

Growth in newly established churches: Where are the regular church attenders coming from?

One of a series of practical missions research case studies

Key Words: survey, church planting, conversion growth, transfer growth

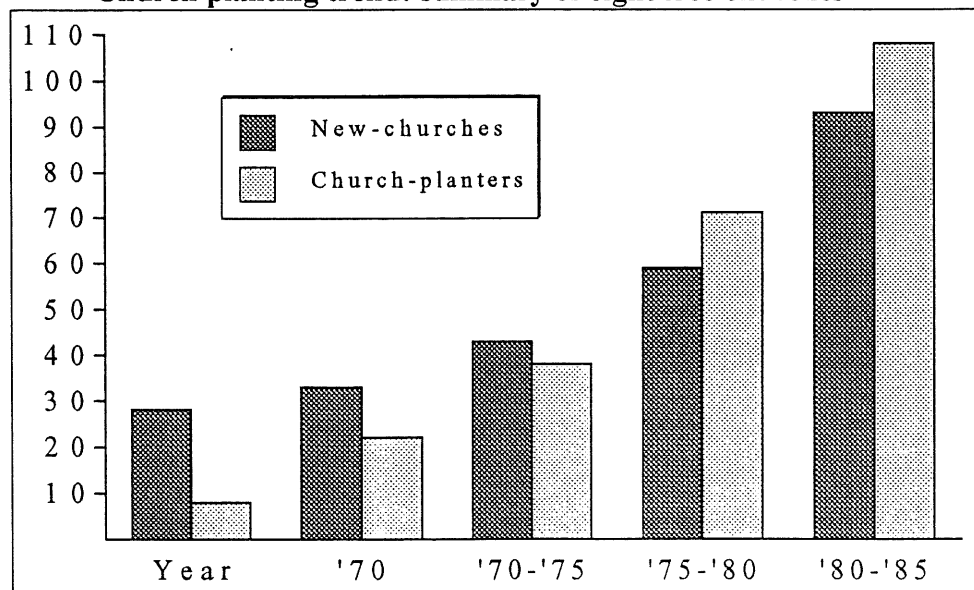
Abstract: A survey of several hundred people who had recently joined newly planted churches was made. The purpose was to discover what kind of people were attracted to these newly planted churches. The findings challenged several points of conventional wisdom.

Background: The question of the re-evangelization of Germany is more and more associated with the planting of new churches. OC's ministry in Germany up until the recent past was focused almost exclusively on the State Church, primarily due to the thinking in German Culture that an upright German belongs to the State church. The small number of Free churches being established in Germany were a factor, as well. This important effort to reach the "State" churches is not something that OC Germany has given up on, and it will remain an important priority for the future. On the other hand, missionary planning must always be flexible, prepared to change according to the culture to which one ministers. There appears to be a new openness to Free churches or church planting efforts, and we are observing in German culture a diminishing relationship between the culture and the "State" church.

The "State" church as an institution is playing a less important role for most Germans. This is evident in at least two areas. First, in some areas more than 50% of all marriages are being completed without a church wedding. Second, a high number of members of the State church are withdrawing their membership from the church, particularly in larger cities. The State church is no longer the only alternative for religious involvement. And this has tremendous consequences for the church planting movement. Not all those leaving the State churches are streaming into the Free churches. Instead they are turning their back on all forms of institutional Christianity.

However, for many Germans, there isn't the same sociological barrier as before against people joining Free churches. **Figure 1** confirms this assumption.

Figure 1
Church planting trend: summary of eight free churches



One of the reasons for the increasing number of new churches is that there are many more church planters today. But this alone is not an explanation for the growth at this time after the relative lack of success of previous church planting efforts.

Church planting is, alongside of the renewal of the existing churches, the evangelistic way of the future. Should the present study lead to greater clarity, and contribute to the establishing of new churches and renewal in existing churches, for that we will praise God. We especially owe thanks to the ten churches who willingly participated in this study.

Purpose: The overall purpose of this study was to determine to what degree new churches were growing through transfer growth, i.e. through individuals changing churches. Above and beyond that there were several other points to be investigated.

