Texas New Church Starts 1985 – 2005

Learnings from Successes and Failures among New Church Starts
An Initial Examination Focusing on Five Annual Conferences with Detailed Analysis of the Texas Conference

A Research Project Sponsored by the Texas Methodist Foundation

by

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The Texas Methodist Foundation provided a grant to the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary in 2006 to examine the successes and failures among new church starts since 1985 within five Texas conferences. The Lewis Center developed and implemented the project with RRC, Inc., of Bryan, Texas. The two principal researchers were Dr. Donald R. House, president of RRC, Inc., and Dr. Lovett H. Weems, Jr., executive director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership.

By design, the examination focused upon new church starts within the Texas Annual Conference in order to collect more extensive information through interviews with clergy and laity. The examination required approximately ten months to complete due to the difficulties in completing interviews with founding pastors and establishing the locations of new churches that have closed. The results of this examination are necessarily incomplete since there is much more study to be conducted, requiring further data collection and extensions among other annual conferences.

Beginning Understandings

One must begin with a clear definition of a new church start, but even this task is somewhat difficult. Some new church starts begin with a decision by a district superintendent who assembles church leaders to plan the new church. Planning entails the selection of a founding pastor, the general location of the church, and considerations for early funding of the effort. Others involve little planning—perhaps an effort on the part of a local church to begin a church service in a separate location and facility to minister to a new, expanded, or different population group, ultimately evolving into a stand-alone congregation or a separate campus of the same congregation (not technically a new church start). To some, the latter example is merely a mission outreach by a local congregation, but, to others, the example is indeed a new church start, fostered by a local congregation.

There are other models as well. The definition used in this study necessarily includes examples of various methods. The histories of some of the older efforts to begin a new congregation are not complete. There may be some new church starts that have been forgotten and can no longer be recognized. Those that were assigned a new GCFA church number are easier to identify, but even some of these have no reported statistical information. For some, there is no record of a founding pastor—only a notation "TBA" or "to be announced." For our purposes, a new church start is broadly defined as those efforts that were considered new church starts by their annual conferences but included in the analysis only if sufficient information is available. That means that some reporting will use different sets of numbers for "new church starts." The detailed demographic and statistical analysis is available only for new starts that progressed far enough to receive a GCFA ID number and to make a statistical report for at least one year. On the other hand, information about the founding pastor or whether the church is still meeting normally can be included in the reporting. For our purposes, the product of mergers of two existing congregation is not considered a new church start.

It is generally understood that the purpose of a new church start is to make disciples of Jesus Christ through the United Methodist witness. It is reasonable to expect that such expanded witness will result in increased membership and attendance in these churches. It is under this understanding

that this examination is designed and conducted. We assume that, while not the only expectation, there is an expectation that every new church start seeks to expand membership and attendance.

Occasionally, an existing church will become inactive and the end-of-year statistical reports will depict no activity—no attendance, no members, no expenditures. After a time, the church will return with attendance, members, and expenditures. This revival of an existing church, for our purposes, is viewed as a new church start, even if the original name is maintained.

Interviews and Data Assembly

This examination largely focuses upon new church starts within the state of Texas, with specific focus upon the Texas Annual Conference. Data collection began with the identification of new church starts within the Texas Annual Conference. Several sources were used to make the identification. First, annual conference journals were reviewed that listed some of the new church starts. These journals were not always complete in their listings. Second, annual statistical reports were reviewed in search of new church names or new church numbers. Third, listings of potential new church starts were reviewed by several annual conference leaders to provide a brief history. And fourth, founding pastors were interviewed in order to clarify differences between new church starts, mergers, and re-appearances of established churches after temporary closers.

Each identified founding pastor was asked to participate in an interview or survey in which key information was recorded. Unfortunately, it was not possible to gather information from every founding pastor—particularly among pastors of new churches that have since closed. A few of the founding pastors are now retired and could not be located for an interview. It became apparent during this study that the interviews might best be completed by an annual conference clergy leader who might encourage better participation. While all planned interviews were not completed, considerable survey information was obtained that supports some of the conclusions presented in a later section of this report. In the Texas Conference, names of laity active in the early years of the congregation were requested so they could be surveyed. A number responded, though all of them came from either churches just started or from churches that had reached 350 or more average worship attendance so limited observations can be drawn.

For the other annual conferences within the state of Texas, new church starts were identified through an examination of statistical reports and interviews with annual conference leaders. For statistical purposes, a church was identified as a new church start if during the period 1985 through 2005, a new church number appeared. In one case, the re-appearances of an old number after two years of inactivity is considered a new church start.

Information concerning pastors came from two sources: pension files and annual statistical reports. The Texas Annual Conference constructed a computerized repository of church and clergy records that provides a valuable link between clergy and local churches between 1985 and 2005. This computer data base was used to identify founding pastors and, in many instances, their ages, gender, and clergy credentials. The most complete clergy information, however, is limited to clergy who participate in the annual conference pension program. Texas Conference statistical files, in cases in which the founding pastor did not participate in the annual conference pension program, were used to identify pastor names. In some instances, searches through the annual conference

journals were necessary to identify pastor names when missing in the statistical reports. A complete set of annual conference journals were assembled over the 1985-2005 period.

Some of the new church starts in the Texas Annual Conference received external financial support—either through the annual conference or through the districts. For most of the period under inquiry, the Houston Board of Missions operated as a vehicle for administering financial support for new church starts among the five districts within Harris County. Records from the Houston Board of Missions were collected, and one of its key employees was interviewed on multiple occasions.

Additionally, the annual conference maintained a Fair Share Goal for new church starts. Twice each year a committee distributed the funds received among selected projects, most of which were new church starts. These records were obtained, including the exact funds used in support of specific new church starts. It was difficult, if not impossible, to record all additional financial support a new church start received from local churches. In at least one instance, the total external funding support was recorded. Among new church starts among the other annual conferences included in the study, no records of external financial support were obtained.

The physical addresses of new church starts were recorded for almost all identified new church start across the annual conferences. There were very few exceptions. The physical addresses were obtained from internet searches, reviews of annual conference journals, interviews with district staff, interviews with historical archive personnel, and interviews with founding pastors. The physical addresses were entered into computer software that provides geographical codes, pin-pointing exact locations on a map. At times, the locations were identified using Google Earth®, following rural highways and recognizing building tops. For the Texas Annual Conference, all church locations were identified in order to consider the importance of neighboring United Methodist churches.[1]

With the identification of all church locations in the Texas Annual Conference, it is possible to examine the impact of the presence of "neighboring" United Methodist congregations on the new church. It is also possible to examine the impact of the new church start on attendance and membership among "neighboring" United Methodist congregations. Exact locations of all churches among the remaining annual conferences in the state of Texas have not been collected.

With the geographical codes for each church, supporting demographic data were obtained for the years 1990 and 2000. The data are reported down to the census block—representing a very small geographic area, such as a few city blocks. The demographic data include family incomes, ages, educational attainment, and ethnicity among residents within the census block. With specially designed computer software, it is possible to review the demographics within any specified radius drawn around a geographic point on the map. For our purposes, it is possible to record the demographic data from the resident population within (say) four miles of the location of a new church start for both 1990 and 2000. These data provide an important record of sizes and characteristics of resident populations around a new church start. In addition, it provides a basis for estimating changes in the resident population around a new church start. For instance, the data

[1] Out of over 700 churches, only nine local churches were not located. These churches were quite small and located in rural areas. None of these churches that could not be located are believed to be in the vicinity of any of the identified new church starts.

provides a record of a neighborhood that moves from high income to low income over the decade. It records the growth in middle and high income families in the neighborhood. It records the neighborhood gains and losses of children in the neighborhood.

The interviews with founding pastors included several key questions. The number of completed surveys or interviews with founding pastors was limited by the number choosing to participate; however, interviews or surveys were completed across all of the annual conferences.

Specific community-level religious information has been collected by private organizations, given the prohibition of government-collected religious information.[2] Two types of information at the county level have been assembled: number of residents who attend religious services, and the number of religious congregations (or churches). These data are used to provide a type of religious involvement of the residents of a county. It is assumed that the level of religious activity in a community will affect a United Methodist new church start.

