

In the early decades of the 21st century, United Methodists will use a variety of strategies and tactics for planting new congregations in the United States. Below you will find several of the most common strategies used within our denomination. We have ordered these from most to least pervasive along with some benefits, challenges and tempting shortcuts associated with each. Please note that this is not intended to be an exhaustive list and that United Methodists will likely plant hundreds of new churches by intentionally blending two or more of the strategies. Lay or clergy planters serving full-time or in bi-vocational assignments could lead each of the following strategies. Depending on the planting context any strategy could be right for almost any people group.

Important Funding Note: (\$ denotes costs associated with these strategies; fewer \$ = lower conference investment; more \$\$\$\$ = greater conference commitment of resources). Most new congregations will become financially self-sustaining. However, some churches – especially those who minister to low-income populations, may require long-term subsidy – which may be justified if they continue to bear good fruit. We caution against the use of the conference budget as a major funding source for long-term subsidy. We encourage the conference to develop streams of funding beyond the conference budget (from local churches, from individual donors, foundations, etc.), when long-term subsidy seems necessary. If we expect that a church will require many years of development before attaining financial self-sufficiency, it makes sense to plant such a church with the support of strong and committed connectional partners.

1. Partner Church/Multiple “Parent” Strategy (\$\$)

An existing United Methodist congregation – or, perhaps, several churches come together – as an anchoring, sponsoring or parenting force in launching a new church. This could be a cluster of partner churches or a combination of partner church(es) and another entity: a United Methodist campus ministry, retirement home or church agency. Each partner must have clarity about its role. In some cases, potential partner churches will need a year or more of preparatory time to be ready for the role. Also, each partner needs to be included in benchmarking updates. The planter often will serve briefly as associate pastor at a partner church or will come from the staff or lay membership of a partner church. The partner churches typically will provide some funding and launch team members. Exceptions to this member-sharing practice would arise when launching a church with a different racial-ethnic audience. In these cases, significant cross-cultural awareness and training will be important for all involved.

- **Benefits** – These types of plants have a higher than average incidence of success. The more credibility the planter has with the partner congregation(s) and the more the planting congregation(s) are willing to invest in the project, the stronger the new plant will be from the start. The planting project will be well connected to the United Methodist community, helping to facilitate various kinds of support from the partners, without sole reliance on any. Launch team members can be cultivated from each partner, in addition to the general community.
- **Challenges** – The planter may end up with too many chefs in the kitchen, essentially navigating competing visions among the partners. Partner church leadership may seek to limit how many members

go to the new church or to backtrack on promises made. It is important for the district superintendent or conference staff to review with the partner churches all agreements being made prior to commencement of the planting project. Covenants should be carefully discussed and preserved in writing. In the instance of multiple “parents” the partners may shrink back from total commitment, counting (mistakenly) on another partner – with the result that the new church’s leader ends up feeling and functioning more like a “parachute drop” (see 2. “Classic Missionary Strategy” below) than a partnered plant.

- ***Tempting Shortcuts*** – The cabinet may rush a planter appointment forward based simply on the casual interest of potential partners. It is essential that a detailed planting plan be developed, with special attention to assessment, funding, conference expectations, and the relationship of the planter to the partners. If several United Methodist entities are embracing the idea of the plant, the district superintendent or conference staff may not insist on bringing all partners to the table to discuss roles, responsibilities and specific commitments regarding the plant. Also the cabinet may fail to consult with partner church leadership about characteristics they believe are essential for the planter’s success. These kinds of plants work best when the planter aligns with the culture of the partner churches in key ways (although we also want her/him to fit the culture of the target mission population).

