UMC Church Planting in an Uncertain Time

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New congregations are one of the most effective ways to bring people into the Christian faith. Yet planting churches can seem like an overwhelming project in a time of great uncertainty – a time like the one the United Methodist Church is experiencing. To determine how church planting is progressing at this time of great uncertainty, Discipleship Ministries surveyed veteran planters and congregational developers about the state of planting in their areas, factors affecting planting, plans for planting and other topics related to the development of new congregations.

As we suspected, concerns about leadership, finances and denominational uncertainty within the UMC are impacting planting now, as well as plans for the future. But, despite all of the concerns about unknowns that can threaten the process, this group of committed planters and administrators wants to continue their work of beginning new United Methodist congregations.

METHOD

We designed a survey focused on planting, with a small section related to the School of Congregational Development to address questions about the future of the school. The survey included three types of questions: multiple-choice, open-ended and “scaled.” The scaled questions were limited to the section addressing the School of Congregational Development.

Responses were collected for two weeks. Multiple choice questions were analyzed using simple counting statistics. Open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively and the responses were grouped according to the analysts’ perception of similarity in intent. Tallies of the counts of each of these response groupings are presented in the analysis.

RESPONDENTS

141 invitations to respond were extended. Most of the 71 respondents were congregational developers (36) and church planters (30). The remaining five respondents were a Director of Connectional Ministries, two strategists and two pastors. There were 17 respondents from each of the North Central and South Central Jurisdictions, and 22 from the Southeastern Jurisdiction. The Western Jurisdiction had seven respondents and the Northeastern Jurisdiction had eight.

RESULTS

Respondents could choose whether to answer all questions. Some questions were given exclusively to planters, and some were given exclusively to developers. Results, therefore, do not all add up to 71.
Nearly all respondents indicated that at least a few new faith communities had been started in their annual conference within the last five years (Figure 1b), and the majority expect that one to four new faith communities will be planted within the next 12 months (Figure 2a). Half of the respondents think that number is about what is appropriate, and the remaining half think that it is not enough.
76% of respondents indicated that the present climate in the UMC is negatively affecting current planting. Despite this present uncertainty, however, nearly 70% of respondents said that plans for planting after General Conference 2020 are proceeding as usual (Figure 3).

CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

More than half of respondents said they think the UMC needs to have conversations about the issues that directly concern sustainability of church plants post-GC 2020, assuming the outcome from GC 2020 will necessitate major change within the UMC (Figure 4).

Examples of the types of conversations that respondents believe we should be having (but aren’t) include:

- “We must talk about how we are going to reallocate resources – closing churches, selling property, merging congregations to create vital communities.”
- “How can we retain planters and new church plants in the midst of all these changes? How do we care for ‘baby’ churches?”
- “How can we, as church plants, utilize our voices to make an effective witness towards inclusion?”
ETHNIC FAITH COMMUNITIES

Many annual conferences have not planted any ethnic faith communities in the last two years. Among conferences that have planted ethnic faith communities, most have been African American, multi-ethnic or Hispanic – but there is still great variation from conference to conference. For instance, among those conferences represented in the survey that have planted ethnic faith communities recently:

- 18 have not planted any Native American churches in the past two years.
- 11 have not planted any African American churches in the past two years.
- 11 have not planted any Asian or Pacific Islander congregations in the past two years.
- 5 have not planted any Hispanic/Latino congregations in the past two years. (Figure 5a).

The number of Native American plants is the smallest by far. (Figure 5b).

Despite the relatively low rates of planting ethnic churches, there are notable exceptions, including:

- One conference that planted 9 or more (the question was worded as a range) Hispanic/Latino congregations in the past

A developer from one of these conferences describes their strategy like this:

“We have a clear goal to plant at least one new Hispanic church in each of our 12 districts by 2025. We have five districts covered already and are working in three new districts this year. The vision is for ALL of these to be multi-ethnic, multi-lingual. We have a full time Cuban church planter who is overseeing all this work (discovering, developing and deploying new leaders). We also have a part time Laotian planter who is overseeing our work planting Southeast Asian new churches. We have four new congregations. Three are Burmese/Karenni and one is Indian. Our goal is for these congregations to spread to new cities.”
two years and is also focusing on mentoring leaders in their strongest African American churches

- One conference that has started several African congregations
- One that has started a Haitian church
- And one that has started several new churches of each ethnic group in the past two years.

Less than 1/3 of all respondents said their conference has a strategy for planting ethnic faith communities (Figure 6). Some respondents said they were actively working towards planting ethnic faith communities but did not specify an actual strategy.

**PATH 1**

Most respondents said the best ways that Path1 could support conferences with limited funding for planting are providing training and coaching and facilitating connections between people and resources. When respondents were asked how Path1 could support conferences with MORE resources for planting, the same priorities emerged, as well as a desire for assistance in identifying and developing future planters. Simply put, developers and other new church leaders want Path1 to help them find and train new planters.
Nearly 3/4 of all respondents in Path1’s new curriculum to train lay people for planting (Figure 8). And most are likely to have people to train them. Despite the present denominational uncertainty, 2/3 of respondents said the number of people expressing an interest in planting has either remained steady or increased. Finally, less than 40% of respondents said that they would be willing to share young, talented clergy across conference lines if another context was more appropriate for their gifts. This invites further investigation: What lies behind this feeling, which appears counter to the itinerant nature of the ministry in the Wesleyan tradition?

THE SCHOOL OF CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The survey included several questions related to The School of Congregational Development, which was canceled in 2019. Researchers wanted to learn about respondents’ interest in and commitment to the school. In these questions, respondents were given a set of statements related to the School of Congregational Development to which they had to indicate their level of agreement on a scale of 1-5.

Nearly 90% of respondents indicated that they had attended the School of Congregational Development at some point, but less than 1/3 of those viewed it as a valuable resource (Figure 9). Generally, there were few strong feelings.
for or against the SCD, and a lukewarm desire to see its return (Figure 10). The feelings related to SCD’s future may be due to factors not measured by the survey. The few open-ended responses received suggested updating, rather than discontinuing the school.

![FIGURE 10](image-url) Responses to the question, “Please use the rating scale to respond to the following statements about the School of Congregational Development in the future.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% that want to see SCD return in 2020</th>
<th>53%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% that want to see SCD return after 2020</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% that want to see SCD return in 2020 AND continue in future years</td>
<td>58%</td>
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**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The great uncertainty about the future of the United Methodist Church is having an impact on planting, but not as much as one might think. Planters, developers and other conference leaders remain committed to planting as the most effective method of making new disciples. Church planters have concerns, but they remain hopeful and believe more planters are needed. Planters seek support, sharing of resources, and encouragement for their work. Finally, although the United States is expected to have a “minority white” population by the year 2045, only 1/3 of annual conferences have a planting strategy specifically addressing ethnic populations and churches. This is an area that offers significant possibilities for growth in ministry and service.

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