Finally, the end-of-year statistical reports were obtained from the *General Minutes* between 1985 and 2005. Three key variables were extracted from these data files: average worship attendance, total expenditures, and members joining through profession of faith. The *General Minutes* were also used to identify the names of founding pastors.

Data Problems and Corrections

For a few new church starts, annual statistical data are missing for one or two years. In particular, attendance can be reported as zero for a year when attendance was positive for both the previous year and the following year and membership is positive for the year in which attendance is reportedly zero. In instances in which positive attendance is reported for the previous and following year, the average of the two years' attendance is included in place of the zero reported attendance.

For some, zero attendance is reported for multiple years when membership records are positive and expenditures are positive. In these instances, attendance is estimated to be 75% of the membership figure.

The year in which a church began is often recorded in the annual conference journal (though not always). The recorded year may or may not be consistent with the year implied by the statistical data. For our purposes in analyzing demographics and statistical reports, the year a church began is the first year in which positive attendance is reported. The year in which a church closed is the last year in which positive attendance is reported. In work with the founding pastor information, the beginning year used is when the pastor was first assigned.

[2] These data were obtained from the Association of Religious Data Archieves, downloaded from http://www.thearda.com/. See http://www.thearda.com/Archive/ChCounty.asp for listing of county-level data sets. The ARDA website (www.thearda.com) is referenced by the Census Bureau as a source for religious affiliation data. See http://www.census.gov/prod/www/religion.htm.

There were several new churches started in 2005, but few reported any statistical figures by year-end. Accordingly, these were not counted as new church starts but likely will be counted in future studies. Only one church is recognized as a new church start in 2005.[3]

Two Ways to Measure "Success" Rates

There are two equally important ways to look at the success rates for new church starts within conferences. We report both. One is to examine all the new church starts attempted by a conference and to see how many of them are still reporting worship attendance in the most recent year. These figures are shown in Appendix A. This calculation includes churches that never got off the ground sufficiently to receive a GCFA ID number and to report annual statistics. The overall success rate for the five conferences is 64%, which matches some other research regarding new church success across multiple denominations. Success rates across these conferences range from 52% to 74%. However, some conferences with lower success percentages did better in developing churches that had higher and median average worship attendance after seven years.

The other set of numbers will be used in the remainder of the report. Here the new church starts are limited to those churches that did get far enough to receive a GCFA ID number and report annual statistics for at least one year. Some of these churches were closed later. The total number of new church starts in these calculations will be lower since those efforts that never got off the ground are not included due to the absence of useable statistics.

New Church Starts: The Texas Annual Conference

Thirty-two new church starts with sufficient statistical information were identified within the Texas Annual Conference, beginning in 1985 and ending in 2003.[4] Table 1 below lists the names of the new churches, the year of first attendance reported, and the last year of reported attendance (if applicable).

[3] This single new church start is El Buen Samaritano from the Central Texas Annual Conference.
[4] There were no new church starts to be included from 2003 records. New churches that were started in 2005 were excluded from the statistical analysis were excluded due to the limited attendance history. These 2005 starts will be included as this work is updated in the future.

Table 1
New Churches
Texas Annual Conference

Church	Yr_Open	Yr_Close
San Marcos, Baytown	1986	
Covenant Glen, Missouri City	1989	
Scottsville Mission, Scottsville	1989	
San Paulo, Bryan	1990	1997
Bay Harbour, Houston	1990	
Faith UMC, Richmond	1990	
Newgate, Longview	1990	1993
Christ UMC, The Woodlands	1991	
Dong San, Houston	1991	
Vida Nueva Iglesia Metodista Unida, Houston	1991	
Filadelfia, Houston	1992	
Good Shepherd, Fairfield	1992	
Abundant Life, Lufkin	1992	
Rocky Springs, Jefferson	1992	2004
Edgebrook Community, Houston	1993	
Abundant Life, Houston	1993	
Faro De Luz, Mt. Pleasant	1993	
Christ UMC, College Station	1995	
Veterans Memorial, Houston	1996	
Grace Fellowship, Katy	1997	
Parkway, Houston	1997	
New Community, Jacksonville	1997	
First UMC, Tyler	1997	
St. Lukes, Huntsville	1997	
Trinity, Houston	1999	
Shepherd of the Heart, Pearland	1999	
Faithbridge,	1999	
Casa de Albanza, Houston	1999	
Wildwood, Magnolia	2001	
Sienna Harvest	2002	
NewBirth, Longview	2002	2004
Lake Palestine, Lake Palestine	2002	

There are a few churches that deserve special mention. Rocky Springs was a new church start within the Texarkana District which merged with Warlock UMC in 2005. McCabe Roberts is listed as a new church start in some materials, but it represents a merger between two existing congregations. Savannah is currently operating under a new name—Living Water. Summerwood is has also been known as FaithQuest. Sienna Harvest was earlier known as Church of the Promise. Covenant Glen of Missouri City is viewed as a new church start since its predecessor, Parker Memorial, had closed for at least a year. Edgebrook Community changed its name to Imani Christian Life and is now known as Hope UMC. First Korean, Beaumont has statistical information recorded only beginning in 2006. Veterans Memorial left the United Methodist denomination in 2002. Other new church

starts with worship attendance records beginning in 2005 were excluded from the analysis due to the limited attendance history.[5]

New Church Starts: Four Other Annual Conferences

Table 2 presents the number of new church starts with statistical information among the remaining four annual conferences. (Two other conferences not included in this research project also have churches in Texas--the Rio Grande Annual Conference and the New Mexico Conference—but in both cases their churches cover areas outside of Texas. Due to the limitations of this study, inclusion of these annual conferences was not possible.

Table 2
Number of New Church Starts
Five Annual Conferences in Texas
(for new starts progressing far enough to receive an ID number and report statistics)

Conference	Started	Continuing	Percent
Central Texas	21	17	81.0%
North Texas	39	30	76.9%
Texas	30	23	76.7%
Northwest Texas	11	6	54.5%
Southwest Texas	17	13	76.5%
Total	118	89	75.4%

Of these 118 new church starts from 1985, 75.4% remained active by the end of 2005. However, some remaining churches are likely to close in the near future, particularly if the new churches are relatively young. Table 3 presents the number of "surviving" new churches and the average age of these churches as of the end of 2005.

Table 3
Surviving New Churches and Average Age

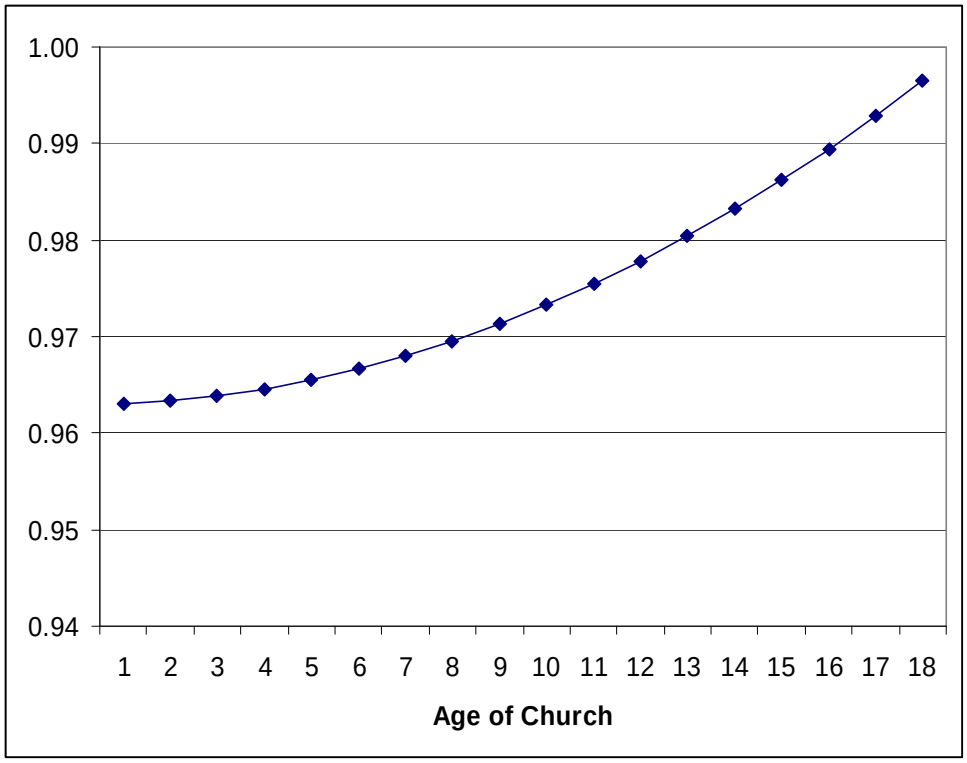
Conference	Number	Age
Central Texas	17	11.41
North Texas	30	8.43
Texas	23	11.65
Northwest Texas	6	14.17
Southwest Texas	13	12.62
Total	89	10.83

Northwest Texas reports the largest percentage of closures, but the remaining survivors are relatively old.