2. Classic Missionary Strategy (\$\$\$\$)

This strategy (sometimes known as “Parachute Drop”) reaches all the way back to Paul’s planting adventures in the first century. Any version of this approach, by our United Methodist polity, will be connectional in nature, unlike what may be experienced in other denominations. This type of plant happens when a cabinet sends a planter into a territory to plant a church and (1) that planter is not from that territory plus (2) there are no active partnerships in place with other United Methodist churches or institutions in the area. Many of the famous examples in United Methodist history that have worked in fact were not pure parachute drops – if, for example, the planter had some relationships already established in the community or grew up nearby. Or perhaps the planter discovered a very rich local source of prospective members that would not exist in just every community. When the planter has an informal network of relationships and support within the community, but proceeds without an official partner church, we could call this a modified missionary strategy.

- ***Benefits*** – in communities where no United Methodist congregations are ready or able to provide healthy partnership, this strategy offers a way to move forward. If the church we are planting will differ markedly in its congregational culture from any other United Methodist churches nearby, this approach can offer the necessary space and freedom to color outside the lines of local convention. Some leaders have strong and magnetic personalities and this strategy enables them to collect people (what they do best), without having to negotiate constantly with partner churches (negotiation possibly being something the planter doesn’t do well). Many of our largest and fastest growing new churches began in this way.
- ***Challenges*** – this is a risky strategy, with a high rate of project failure in the first three years. For this reason, some conferences with limited resources may choose not to employ this strategy. If the project involves an elder in full-time appointment, it is also a very expensive strategy – since there are no people to share the planter’s salary expense for quite some time. Assessment of the planter is of paramount

importance, as well as assessment of community readiness and of the match between the planter and the community. Clergy families that survive this type of plant will almost universally testify that this is stressful business – and not recommended for any but the heartiest marriages. Planters and their families may become isolated from others in the United Methodist connection and need to make a special effort to maintain supportive relationships.

- ***Tempting Shortcuts*** – When these projects succeed, they often succeed big – and it is tempting to model other projects after a very big and splashy success, assuming that we have discovered the eternal secrets of church planting. In reality, however, the highly successful parachute drops are rare. Most church plants will not grow as fast as the churches on the “planting legend” grapevine. Many church plants with excellent leaders will not take root at all, even when the leaders appear to be doing all the right things. A few among us truly have the gifts to pull off such an endeavor, and then only in the right circumstances. Diligent assessment and discernment by the appointive cabinet is critical.

3. Multi-site Expansion Strategy (\$)

This strategy may look (at first glance) much like a Partner Church strategy where the partner church is simply very engaged. The difference here is that the new faith community meeting at the new site remains part of the original church, even as they may develop a distinct staff and ministry team system. Multi-sites may open up in other United Methodist buildings, in facilities purchased, leased or constructed by the congregation or in space that is essentially borrowed for a couple hours a week (e.g., movie theater, civic auditorium, school, etc.). Multi-sites vary in pastoral and staffing strategies. They typically have a site pastor – who may or may not be the lead preacher at the site. Some multi-sites utilize large video projection of sermons recorded by the senior pastor of the church at another campus. In some cases, cabinets appoint pastors to the site directly. In other cases, cabinets appoint simply to the church, which then deploys its staff and pastoral resources among its various sites.

- ***Benefits*** – This strategy enables healthy congregations to multiply their ministries and rapidly plant new congregations. Since the people of the original campus will remain organizationally connected to the ministry of the new site, it is often easier to raise local funds for the multi-site than for projects that will not carry the name of the original congregation. It may also be easier to share administrative resources, staffing expertise, etc., with the new campus when there is a perception that “we are all one church.”
- ***Challenges*** – The relationship between the pastors of the campuses is critical. Most multi-sites (beyond The United Methodist Church) attempt to utilize staff members from the original campus, who already have loyalty to the senior pastor and know how to team with her/him. Whenever the cabinet appoints a planter to a multi-site project, that planter is typically an associate pastor. It is absolutely critical that the senior pastor of the church be consulted in the appointment. If there is a plan for the multi-site possibly to become a chartered congregation at some point in the future, this must be documented clearly from the outset. Otherwise, all parties (and pastors) should proceed with the expectation that the sites will remain bound together as one congregation permanently. These projects simply do not work when the pastors get caught in power struggles.

