

## **Church Planting in Theological Education**

Church planting is on the mind of North American Christians. A Google™ search on “church planting” produces 244,000 web pages. Thousands of churches and ministries are focusing on the planting of new congregations. However, this interest has begun to take hold of educational institutions as well. Evangelical schools have rediscovered the values and practices of church planting. Mainline groups have recently embraced the value of church planting in missional church contexts.

While serving as a professor of church planting, I received a survey from Chip Arn. The survey was seeking to quantify the available resources focused on church planting in the theological education community. The survey process was delayed by a change in leadership at a partner school, so and Chip and I agreed that I would continue the survey.

I slightly altered the survey and resent it to all schools. The survey was sent to groups accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, the American Association of Bible College, and the Transnational Association of Colleges and Schools. Seventy two schools responded to the survey from a broad array of faith convictions.

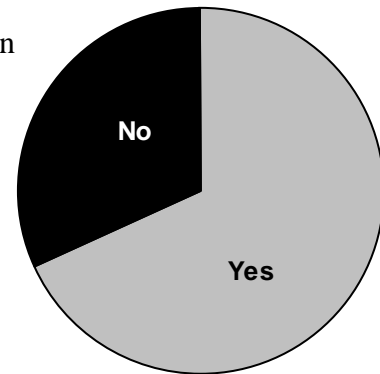
The survey produced a diversity of responses. However, there were also some trends—particularly the development of new classes and church planting centers. Yet, schools are training church planters in many different ways. I will explain those more fully below.

### **Patterns of Church Planting Programs**

There is a broad approach to church planting training at academic institutions. In some cases, there is no knowledge of the new church development field. (One school believed the survey was about church “planning” rather than “planting.”) In other cases, some schools have full-fledged centers with specialized degrees. Most schools fall somewhere in the middle.

### **Schools without Specific Programs**

Thirty two percent of the respondent schools did not have a specific course, seminar, or track. In some cases they offered alternatives. In others, there simply was not option for church planting training connected with the school. Since the survey respondents were more likely to respond if they had a program, we can assume that many of the non-respondent schools simply had nothing to report.

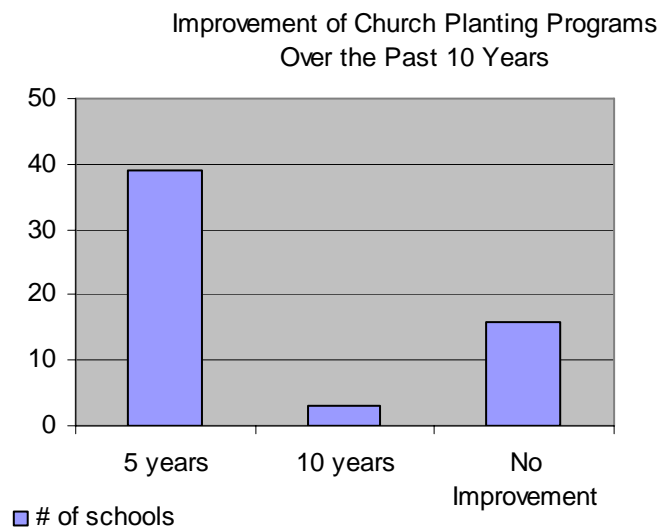


In some cases, training in church planting is not considered the role of the seminary. Trinity Seminary, Columbus, OH explained “The assignment of church planting... is done exclusively through the Division for Outreach... of the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America). Workshops for the training of new mission pastors would likely happen in Chicago at the ELCA church wide office.”

Colleges have a mixed approach. Some consider training for church planting to be best accomplished at the graduate level. “No course was offered at Mississippi College [in Clinton, MS]. No such course exists in the catalogue. The professor in the Christian Studies Department considers Church Planting to be a course more suited to a seminary curriculum.”

Many include church planting as a part of other classes. For example, North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL offers a combined evangelism and church planting class. They occasionally use “videos on church planting produced in-house by the Evangelical Covenant Church's director of Church Planting.”