[5] This 2005 group of churches includes St. Lukes (Bryan), Summerwood (Houston), Savannah (Pearland), and Gateway Community (Houston).

With the existing evidence, it is possible to calculate the likelihood of the next year's continuation of a new church start. Figure 1 below presents the predicted results from a regression analysis of new church closures and the age of the new church.

Figure 1
Probability of New Church Survival
For One Additional Year



These results, as expected, indicate that the longer new church start has survived, the greater the likelihood of continual survival. The most difficult years are the first few years of operation. A new church that has remained in operation for several years is more likely to continue an additional year than one that has been in operation for a much shorter time.

An Overview of the Data

This study's statistical analysis concentrates upon new churches started between 1985 and 2005.[6] Table 4 presents the distribution of these new church starts among the years.

Table 4
Number of New Church Starts
All Annual Conferences in Texas

[6] New churches established in 2005 have had no effective time to establish any trends.

Year	Number
1985	5
1986	7
1987	7
1988	1
1989	8
1990	7
1991	6
1992	11
1993	3
1994	2
1995	2
1996	8
1997	10
1998	2
1999	8
2000	3
2001	2
2002	4
2003	16
2004	5
2005	1
Total	118

Interestingly, the numbers of new church starts were not evenly distributed across the years. There were 20 identified new churches started in 2003 and only one new church start in 1994 and in 2000.

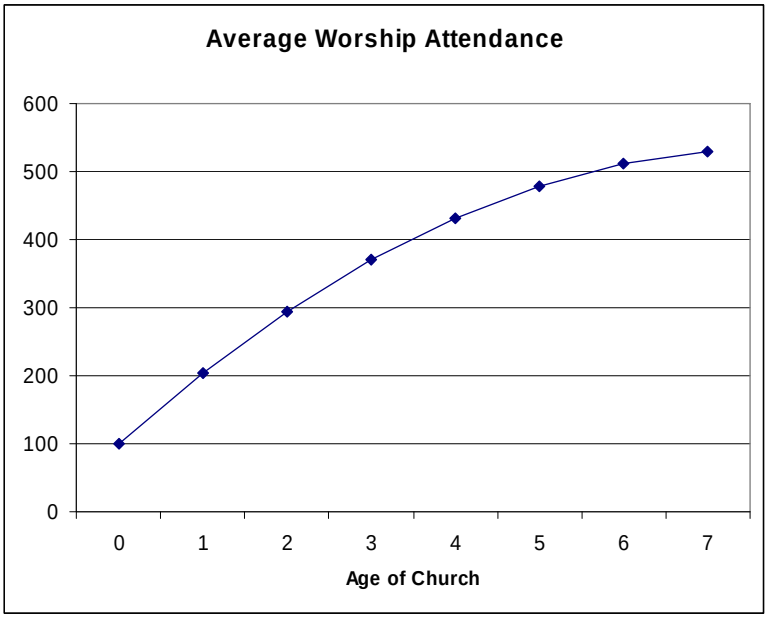
An important part of the analysis requires the specific location of each new church start. At present, there are only two new church addresses that could not be obtained. For the remaining new churches, exact locations were identified and demographic data were obtained for 1990 and 2000.[7]

The Growth Path of a New Church Start

Among the 118 new church starts, there is a general worship attendance growth trend among those that survive. The new church experiences its most rapid growth in the first few years. With time, the annual gains in membership become smaller. Figure 2 below presents the projected attendance growth of the average new church start.

[7] In only a few instances, locations were estimated. For example, Harker Heights Korean UMC, a new church start which closed in 1990, was located on the main street of Harker Heights, in the absence of a specific address. Pottsboro UMC which closed in 1986 was located in the center of Pottsboro, Texas, in the absence of a specific address.

Figure 2
Projected Attendance Growth Path



Note that by year seven projected attendance reaches about 530. For many starts, worshipers are meeting in an owned church building, having met in a school facility for three to four years. Some will have established two worship services as the new facility might not accommodate enough to average 530 attendees in one service. However, there are variations across new church starts. At present, there is insufficient information to determine the importance of the size of the first worship area in determining average worship attendance.

As will be discussed below, the growth paths of new church starts are affected by several identifiable factors, including population growth, age of founding pastor, family income of the resident population, ethnic and racial composition of the resident population, and others. This information serves as a basis of considering locations of future new church starts.

Site Selections: Population Growth and Composition

Among the five annual conferences included in this study, the characteristics of the communities in which the new churches were planted differ considerably. On the basis of population growth alone, there are significant differences. Table 5 below presents the average growth in population within a 4-mile radius of each new church start between 1990 and 2000.

Table 5
Population Growth Within a
4-Mile Radius of a New Church Start
1990 – 2000

Conference	New	Pct
Central Texas	16,236	37.4%
North Texas	29,170	29.6%
Texas	17,861	16.7%
Northwest Texas	3,574	4.7%
Southwest Texas	9,841	50.5%

As presented, the typical new church start in North Texas was placed in a neighborhood in which population growth averaged 29,170 between 1990 and 2000. This growth in population was limited to a 4-mile radius around the location of the new church. This 29,170 additional residents stands in stark contrast to the population growth reported in the Northwest Texas Annual Conference—only 3,574 gain in population over ten years. The Texas Annual Conference averaged 17,861, but was only 61% of the figure for North Texas. These figures, however, do not address the availability of locations for new church starts. One might conclude that areas of greatest population growth were sought and that these figures represent the best opportunities available. The evidence presented later in this report, however, suggests that this is not the case. There appears to have been other locations with better conditions for new church starts.

For the Texas Annual Conference, it is possible to compare the characteristics of the neighborhood surrounding new church starts and the neighborhood surrounding existing churches. Table 6 presents the population growth surrounding new church starts and surrounding existing churches in the Texas Annual Conference.

Table 6
Population Growth Within a
4-Mile Radius: New and Existing Churches
Texas Conference
1990 – 2000

	New	Existing	TAC	State
Population Growth	17,861	4,445	13,507	
Percent Growth	16.7%	16.7%	16.9%	22.8%

As presented, the typical new church was placed in a neighborhood with a population growth that is four times the growth in population surrounding existing United Methodist churches. There are 1,435 census tracts within the boundaries of the Texas Annual Conference, and the average population growth within a 4-mile radius of the population center of each census tract equals 13,507. Interestingly, this growth is about three times that of the growth surrounding existing United Methodist churches. Clearly, population growth was an important criterion for new church start site selections, and existing United Methodist churches are poorly positioned to capture the full impact of population growth.

There are other factors that can be compared between neighborhoods surrounding new churches and neighborhoods surrounding existing churches. Table 7 presents a selection of comparisons.

Table 7
Neighborhood Characteristics[8]
New Churches vs. Existing Churches
Texas Conference

	Over $75K	College	Over 65	% Asian
New Church Starts	10.1%	58.5%	8.2%	6.5%
Existing Churches	3.8%	40.1%	13.5%	1.7%

Within the Texas Annual Conference, new churches were placed in neighborhoods in which 10.1% of the population earned incomes in excess of $75,000 per year. This compares to only 3.8% of the population where existing churches reside. On average, 58.5% of the population surrounding new church starts reports an educational attainment level of at least a college degree—compared to 40.1% for existing churches. Only 8.2% of the surrounding population reached the age of 65 and over, compared to 13.5% for existing churches. A surprising 6.5% of the population surrounding a new church start is reported as Asian in race compared to only 1.7% for existing churches.