- ***Tempting Shortcuts*** – Because the funding and leadership may emerge mostly from within the congregational system, the district superintendent and conference staff may assume that no external help is needed. In fact, coaching is as critical with multi-site projects as in any other strategy – and the coaching relationship should involve both the senior pastor and site planter. Also, we should not assume that the local church is able to fund every expense needed for an optimal launch. The conference may need to make an investment alongside the local church. Finally, the local church should not try to stretch the staff from the original campus to cover ministry on two or more campuses. New staff must be added.

4. Church-Within-a-Church Strategy (\$ - \$\$)

In a world of very expensive real estate, many new churches will share space with other churches (both partner churches and other collegial congregations). Existing congregations choosing to share property may find that new churches may better serve their immediate neighbors, especially when the new church specializes in a certain racial-ethnic culture and/or a certain generation or social group.

- ***Benefits*** – This strategy enables us to re-establish or renew United Methodist ministry within established neighborhoods and to utilize church property that may have become under-utilized in recent years as neighborhood populations changed. This strategy enables us to plant urban churches much more economically than if we had to buy or secure ministry space. Churches that serve economically challenged populations may discover the shared facility strategy as a pathway to financial sustainability.
- ***Challenges*** – Sometimes the mission field will best be reached in a setting outside the church building. If the new church is a United Methodist congregation, the host congregation should treat them as family, not renters. This means that negotiation of a reasonable building impact fee (sharing specific costs) makes more sense than a rental agreement. The new church does not exist to help the older church pay its bills, but rather to assist the older church in making disciples of Christ for the transformation of the neighborhood. Where the relationships fall into “us/them” and paternalistic patterns, trouble follows. It is critical that effective cross-cultural training be done before the start of the project.
- ***Tempting Shortcuts*** – In the early days we may not work intentionally to build a positive relationship with our partners. Prayer for one another and regular communication are essential. The district superintendent might check in early and often to see how it’s going in the first months. Where strong, collegial relationships are formed, this strategy can work well.

5. The “Elijah/Elisha” Strategy (\$ - \$\$)

This strategy involves congregations who haven’t borne much fruit for past several years and/or who may be at the end of their natural life cycle. It requires a proactive discernment process with the district superintendent or conference staff. The congregation may either discover a new vision and recommit to fruit-bearing ministry or respond to God’s call to become an “Elijah” new church start (2 Kings 2:1-14 tells how Elijah passed on the legacy of his ministry to Elisha). Elijah churches intentionally choose either to (a) join another church and give their

physical assets to the conference to reach a new group of people or (b) open their doors to a planter and launch team that takes over management of the facility to start a new congregation.

- **Benefits** – United Methodist ministry continues for another generation in a community where otherwise it would end. The Elijah church chooses to offer a way forward in God’s mission rather than a dead end. With thousands of churches teetering in survival-mode with just a handful of members left, this strategy offers a way to leverage untold millions of dollars in United Methodist resources for new church development.
- **Challenges** – If this becomes a well-known strategy in the conference, the prospective Elijah church may come to view their district superintendent as the “grim reaper.” Some congregations may not be ready to face the reality that they need to let go of the past to enable something new to grow in their changed communities. Some districts and conferences do not have a system in place to recoup the assets of church closures for new church development.
- **Tempting Shortcuts** – In some cases, the temptation is to delay rather than to rush this process, allowing buildings to decay and cash assets to be depleted, with little ministry to show for all the lost years.

6. Vital Merger Strategy (\$)

Most of the time, mergers do not truly create new churches. Two declining churches typically agree to share one facility and decline together rather than alone. However, East Ohio Conference, for example, has a strategy that requires both of the merging churches to sell their buildings, pool the funds, move to a temporary location, find a new name, receive a trained planter and proceed as if they were a new church. Leadership of the planter is key.