Other colleges are increasing their programs by starting a separate class for church planting. Mid-Continent College listed, “Mis 3103 Church Planting. This course is now a part of Strategies for Church Growth. It will be returned to our catalog as a part of the Nehemiah Project.” Of those who have a distinct class for church planting, most have added this within the last five years. The graph below illustrates those who have increased over the last 5 or 10 years compared to those with no change.



### **Connected with Other Groups**

In many cases, schools teamed up with other persons, churches, groups, or denominations to offer programs at their schools. Some schools emphasized connections with visionary church planting churches. Lancaster Bible College in Lancaster, PA explained “We have a church planting program... [that] is currently being completely revised. We are moving forward on an intensive partnership with visionary churches

who want to plant a daughter church. Students will partner with that church with the intention of becoming the pastor of the church plant.”

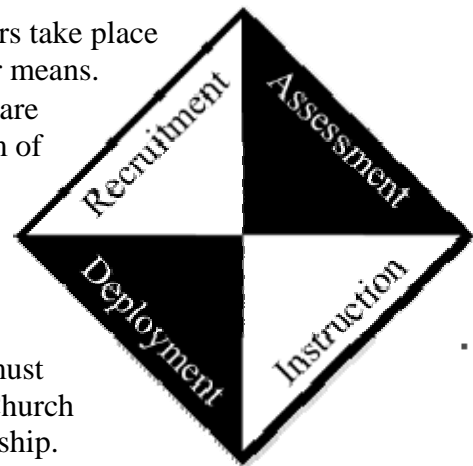
Dallas Christian College in Dallas, TX partners “with World Impact—an organization that establishes churches in the inner city/urban context (and) ... with local churches that are planting new congregations.”

### **Church Planting Centers**

Many schools have adopted “Church Planting Centers.” The most significant of these programs are at the Southern Baptist related seminaries. Each Southern Baptist Seminary has a full-time church planting professor who is jointly appointed by the North American Mission Board (the SBC mission agency focused on North America) and the individual seminary. (Full disclosure here: I direct this program.)

The Nehemiah Project manual explains, “The Nehemiah Project is a cooperative strategy that links Southern Baptist churches, associations, state conventions and Canada, training institutions, and the North American Mission Board to intentionally prepare church planters to plant healthy, reproducing churches.” These Nehemiah Project Church Planting Centers include:

- Recruitment: Ongoing recruitment of church planters take place in chapel, through special events, and through other means.
- Assessment: Students interested in church planting are brought through an assessment process—a minimum of a four-hour behavioral interview exploring the individual wiring and call to church planting.
- Instruction: Nehemiah Professors / Directors teach multiple church planting courses focused on North American. All Nehemiah Project church planters must take Introduction to Church Planting, Methods of Church Planting, and participate in a church planting internship.
- Deployment: Center Directors assist students to be placed in church



planting positions available within the denomination.

Other schools also offer church planting centers. Many of these are Nehemiah Partnership Centers—schools that use the Nehemiah Project materials though they may not be Southern Baptist. For example, Columbia International University in Columbia, SC (and about 20 other schools) use the Nehemiah Partnership materials and, in return, share the names of potential church planters interested in planting SBC churches.