Foundation Equation

The data assembled for this study offer considerable opportunity to examine carefully the factors that contribute to the growth of a new church start. The data include 118 new church starts within 118 differing neighborhoods, in the presence of differing numbers of other United Methodist congregations. For example, the percent of the population with incomes over $100,000 within a 4-mile radius of a new church start ranges from less than 1% of the population to over 15% of the population. The percent of the population over the age of 64 within 4 mile of the church varies between 3% and 31%. Population growth between 1990 and 2000 within a 4-mile radius of the church ranges from a low of a loss of 279 to a gain of over 70,000. In short, the conditions under which new churches were started among the five annual conferences varied considerably. This variation offers an opportunity to determine the importance of these differences.

There are many factors that could be considered important, but after many evaluations, the following factors were deemed important for the larger groups of new church starts:

[8] Again, the neighborhood is defined as a 4-mile radius around the church.

Table 8
Variables and Definitions

Variable	Definition
yrs_open	Number of years the new church has held worship services
population	Population within 4-miles of the new church
percent_100+	Percent of the population with incomes greater than $100,000
competing_5	Number of United Methodist churches within a 5-mile radius
percent_65+	Percent of the population ages 65 and above

The results of the estimation of the foundation equation are as follows:

Table 9
Foundation Equation[9]

```
Random-effects GLS regression                   Number of obs      =       349
Group variable (i): rectype                     Number of groups   =        32

R-sq:  within  = 0.4566                         Obs per group: min =         1
       between = 0.2793                                        avg =      10.9
       overall = 0.2736                                        max =        19

Random effects u_i ~ Gaussian                   Wald chi2(6)       =    239.21
corr(u_i, X)       = 0 (assumed)                Prob > chi2        =    0.0000

------------------------------------------------------------------------------
      attend |      Coef.   Std. Err.      z    P>|z|     [95% Conf. Interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
    yrs_open |   104.8553   42.78935     2.45   0.014      20.9897    188.7209
   yrs_open2 |  -4.159189    1.95001    -2.13   0.033    -7.981138   -.3372396
  population |     .00611   .0010462     5.84   0.000     .0040595    .0081606
 competing_5 |  -46.09334   12.59024    -3.66   0.000    -70.76975   -21.41693
percent_100+ |   1626.465   246.2638     6.60   0.000     1143.797    2109.133
 percent_65+ |     2518.2   860.9456     2.92   0.003     830.7771    4205.622
       _cons |  -938.4174   232.2082    -4.04   0.000    -1393.537   -483.2976
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
     sigma_u |  243.54209
     sigma_e |  130.15899
         rho |  .77783017   (fraction of variance due to u_i)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
```

The regression results contain several important statistics. The column labeled “Coef.” contains the regression coefficients for each variable included in the regression. The interpretation of a coefficient is important. Each coefficient indicates the extent to which attendance changes in response to a change in the variable in question. For example, an increase in population of 1,000 will result in an increase in attendance of 6.1 (1,000 times .006611).

The results support the following conclusions:

1. Worship attendance increases with the age of the new church
2. Worship attendance increases with population growth
3. Worship attendance is greater in neighborhoods with a greater proportion of higher income residents

[9] The regression equation constant term is labeled _cons. For these purposes, its regression coefficient has little meaning.

4. Worship attendance is greater in neighborhoods with a greater proportion of persons 65 years of age and older

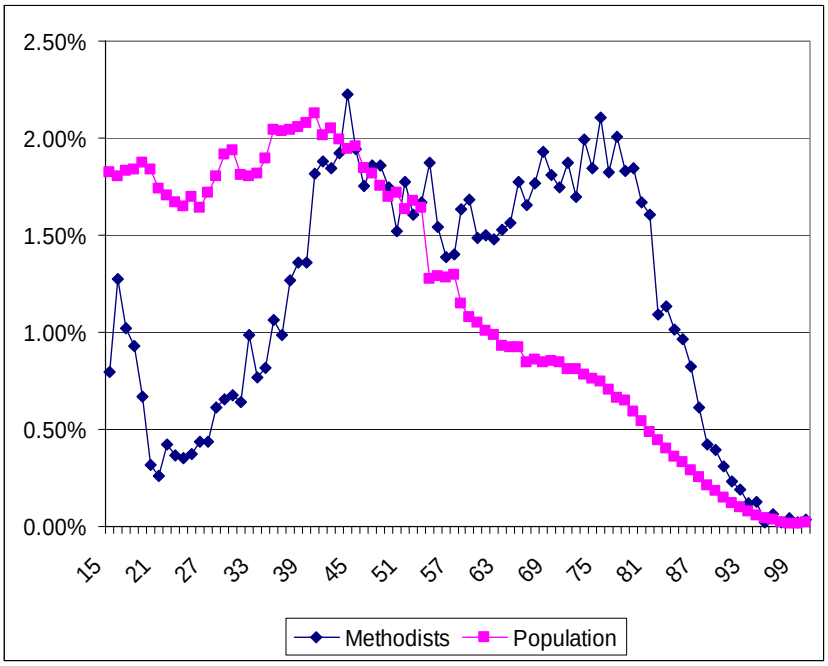
These results deserve comment. New churches grow in attendance faster if they are placed in faster growing communities. This appears consistent with the practice of placing churches in the faster growing communities. However, the interaction terms indicate that the response to population growth is conditioned by the number of other United Methodist churches in the area. All else being equal, attendance is less in communities with a larger number of other United Methodist churches within a 5-mile radius.

Attendance is greater in communities with a higher percentage of high income residents and older residents. This is consistent with other evidence indicating that our denomination attracts relatively high income members.[10] The importance of older residents may be puzzling to some. It is generally believed that new churches target communities with growing numbers of young families. That may be true.

Figure 3 below compares the age distribution of the US population and the age distribution of attendees of United Methodist churches in the US.

[10] *Report of the Connectional Ministry Funding Patterns Task Force II,* GCFA, August 2007, p. 32.

Figure 3
Age Distributions: US Population and
Worship Attendees among United Methodist Churches



The US population is under-represented among residents under the age of 45 and is over-represented among residents over the age of 55. This suggests that United Methodist churches find it relatively difficult to attract young people and much less difficult to attract older people. With this, it indicates that a new church start will have greater success in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of older people and less success in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of younger people. The empirical results are consistent with this other evidence.

Many from other denominations report different experiences, finding that new church starts depend upon young families to form a foundation for growth. In our denomination, there are successful new church starts that depend upon young families for growth, but these results underscore the importance of a presence of older, high income families in the community. More research is needed to determine if this relation is unique to Texas or shared across a larger geographic area.

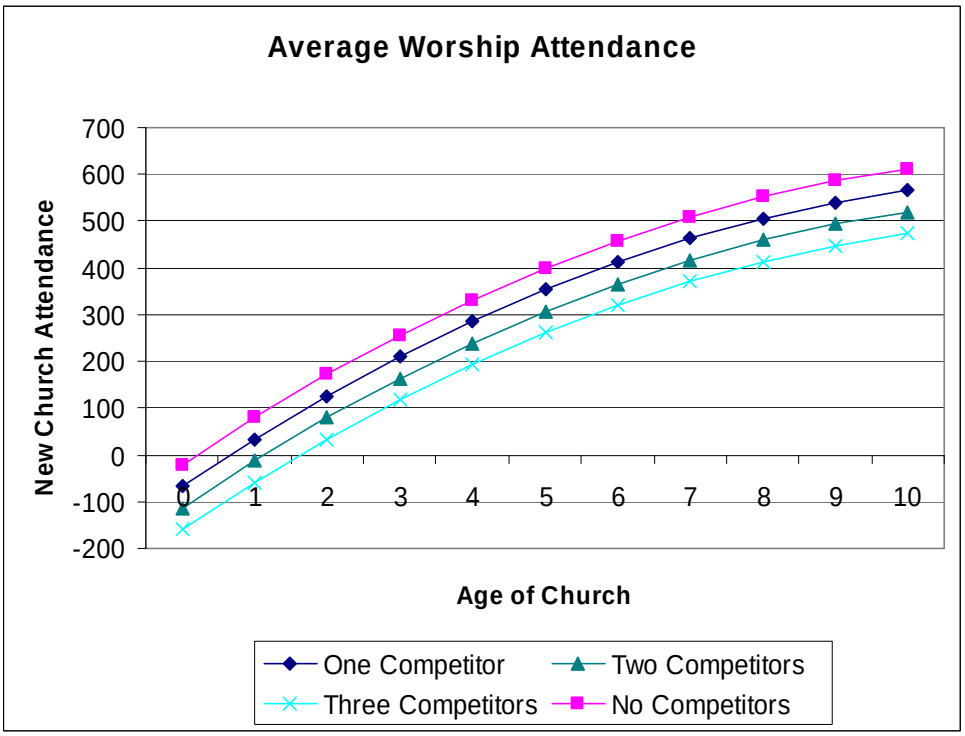
"Competing" United Methodist Churches (Texas Conference)

Many church planters take into consideration the presence of other United Methodist churches in the vicinity of a proposed new church start. There is anecdotal evidence that a new church start can draw members from a neighboring United Methodist church. Some new church starts are planned to draw some members from other United Methodist churches as a means of building a membership foundation.

