

[Mainline church study details eight vital characteristics of new church developers](#)

by Cory Miller

SAN FRANCISCO (PD) — What are the key characteristics a church planter must possess to be effective in starting a new church?

That was the question Dr. H. Stanley Wood, the Ford Chair Associate Professor of Congregational Leadership and Evangelism at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and his team sought to answer through a massive research project of the most effective church planters in the last 20 years within seven mainline denominations.

The results of this comprehensive study are detailed in a new book, published by Eerdmans, titled [Extraordinary Leaders in Extraordinary Times: Unadorned Clay Pot Messengers](#), the first of two volumes written from the study.

"Throughout her history, the Church has had men and women whose passion has been to take the message of the Gospel to the unchurched," wrote Wood, who served as the book's editor as well as a key contributor for the chapters detailing the traits. "This zeal exists in every generation, in both genders, among varying age groups, and in every corner of the world."

Wood describes this passion of church planters (or 'new church developers' as they are known in mainline traditions) as a "holy mystery that is linked to the graciousness of the Holy Spirit working within the human heart."

Through the research study, Wood and his team sought to find empirical evidence of that work in the lives of God's people so that others (in particular,

Each of the seven denominations stipulated in this study is losing more members each year than it is gaining. Each denomination admits to having many established congregations in need of transformational leadership and re-development. Developing new churches is seen as one of the hopes for the future for these denominations.

Dr. H. Stanley Wood,
[Extraordinary Leaders in Extraordinary Times: Unadorned Clay Pot Messengers](#)

mainline denominational leaders) could identify and nurture them. To do so, they surveyed more than 700 new church developers (NCDs), and then followed up with six focus groups of the most "effective" and "extraordinary" founding pastors to determine what pastoral leadership traits were common among them.

Wood describes the most effective NCDs as being "those pastors who started and sustained new churches that achieved the highest membership growth within their respective denominations" and "those pastors who were able to attract and assimilate formerly unchurched persons into active church membership."

The study sought to discover what core traits, behaviors, and spiritual gifts were most vital to them in their first seven years of ministry in the new church development.

Wood found eight key traits, organized into two tiers.

1. "Catalytic innovator"

In the top tier, the single most important profile is made up of five skills and abilities that Wood describes as a "catalytic innovator."

Often referred by some planters as "entrepreneurial leadership," Wood describes this core trait as "somebody or something that makes a change happen or brings about an event" and as "someone who introduces a new way of doing something."

"The term 'catalytic innovator' captures the entrepreneur's bold style of work; and again, it emphasizes that the work of the innovator is not done in a vacuum," Wood wrote.

Under the broad category of "catalytic innovator," Wood identified five aspects that further define that role for a new church developer and described them as "crucial competencies for success in the early years of ministry."

The five aspects are, with comments by Wood:

- Charismatic leader – "It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that effective NCD pastors freely describe themselves as 'entrepreneurs.'"
- Tenacious perseverer – "Like workers in every field, these developers go through times of ease and times of difficulty; despite the times, though, they persist in growing and building the church."
- Risk-taker – "An effective NCD pastor takes risks with exceptional energy and when the stakes are exceptionally high."
- Flexible adapter – "A skilled change agent who is agile and flexible with people and their agendas."
- Self-starter – "They are not afraid to initiate a difficult plan of action or to take risks to see it through."

2. Vibrant faith in God

The second key trait in the top tier noted by effective NCDs was a "vibrant faith in God" – in his calling and provision, but not to a "life in a spiritual comfort zone." One developer said: "You can't give away what you don't have."

Prayer was mentioned frequently in the focus groups.

"Vibrant faith in God is a trait to be nurtured, one that is cultivated and nourished by making prayer and reflection on Scripture a disciplined priority in life," Wood wrote.

3. Visionary/vision caster

The third characteristic in the top tier of effective NCD pastors was that of "visionary/vision caster."

"These developers dreamed big dreams and moved forward to fulfill them," Wood wrote. "They rooted these dreams in their understanding of God's purposes for the new church."

He added that the NCD pastors in the study who had the largest church memberships made the articulation of a clear vision to their congregation "a very high priority."

The most effective, he observed, were more likely to present their vision statements as "goals and objectives" rather than traditional statements with "ideals and hopes."

4. Empowering leadership

Unlike the top tier traits, which have significant percentage differences between them, Wood found that the second tier traits were all of relatively equal importance.

Within the second tier of characteristics, Wood found "empowering leadership" as one of the most cited traits of effective NCDs.

"This brand of leadership is not simply energetic leading; it is also the 'ability to spot' and nurture other leaders," he wrote.

Wood observed that the most effective NCD pastors put "a continuous and urgent premium on the identification and training of indigenous leadership" and "devote their time and energies to it."

Restated, he wrote: "They lead to give their leadership away."

5. Passion for people

Passion and love for people is the fifth characteristic noted by effective NCDs.

"These leaders love, they care, and they show it – and they identify relational skills as a key ingredient of leadership in the success of any new church," Wood wrote.

These leaders learned to communicate contextually with their congregation, understanding their "needs, hopes, and dreams," and turned it into the new church's purpose.

"They not only feel for those to whom they minister, but they also can demonstrate their passion in appropriate and meaningful ways," he wrote. "They can connect with people."

6. Personal and relational health

The sixth trait was an emphasis on both "personal and relational health" – "keeping body, mind, and spirit aligned and healthy."

"Most importantly, this trait underscores the importance of attending to and nurturing healthy families," Wood wrote. "Most of the top church developers are married."

7. Passion for faith-sharing

The seventh characteristic found is that effective NCDs had a passion for "faith-sharing," or evangelism.

They viewed evangelism as a "continual lifestyle."

"The most effective NCD pastors are likely, within any 90-day period, to have assisted a person making a first-time affirmation of faith," Wood wrote.

8. Inspiring preaching or worship

The final characteristic noted within the two top tiers for the first seven years of a new church development was "inspiring preaching and worship."

"The goal of inspiring worship is an encounter that can be described as a celebration in which both the seeker and mature disciple 'meet God' and understand Scripture," Wood wrote.

Wood noted that the need for new church development within mainline denominations is critical.

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"Developing new churches is seen as one of the hopes for the future for these denominations."

And according to Wood, new church developers – who are identified, nurtured, and then sent out – will provide the vital pastoral leadership necessary for those new churches to flourish.

Recommended resources

- [Starting New Churches on Purpose by Ron Sylvia](#)
- [Starting a Purpose Driven Church \(CD\)](#)
- [Am I Called to be a Church Planter? \(CD\)](#)

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