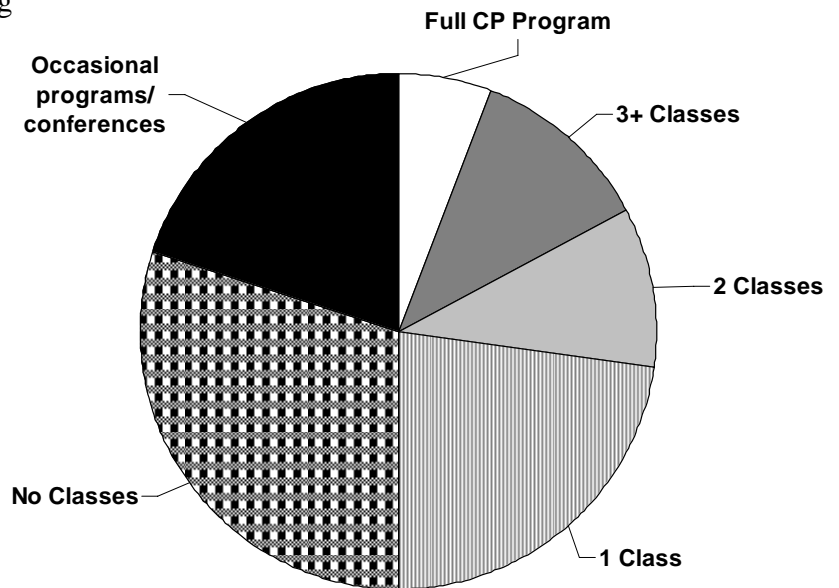
Still other schools have developed their own centers. Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, FL partners with The US Center for Church Planting under the direction of Steve Childers, serving as Director of the Center and a professor at Reformed. Their center is “certified” by the Presbyterian Church of America as an assessment and training center for their church planters. Also, Andrews University in Berrien Springs, MI explains that the school church planting center (North American Division Evangelism Institute) “is now

looked upon as the church planting resource center for the denomination in North America.”

A few schools with church planting centers actually require church planting as part of their core curriculum. Every student at the

Canadian Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Cochrane, Alberta is required to take

### Schools with Courses & Programs



a church planting class. No other seminaries taking the survey indicated such a commitment, but there are a few others that have such a requirement.

### **Class Offerings**

The school with the broadest church planting focus is Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. Their courses include: North American Church Planting Exercise, Church Planting: Biblical and Strategic Foundations; Developing a Church Plant Methodology; Practicum in North American Church Planting; Evangelism and Church Planting with a Non-Evangelical Context; Preaching for the North American Church Planter; Pastoral Ministry for the Church Planter; Music in Church Planting; Counseling for the Church Planter; Church Plants in the New Testament; Spiritual Renewal in Church Plants. Southeastern, and several other schools, offer a M.Div. in Church Planting that allows students to do two years of their program on campus and the remaining “year” of course on the field or in short modulators returning to campus. The courses listed are part of this program.

Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, MS provides a class where students research their field as part of the church planting process. “Research on the field with the view of actually establishing a local church in the future. Includes survey, demographic, and contact work with evaluation.”

Some divide the church planting courses by focus. For example, Trinity International University in Deerfield, IL offers a class “Global Church Planting” that is separate from a class “North American Church Planting.” Some still combine International and North American church planting in the introductory class.

## Conclusions

The strongest programs tended to be at larger schools, but this was not universally so. However, in almost every case the stronger program had a person who promoted church planting—either a professor or a local church leader.

Ken Davis is the Director of Church Planting for Baptist Bible College and Seminary in Clarks Summit, PA and leads an annual church planting conference, offering internships, etc. Others involve outside ministry leaders. Emmanuel Bible College in Kitchener, Ontario explained “The instructor for the above course is an adjunct instructor who is involved as a mentor and coach for church planters. His name is Glenn Gibson and he works for an umbrella organization in Canada called Outreach Canada. Outreach Canada has run seminars and a church planter’s boot camp on our campus.” Schools with leaders assigned to promote, recruit, teach, and help place church planters have the most successful programs.

Also, most successful programs had a distinct identity on campus. Many called this a church planting center. This center was usually a part of the missions or church growth department, but it had some separate identity and events. These events helped the students to consider the idea of North American Church Planting.

There is a tremendous interest in church planting today. Many schools are beginning to recognize that many of their students are not interested in the traditional pastoral route. They are being challenged by an emerging North American missions focus—and they want to attend schools that will equip them for this increasingly common form of ministry.

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If you wish to participate in the survey, you may still do so and the database will be updated. To participate, send an e-mail to [estetzer@namb.net](mailto:estetzer@namb.net). Schools wishing to start a church planting program may wish to contact me at [nehemiah@namb.net](mailto:nehemiah@namb.net) to learn more.

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