From the Texas Annual Conference, information was gathered from every United Methodist church, including attendance, total expenditures, professions and faith, and exact location. It is therefore possible, for example, to count the total attendance of neighboring United Methodist churches and measure the change in this total in response to a new church start. The results of this analysis indicate that the establishment of a new church does, in fact, draw worship attendees from neighboring United Methodist churches within a 5-mile radius.

Figure 4 offers a graphical expression of these results.

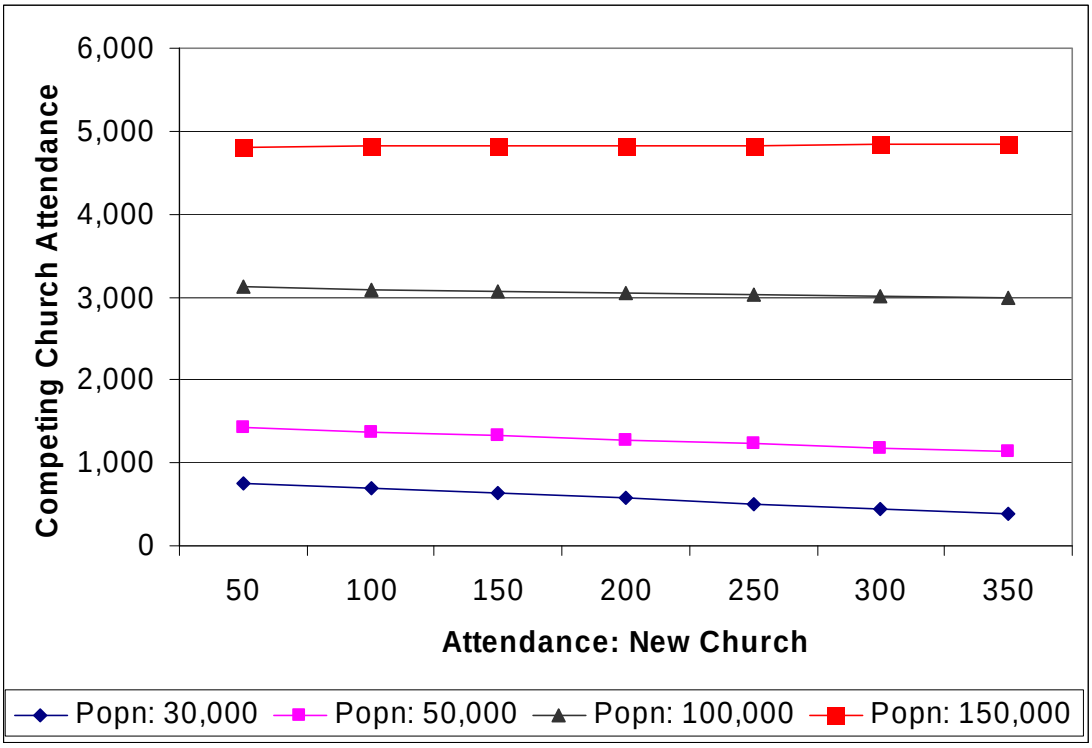
Figure 4
Worship Attendance Growth Paths
With the Presence of Other United Methodist Churches
Texas Conference



The number of neighboring United Methodist churches within a 5-mile radius are designated in the graph as "competitors." As indicated, the potential growth of a new church start is reduced with the presence of other United Methodist churches within a 5-mile radius.

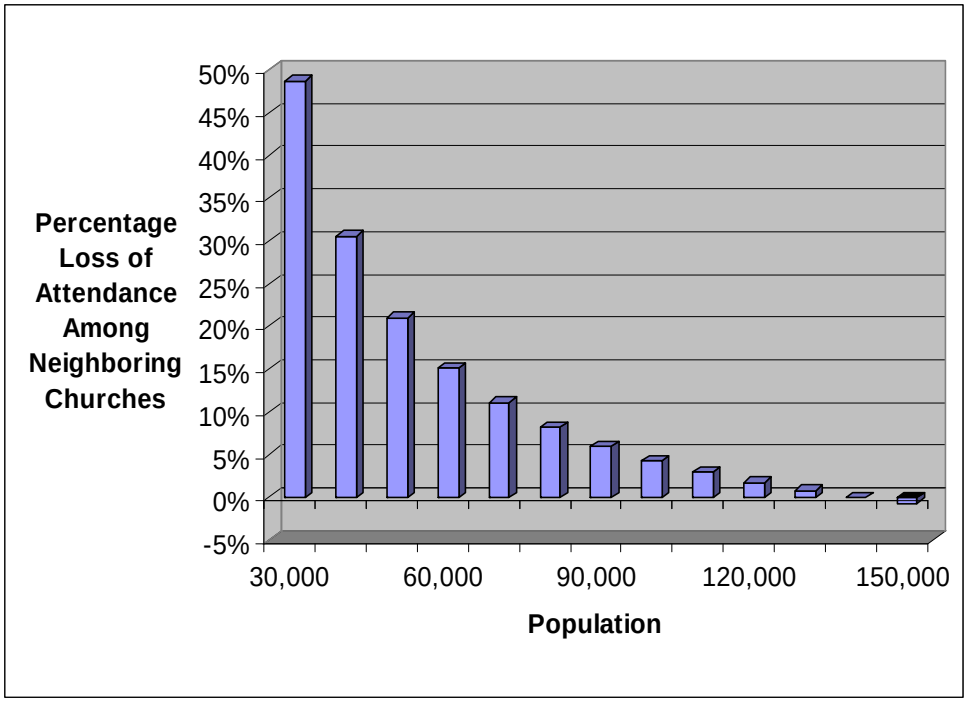
The results also indicate that the size of attendance loss among neighboring United Methodist churches depends upon the size of the community. Figure 5 below presents the total attendance among neighboring United Methodist churches in response to attendance growth within a new church start.

Figure 5
Attendance among Neighboring United Methodist Churches
and New Church Attendance: By Size of Neighborhood
Texas Conference



This evidence indicates that the "penalty" paid among neighboring United Methodist churches varies with the size of the community. The decrease in membership in a neighborhood of 30,000 as a new church grows from 50 in attendance to 350 in attendance is clearly visible—the lowest curve. However, the decrease in attendance in a neighborhood of 150,000 is hardly perceptible. This conclusion is more easily detected in the following figure.

Figure 6
Loss of Attendance among Neighboring
United Methodist Churches: By Size of Neighborhood
New Church Attendance: 50 to 350
Texas Conference



This figure illustrates the relation between loss of attendance among neighboring United Methodist churches and population size. As attendance in a new church start grows from 50 to 350, attendance among neighboring United Methodist churches decreases by 49% in neighborhoods of only 30,000 residents. However, as the new church start attendance grows from 50 to 350 in neighborhoods of 150,000, the loss of attendance is virtually zero. A new church start in an area with a relatively large population will have no measurable effect worship attendance among neighboring United Methodist churches.[11]

Net Gains from New Church Starts

If the growth in attendance of a new church start results in a decline in attendance among neighboring United Methodist churches, is there a measurable net gain from a new church start? Clearly, the gain in membership only within the new church overstates the overall impact of the new church start.

[11] The analysis is not yet complete. This examination totals attendance among United Methodist churches with a 5-mile radius. A more extended analysis would examine total attendance among differing radii to determine how far out the effect is measurable.