- **Benefits** – This strategy may solve several problems and give us a fresh new congregation as well. The problems could be decaying buildings, buildings too large or too small or problematic locations. The problem could be existing congregations with inadequate resources to do the quality of ministry they long to do. In a situation where transformational leaders are in short supply, the merger also creates a prime place to send such a leader.
- **Challenges** – Ghosts can abound. Old patterns, old prejudices, old attitudes – even old office-holders – these realities can really slow any possible momentum from the outset. Also if the merging congregations remain significantly older or culturally different from the mission field, there must be a plan to infuse some younger, more indigenous community people into the mix.
- **Tempting Shortcuts** – Just because it is not a typical merger does not mean we can ignore the careful weaving of traditions and people that are essential to pulling off mergers. We also must not back down, once into the project, about selling all existing properties and utilizing a trained church planter.

7. Closed/Reopened Facility Strategy (\$ - \$\$\$)

Similar to the above strategies, except that there is no church left to share its facility, turn over its ministry, or merge with another congregation to create something new. The new church begins to address the needs and culture of the community population.

- **Benefits** – There is an existing building, often strategically located with respect to a population currently underserved by The United Methodist Church.
- **Challenges** – There is an existing building, often with enormous structural issues and liabilities. Also, the community may still associate the facility with the former congregation; so the story of the new church's birth must be carefully shared to engage and serve the community.
- **Tempting Shortcuts** – We may choose to re-open the building prematurely without engaging the community first. Or we may be stuck on re-opening a building, when the wiser path would be to sell the building and find another facility within the neighborhood.

8. House Church Strategy (\$)

This may well be the oldest strategy for church planting that exists, certainly reaching back to Asia Minor in the first century, and also to frontier America when population was very thin. House churches are typically small, limited to the number that can fit in a home or a small meeting space. These churches may begin with as few as 6 or 7 folks, and grow to 12, or given the right space and leadership, they may grow to 50 or 60 folks. In some parts of the world, they multiply rapidly. Multiple house churches may gather monthly in a large worship venue. They are often lay-led, with clergy sometimes riding a circuit to bring the Sacraments.

- **Benefits** – these projects can be extremely low budget, and they do not depend upon a large clergy supply (think early American Methodism). New leaders can be trained and deployed, so that where there is one house church, there may soon be six or more. Some conferences may yoke the house churches with a station church, and appoint a pastor to the station church who can also offer leadership to the house church leaders.
- **Challenges** – it is easy for a house church to forget its connection. In Methodism, we do not do “disconnected church.” Some who feel led to a simple house church experience may resist United Methodist connection and accountability. Also, some house churches will quickly settle in and become closed groups with tight fellowship and few new participants. Those who lead such churches must help the participants keep an eye on multiplication, evangelism and missional service in the community.
- **Tempting Shortcuts** – The easy shortcut is to send persons to lead who are simply unprepared in terms of spiritual maturity, theology or group-leading skills. Just because the group is small does not mean that this is easy ministry. When leaders or potential leaders are unwilling to remain connected to the mission of the larger United Methodist church, or to share in the discipline of accountability to the pastor assigned to supervise them, we must remove them and deploy those who are willing to play for the team.

9. Intentional Communities (\$)

While there is no singular micro-strategy for creating Intentional Communities they are, most basically, groups of people living together (in one residence or in several residences in close proximity) in a specific missional area who are bound by a covenant with common goals and vision. Often referred to as New Monastic or Neo-monastic communities these Intentional Communities gather together with the purpose of growing spiritually, following Christ and aligning around a particular focus on social justice and acts of love, mercy and hospitality toward others. The strategy is often traced back to the early church movement described in Acts 2. There have been Intentional Communities throughout most of Christian history, tracing their roots back to Franciscan, Benedictine and early Celtic orders. More contemporary examples of this strategy, still in existence, were founded in the early 1950s. Typically, Intentional Communities remain small in size (3-12 people) and have no plan to “formalize” as chartered churches with land and a church structure. These missional movements align and mesh with a particular community to develop intense relationships that seek to transform that community in kingdom-building ways.

