happening in church planting. Over the next few weeks, we will be releasing the results of our study. In this briefing, we will look at the survivability of new churches.

First, our methodology.

We shared data with 11 denominations and networks to survey more than 2,000 new churches planted from 2000 to 2005. We were able to determine the status of 1,000 of them and phone interviewed 500 of them. (The final report will include full methodology.)

We found that the survivability rate of the church plants in our study was 68 percent after four years—and this was similar in all denominations.



Many wonder what a *normal* new church growth cycle looks like. The attendance may be surprising to some, particularly those who attend conferences and hear the stories of

churches that have grown to hundreds in the first year. (That is *why* they are speaking at conferences.)

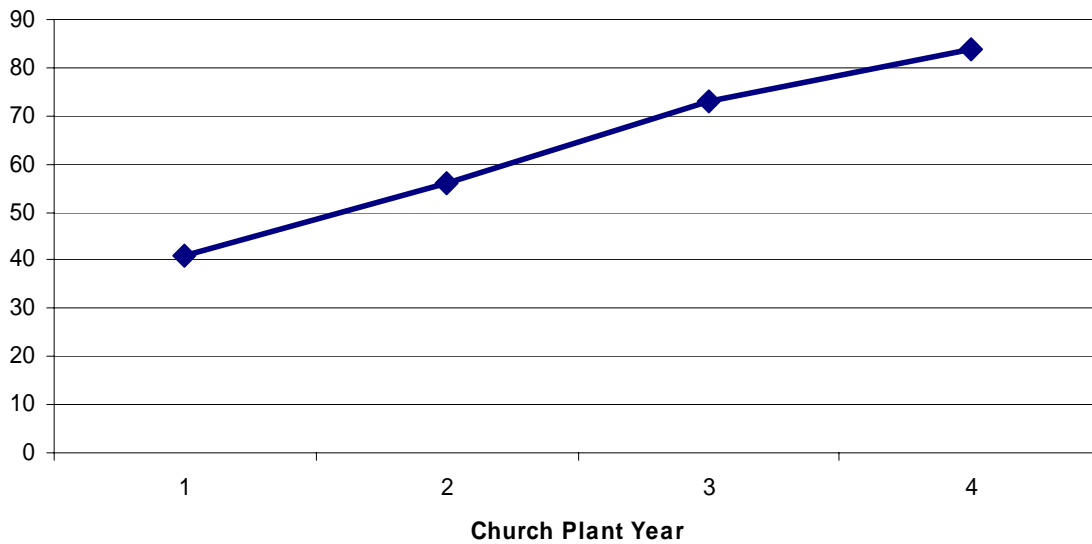
However, the reality is different. And, if church planters go in with unrealistic expectations, there are significant consequences. Although we will look at many causal factors in subsequent reports, one is important here:

Church Plant Expectations

If, for the church planter, the expectations of the church plant meet the reality of the church planting experience, the chance of survivability *increases* by over 400 percent. For example, for those planters who said their expectations were realized, 54 percent of their churches survived. For church plants that failed, 79 percent of church planters stated that their prior expectations of the church plant did not meet reality.

What, then, does a *normal* church plant attendance look like each year? The graph below illustrates:

Mean Annual Church Plant Attendance - All Denominations



Church Planting is central to the North American Mission Board's mission. Learning best practices helps us do more effective missions.

Next: we will examine survivability more closely and the factors that lead to it.

–Ed Stetzer is the Missiologist and Senior Director of NAMB's Center for Missional Research.