Table 10 below presents the regression coefficients of population among new church starts and existing churches in equations explaining differences in worship attendance.

Table 10
Worship Attendance Regression Equations
Population Regression Coefficients
New and Existing Churches
Texas Conference

New	0.006044
Existing	0.002034

It is notable that the coefficient for new churches (0.0060) is greater than the coefficient for existing churches (0.0020). These coefficients can be used to calculate the net gain in attendance from a new church start compared to the gain in attendance among existing churches in the absence of a new church start.

Table 11 presents the calculated comparisons between expected attendance gains from a 10,000 person increase in population within a 4-mile radius of a new church start and of existing churches in the absence of a new church start.

Table 11
Net Worship Attendance Gains
from a 10,000 Increase in Population
Texas Conference

New Church Start	
New	60.4
Existing	-22.4
Net Gain	38.0
Existing (No New Church)	
Average	20.3

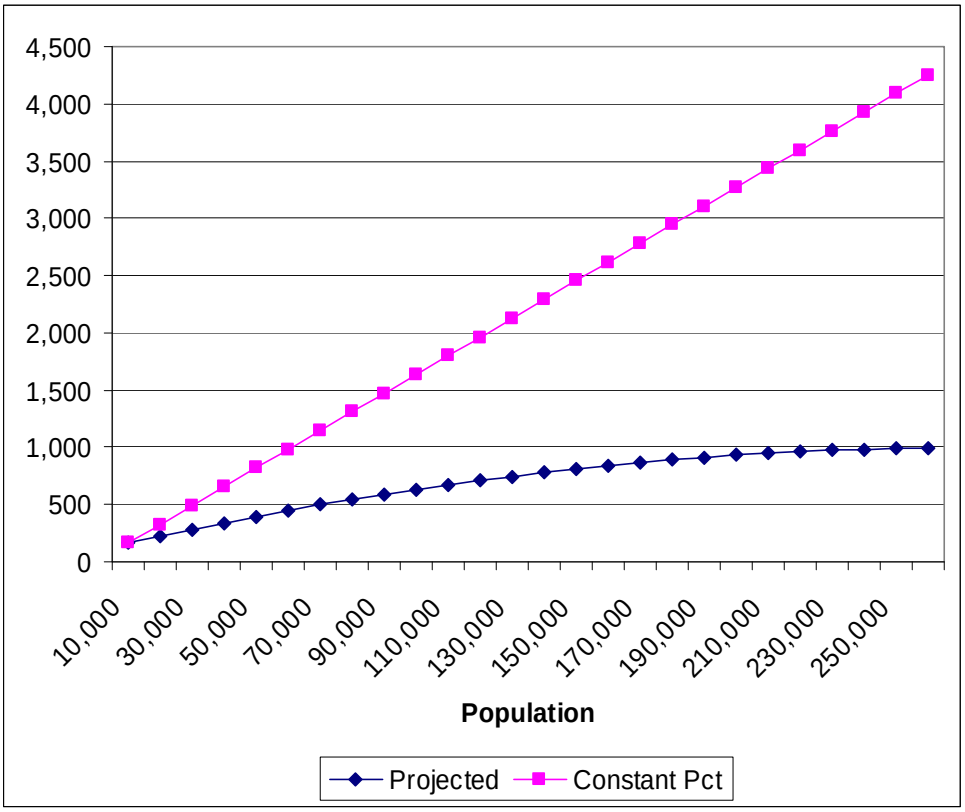
On average, a new church start in the presence of a 10,000 increase in population will experience a 60.4 gain in attendance, but neighboring United Methodist churches will experience a 22.4 loss in attendance. The net gain in attendance equals 38.0. In contrast, existing United Methodist churches would experience a 20.3 gain in attendance in the absence of a new church start.

In summary, the establishment of a new church in the presence of an increase in population yields a gain in attendance that is 87% greater than the gain that would have been achieved through existing United Methodist churches alone. It should be clear that some existing United Methodist churches would not welcome a new church start, given the attendance penalty imposed. However, in the larger communities, the penalty is quite small or imperceptible. In the smaller communities, the penalty is significant.

Keeping Pace with Population Growth

A careful examination of attendance growth patterns among existing churches suggests that without new church starts the United Methodist church cannot keep pace with population growth. Figure 7 below presents the expected attendance growth of an existing United Methodist church in the presence of an increasing population within a 4-mile radius, in the absence of a new church start.

Figure 7
Expected Attendance Growth of Existing Churches



The curve labeled "Constant Pct" represents an attendance growth path in which attendance per capita remains unchanged—i.e., existing churches keep pace with population growth. The "Projected" curve represents the expected attendance growth path among existing churches. Note that the existing churches experience attendance growth but at a decreasing rate. In fact, attendance tends to reach a maximum—exhibiting little attendance growth around the 1,000 mark.

This result strongly suggests that existing churches alone cannot be expected to increase attendance in proportion with population growth. The only apparent hope of keeping pace with population growth is through new church starts.[12]

[12] Existing churches might be able to change their respective attendance growth paths. These results are based upon existing trends.

Race and Ethnicity: Differences among New Church Starts?

The number of new church starts among racial populations other than Caucasian and African Americans is limited in this study, but such starts appear to be increasing. We do not have enough data to make conclusions, but it appears that in new church starts United Methodists are best at reaching Caucasians, are next best at reaching African Americans, but do less well in reaching any other racial or ethnic groups.

The existing evidence includes 24 new church starts that have adopted church names that imply new congregations largely attended by Hispanics, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Chinese. An analysis of these new church starts indicates attendance growth similar to the average growth among churches largely attended by Caucasians and African Americans, once differences in incomes, population growth, the number of neighboring United Methodist churches, and ages of the neighborhoods are considered. These results, however, are not conclusive, and an expanded base of research is necessary to explore fully this issue.

Professions of Faith

Because the mission of the United Methodist church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, the receipt of members by profession of faith is significant. It is therefore relevant to examine the extent to which a new church start increases the number of members gained through professions of faith compared to that of existing churches.

Table 12 presents the population regression coefficients for new and for existing churches.

Table 12
Professions of Faith Regression Equations
Population Regression Coefficients
New and Existing Churches

New	0.000138
Existing	0.000085

The new church response to an increase in population of 10,000 is an increase in membership through professions of faith of 1.4 members. The existing church response is only 0.9 members. Other regressions failed to indicate the presence of adverse effects on existing congregations. That is, a new church start appears to leave gains of new members by profession of faith among existing United Methodist churches unaffected.

These results indicate that a new church start more than doubles the number of new members received by profession of faith compared to the number of such gains among existing United Methodist churches. New churches appear to have little or no impact upon the receipt of new members by professions of faith among existing United Methodist churches.

Site Selections

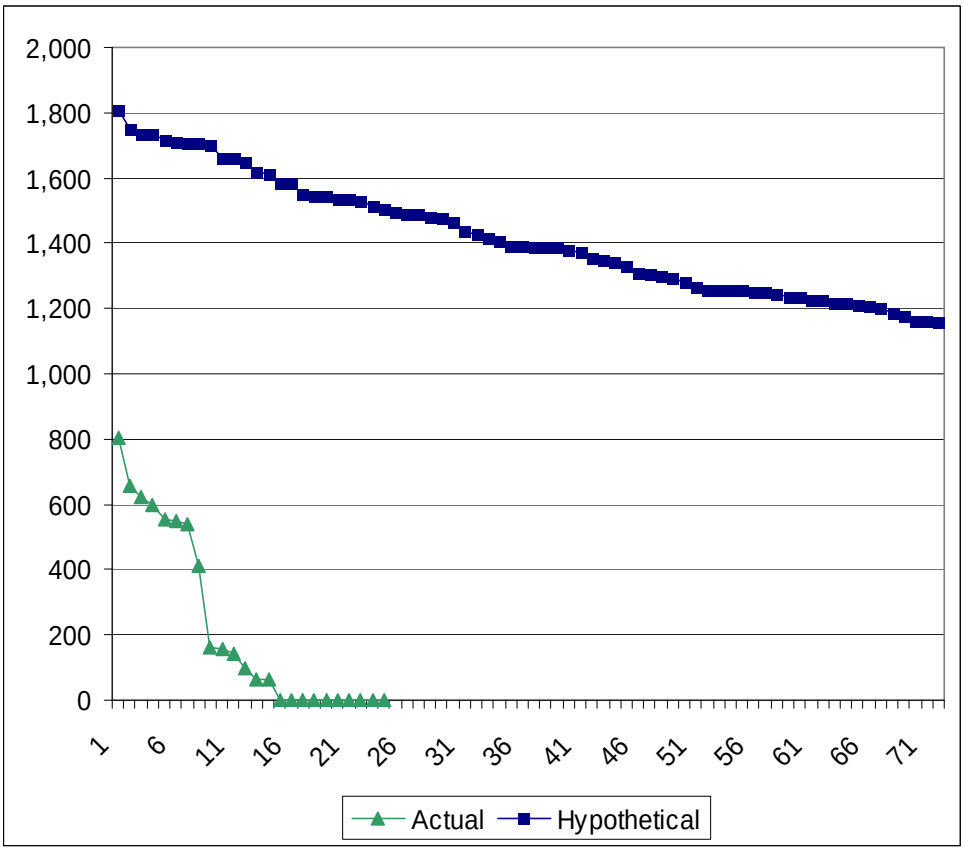
The foundation equation can be used to evaluate alternative sites for the establishment of a new church. Because the number of neighboring United Methodist churches is important, this use of the foundation equation is limited to the Texas Annual Conference.