- **Benefits** – Practically no cost to congregations and conferences to implement this strategy. Mutual support and accountability. Intentional spiritual formation. Healthy inter-dependence among participants. Opportunity to connect with other congregations and Intentional Communities.
- **Challenges** – Creating and abiding by a shared covenant. Learning to share resources (space, finances, possessions). Respecting privacy. Building peace with other residents (conflict management).
- **Tempting Shortcuts** – Failure to develop a covenant and the basic rules of life for the group. Taking on more mission/ministry than the community can handle at the start. Inviting persons to become residents before they are ready.

10. The Surprise Birth (\$)

Sometimes, churches are born unexpectedly – just as children may come along in a season when we did not expect them. Causes of surprise births would include church splits, a group that decides to affiliate with The United Methodist Church, a group of laity who envision a new church and proceed without asking permission, or a campus ministry that develops to the point that they desire to become a congregation in the fullest sense of the *Book of Discipline*. Whenever these new churches or new ideas pop up on the radar, it is easy for church officials to view them with skepticism, especially when “we did not think of it.” However, some of our best United Methodist congregations have emerged in this way, as a work of the Holy Spirit and faithful laity. With wise pastoral care and negotiation, these projects often can be brought into the United Methodist fold as official new church projects.

- **Benefits** – Church planting does not get easier than this. When your region has a goal of five new churches and you only have money for three, what a blessing to discover another congregation coming to life without any conference investment!
- **Challenges** – The district may have had no input in deciding where they would meet. Such churches may choose to worship in close proximity to other area churches. In most cases, their style is such that they draw very different people from those at other nearby churches. Also, if the church has existed

independently for a while, it needs to weigh carefully the commitments of moving into the United Methodist fold.

- ***Tempting Shortcuts*** – Be careful that financial incentives for groups to join The United Methodist Church are minimal, or at least that they are balanced by other connectional obligations. In this economy, people and groups are going to be drawn to money and subsidy wherever they smell it – this could distract the church from the most important questions of what it really means to become United Methodist.

11. Integrated Multi-Ethnic Projects (\$\$ - \$\$\$)

This strategy results in an intentionally multi-ethnic church plant that worships as one integrated body to create a unique cultural expression and reflect all groups involved. This is what heaven looks like, so why not intentionally plant churches that are integrated? This strategy reflects the work of the Holy Spirit to bring together as one in Christ a multitude of cultural, racial and ethnic groups. We recognize that The United Methodist Church is just learning how to implement this strategy effectively.

- ***Benefits*** – Great cities were established because of the gathering of diverse people groups; a diverse church grows through the diverse talents and gifts found therein. The U.S. is becoming more and more diverse and church plants will begin to reflect this shift. This is a great opportunity to reach younger people, who often have more diverse natural networks of friends and colleagues than older generations. Often, they will bring their friends and families and may reflect a more economically diverse people. Ideally, this strategy brings authenticity, in that the church reflects our increasingly diverse communities and the unity that Christ prayed we would have (see John 17).
- ***Challenges*** – This is not an easy strategy to implement. Everything depends on the planter's ability to relate to, recruit leaders from, and be empathetic toward diverse ethnic-racial groups in building a multi-ethnic team. Creating a "third culture" (a space where all people are respected and participate in leadership roles) is a constant challenge. Learning to find leaders in new places requires the planter and key leaders to make an effort to connect with an ever-expanding network of diverse people. There may be slower growth in numbers of participants than in predominantly homogeneous congregations.
- ***Tempting Shortcuts*** – The ultimate goal in this strategy is transformation of the mission field, not simply gathering diverse multi-ethnic/racial people. Diversity of the plant is a by-product of the lead team and the mission field, its diversity, and the desire to be in mission with all people in the community. Hiring ethnic/racial staff (either lay or clergy) only because of their particular ethnic/racial background is not a good idea. Great chemistry, competence, character and commitment to shared values should be considered above all else.

For additional information or support exploring or implementing these strategies, please contact any of the New Church Strategists on the Path1 staff.