To examine other sites for new churches, demographic data were compiled for every census tract within the boundaries of the Texas Annual Conference. Likewise, the location of every United Methodist church and every new church start were noted. The geographical center of each census tract was identified.

For every hypothetical location, the predicted worship attendance was constructed, using the foundation equation with the demographics of the neighborhood within 4 miles of the hypothetical location. Each prediction was based upon attendance five years after the first worship service. The predicted values of worship attendance for the geographic center of every census tract were ranked—from top to bottom. Those tracts in which a new church start within a 5-mile radius was established were omitted from the list. The list, therefore, represents predicted worship attendance five years after the first worship service for locations that were not selected for a new church start in the Texas Annual Conference.

Figure 8 presents the projected worship attendance among 75 hypothetical churches, compared to the projected worship attendance among the 24 actual new church starts within the Texas Annual Conference. The maximum worship attendance among the 24 actual new church starts equals 805 at the five year mark. There are 131 total hypothetical church sites in which projected worship attendance is greater than the maximum projected worship attendance among the 27 actual new church starts. The maximum worship attendance among the hypothetical churches after five years equals 1,810.

Figure 8
Projected Worship Attendance
Hypothetical Churches and New Churches
Texas Conference



This suggests that there were many possible sites within the Texas Annual Conference in which projected worship attendance was greater than the expected worship attendance among the actual sites selected, based upon our foundation equation.

This evidence does not suggest that the annual conference could have placed 131 new churches in these sites. Many of the sites are quite close in proximity to each other—even contiguous census tracts. However, none of the actual new church starts are within five miles of any of the hypothetical sites. Eighty-two of the hypothetical sites are located in Harris County and 49 are located in Ft. Bend County—southwest of Harris County.

Some church leaders suggest than a viable church must have worship attendance equal to at least 125 and a church begins to add specialized non-clergy staff with worship attendance averaging 350 and over. Using 350 as the limit, there are 417 sites for which predicted worship attendance is greater than 350. These 289 sites are distributed across seven counties.

To be sure, the predicted attendance only takes into account the demographics of the population and the presence of other United Methodist churches. The results of the analysis further indicate that attendance would be even greater with the appointment of a trained, young clergy, with support from a neighboring United Methodist church, and beginning worship services housed in a school facility. Much can be learned from a comparison between predicted attendance, based upon the demographic characteristics alone, and actual attendance. For example, the predicted attendance for Grace Fellowship in Katy equals 548 while the actual attendance after five years was 1,062. Clearly, leaders of this new church start did some things much better than the average in order to over-achieve in worship attendance.

External Funding

For many of the new church starts, the church benefited from external funding. In the Texas Conference, the new church starts that were initiated by the Houston Board of Missions were identified. The Houston Board of Missions, with its own funds, selected property upon which the new church facilities were to be constructed. The new church was responsible for reimbursing the Houston Board of Missions for the value of the land. The significance of the work of the Houston Board of Missions was the deliberate, consistent work in selecting sites for new church starts and the financial support in its low-interest loans for the land. Twelve Houston Board of Missions new church starts are included in the analysis. Adjusted for other factors, new churches that were initiated by the Houston Board of Missions reported more in worship than other new church starts.

In addition, the Texas Annual Conference, as is the case in most other conferences, provided grants to many new church starts. Several local churches provided financial support as they served as "mothering" churches. Unfortunately, assembling the financial histories of each new church start is difficult, and the complete histories were successfully assembled only among a few new church starts. From a financial perspective, however, it is instructive to consider the "return" the connection receives from an "investment" in a new church start.

Table 13 presents the financial history of one of the new church starts in the Texas Annual Conference—Christ UMC in College Station.

Table 13
Financial History of
Christ UMC, College Station

	Year	*Outflow*	*Membership*	*Appt Payments*	*Net Pay*	*Cumulative*
1995	1	422,982	269	0	-422,982	-422,982
1996	2	14,226	479	7,733	-6,493	-429,476
1997	3		648	11,425	11,425	-418,051
1998	4		882	31,635	31,635	-386,416
1999	5		1,204	40,867	40,867	-345,549
2000	6		1,499	51,118	51,118	-294,431
2001	7		1,657	65,775	65,775	-228,656
2002	8		1,827	98,857	98,857	-129,799
2003	9		1,973	121,773	121,773	-8,026
2004	10		2,177	153,489	153,489	145,464
2005	11		2,285	188,940	188,940	334,404

This church began in 1995 and received $422,982 in the form of land and salary support. In 1996, the church received $14,226 in the form of salary support. No other external funds were received after 1996.

The church began paying apportionments in 1996, beginning for $7,733 and reaching $188,940 in 1995. This congregation paid its apportionments in full every year. From a financial perspective, the external funding could be viewed as an investment by the connection and the payment of apportionments could be viewed as a return on the investment. Its payment of apportionments equaled the total external funding in early 2004. With this data it is possible to calculate the financial rate of return on the investment. For this church, the financial rate of return equals 17.7% meaning that the connection has thus far earned a rate of return on its original investment that exceeds the rate of return conferences and United Methodist agencies earn on financial reserves and endowments. Of course, the primary motivation for a new church start is not the stream of apportionments that the new church is expected to pay.

What We Learned from Founding Pastors

The study entailed interviews of founding pastors of new church starts among all of the annual conferences. Out of the 118 new church starts with statistical records, interviews were completed among 41 founding pastors. Seventeen of these 41 founding pastors served in the Texas Annual Conference.

Information gained from these interviews was quite broad—including the age of the pastor at the time of the new church start to specific theological understandings. For statistical purposes, only interview responses that can be quantified could be included in any statistical analysis. The completion of so few interviews severely limited the analysis of interviews. What is offered below are observations from the surveys. More surveys will be required to demonstrate statistical significance.

The founding pastor's age proved to be a significant factor in explaining new church growth. On average, the younger pastor experiences greater worship attendance than the older pastor. Founding pastor ages varied from 26 to 63 years of age. The average and median ages of founding pastors are listed below according to the average worship attendance after seven years.

	125 or fewer AWA	126-349 AWA	350 or more AWA
Median Age	43	34	32
Average Age	41	39	32

Among the interview responses, founding pastors were asked about the facility used for the initial worship service. Responses included the use of rented public buildings (such as schools), another United Methodist church, business space, and homes. About 2/3 of the responding founding pastors reported the use of rented public buildings. The results indicate that those that began in rented public buildings experienced increased worship attendance, compared to those utilizing another church's facilities, retail space, or homes. It is possible that the seating capacity in a rented

school facility exceeds that of the alternatives. The increased seating capacity may reflect the levels of effort expended in inviting people to the first few worship services.

The size of the attendance at the first worship service as reported by the pastors varied considerable. Below are the average and median attendance figures listed according to the average worship attendance after seven years.

	125 or fewer AWA	126-349 AWA	350 or more AWA
Median Attendance	125	152	267
Average Attendance	149	174	293

Approximately half of the founding pastors reported the assistance of local churches in beginning the new church. Types of assistance included: program ideas, mentoring or coaching, lay leader training, clergy training, financial assistance, planning resources, and other forms of help. The analysis indicates that those new church starts that received some form of local assistance reported larger numbers in worship.

Founding pastors were asked of any formal training in new church starts received before the beginning of a new church. About half of the founding pastors had received some form of formal training. Some of the training was sponsored by the United Methodist Church and others reported training sponsored by other denominations. The evidence indicates that those who received formal training reported larger numbers in worship.

Founding pastors were asked about the strategy used to establish the new church. Responses included the "parachute drop," product of a mothering church, and development from an existing small group. Where possible, the strategy was noted and a comparison between the parachute drop and other strategies were compared. New church starts that following the parachute drop model reported fewer in worship.

Pastors were asked about the type of music used during the initial worship service, including contemporary, traditional, and blended. These responses were self-reported so the definition of the terms could differ from pastor to pastor. Moreover, the type of music might have changed from the initial worship service. There is no single pattern for new church starts. Not all use contemporary worship by any means because traditional and blended styles are well represented in congregations with great growth. We need more data to make more conclusions.

Additional Differences Observed Based on AWA after Seven Years

For this section we will refer to large churches as those reaching 350 or more after seven years, mid-size churches as those worshipping 126-349 in the same period, and small churches as those with 125 or fewer in worship.

How are the large churches and their founding pastors different from the others?

Benchmarks. Most of the large churches and their pastors set benchmarks and goals for their churches from the beginning, even if some were only in the pastor's mind. Only a couple of other pastors reported such goals from the beginning.

Small groups. Large church pastors reported spending more time in developing small groups than other pastors. Likewise, laity from large churches reported unanimously that small groups were used to assimilate new members. Small groups represented the only type of assimilation on which there was such commonality among laity.

Pastors, use of time. In addition to the greater focus on small groups, large church pastors spent more time on leadership development and meeting with groups in the community than other pastors did. Pastors of large and mid-size churches spent more time on evangelism and contacts than small church pastors did. Mid-size and small church pastors spent more time on hospital calls and counseling and than the large church pastors did.

Program priorities in the first two years. Large church pastors focused on these things more than pastors of mid-size and small churches.

- laity directly involved in ministry (laity rated very high)
- a systematic plan to track visitors, contacts, and prospects (laity rated very high)
- offering numerous points of contact with the local community
- focus of ministry was reaching those not active in a church

Related to laity involvement, large church pastors reported in significant numbers that members were a major source for unchurched prospects, whereas other pastors did not indicate this to be true in their situations.

Shared vision. A major difference between large church pastors and the other pastors was that large church pastors indicated that church leaders shared the same vision for the church's future.

How pastors view themselves. Large church pastors agreed with these statements much more so than the other pastors:

- I like to be challenged.
- The church's first priority is to make disciples of the unchurched.
- Clearly articulating a vision for the congregation is a priority.
- Developing goals and objectives is a priority.

Large church and mid-size church pastors agreed with these statements more so than small church pastors:

- I frequently ask advice of more experienced pastors.
- I have the energy to take on additional tasks.

Laity come from many denominations. Virtually all of the laity responses indicated that they had been a member of another denomination at some point in their lives.

The Development of a New Church Start Data Repository

This research makes it clear that the denomination has failed to adequately maintain records of new church starts and has, to a large extent, missed opportunities to learn from founding pastors and laity of both successful and not-so successful new church starts. For instance, one founding pastor reported that our effort to interview him was the first time anyone sought such information. His new church was started 18 years ago. We have not adequately maintained important histories of new church starts which forms the basis for needed research.

The end-of-year church reports alone are not adequate to fully examine new church starts. Founding pastor and laity interviews need to be conducted at timely intervals. External funding must be recorded. Locations of worship services must be recorded as well as the specifics of staff development. Mergers must be identified when applicable.

Through time, founding pastors and laity cannot be easily located, and, particularly among new churches that have closed, founding pastors are not always interested in revisiting this history. Laity from these closed churches are virtually impossible to find. Records of external funding are often lost or recorded in a manner in which extraction of the information is difficult if not impossible.

Hopefully, this research adequately demonstrates the need for complete histories of new church starts, including interviews of founding pastors and laity. If our denomination is to improve its new church start success rate, it must learn from past experiences—including both successes and failures.

Where such a data repository should best be established and maintained is not clear. Annual conferences that start very few new churches have less incentive to maintain proper records than annual conferences that start many new churches. Yet, the denomination needs the information from all new church starts. The scope of this study falls short of developing the specifics concerning ongoing assembly and maintenance of this information, but it does emphasize the importance of doing so.

Summary

This study serves as a preliminary investigation into the growth of new church starts. It is based upon new churches established among five annual conferences: Texas, Southwest Texas, North Texas, Central Texas, and Northwest Texas. The new churches included in the study were started between 1985 and 2005. Those with sufficient information to be included number 118 new churches. By the end of 2005, almost 25% of the new churches had closed.

A more extensive examination of new churches from the Texas Annual Conference was conducted, largely by identifying the locations of all other United Methodist churches in the annual conference. The study is based upon end-of-year statistical reports, interviews with founding pastors, the exact locations of the churches, and the demographic features of the population within a 4-mile radius of a church for the census years 1990 and 2000. The results of the analysis indicate that worship attendance is greater in locations in which population is growing, includes a large percentage

of individuals with incomes over $100,000 per year, includes a larger percentage of individuals over the age of 64, and has few (if any) United Methodist churches within a five mile radius. On average worship attendance increases with time, but the attendance increases at a decreasing annual rate.

From the survey of founding pastors, the evidence indicates that worship attendance is greater among new churches with younger founding pastors. Those pastors with formal training in new church development experience greater attendance growth. New churches with assistance from other local churches report greater numbers in worship. Attendance appears to reach greater levels if the new church begins in a rented public facility rather than another church facility, retail space, or home. New churches that began as a "parachute drop" report smaller numbers in worship. New churches with locations selected through more careful study appear to report larger numbers in worship.

A new church start is expected to draw some of its members from neighboring United Methodist churches. However, the net gain in attendance is, on average, positive. The loss in attendance among neighboring churches can be significant, but the loss is relatively small in more populated areas. Among the largest communities, the loss in attendance among neighboring churches is insignificant.

A successful new church start is a useful method of growing worship attendance in a community. This study indicates that existing churches will not keep pace with population growth, and that the only means by which the denomination can possibly keep pace with population growth is through new church starts.

The denomination needs to begin collecting information about new church starts on an ongoing basis. Only with a more complete data base can one answer many of the remaining questions. This study urges denominational leaders to develop a plan for ongoing data collection and assembly.

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APPENDIX A

Texas New Church Starts Research Project

Sponsored by the Texas Methodist Foundation - 2007

Churches Still Active by Annual Conference

Conference	New Church Starts from 1985 - 2004*	Reporting AWA in 2005	Not Active or 0 AWA in 2005	Active in 2005	AWA 125 or fewer	AWA 126-349	AWA 350-499	AWA 500-749	AWA 750-999	AWA 1,000+	Avg AWA in 2005	Median AWA in 2005
Northwest TX	11	6	5	6	4	1	0	1	0	0	177	65
		55%	45%		67%	17%	0%	17%	0%	0%		
Southwest TX	19	14	5	14	9	4	1	0	0	0	120	108
		74%	26%		64%	29%	7%	0%	0%	0%		
North Texas	40	28	12	28	17	4	4	1	0	2	251	110
		70%	30%		61%	14%	14%	4%	0%	7%		
Texas	36	23	12	23	10	1	4	4	0	4	467	220
		64%	33%		43%	4%	17%	17%	0%	17%		
Central TX	27	14	13	14	8	4	2	0	0	0	151	97
		52%	48%		57%	29%	14%	0%	0%	0%		
Totals	133	85	47	81	48	14	11	6	0	6	275	120
Percentages		64%	35%		59%	17%	14%	7%	0%	7%		

***2004 was used here since churches started in 2005 would be unlikely to have an ID and report attendance for 2005.**