- What kind of contribution is conversion growth making to new churches in Germany?
- What kind of people are joining newly established churches? For example, what church background, education, age groups are the newcomers from?
- What are their reasons for changing churches?
- Are there differences between charismatic and non-charismatic churches? between churches which are being started by Germans and by foreigners? Are there differences between churches which are being established in larger cities and smaller villages?

Methodology: With regard to the methodology used in this study, the churches that we questioned were selected with the following criteria in mind:

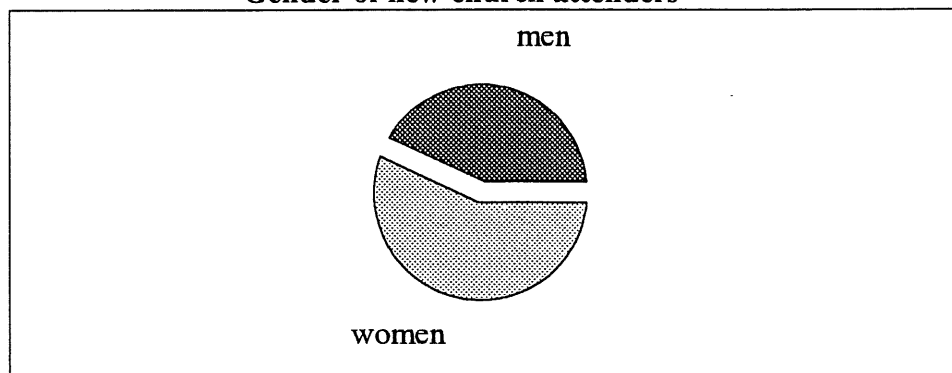
- the church was established no more than 10 years ago
- some charismatic (6) and some non-charismatic churches (4)
- some with denominational churches (6) and some independent churches (4)
- different geographic locations (north 5) (middle 3) (south 2)
- different community size (over 50,000 residents--6) (under 50,000 residents --4)
- some larger churches (over 100 in worship service 5) and some smaller churches (under 100 also 5)
- some churches planted by German (9) and some by foreign church planters (1)

Out of these ten churches, 377 church attenders were interviewed either in person or by phone. Each interviewer was trained in order to minimize misunderstandings and inaccuracy.

Those interviewed were chosen randomly from among the regular worship attenders. The random selection method avoids biases which arise from, for example, letting the pastor choose the names of people to be interviewed.

Analysis/Reporting: Based on the findings from the 377 church attenders we were able to compose a profile of those who are attending newly planted churches. This profile was presented in a series of graphs.

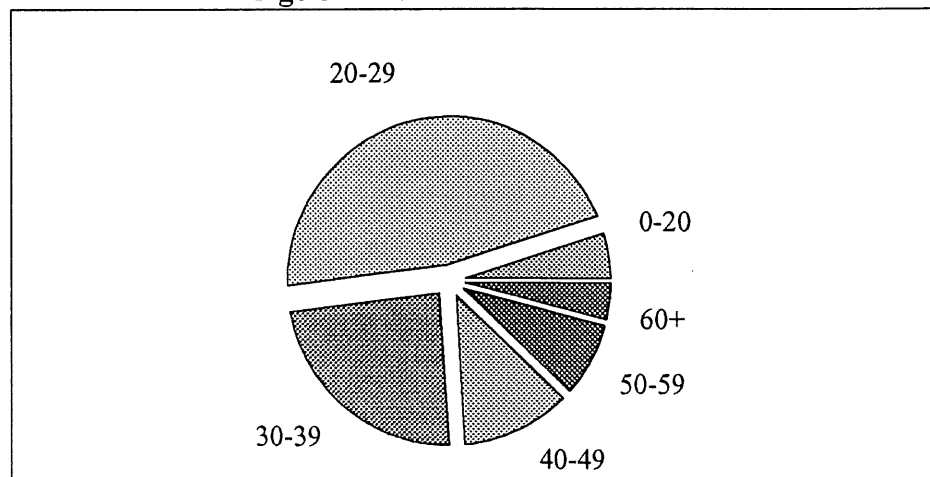
Figure 2
Gender of new church attenders



The higher percentage of women does not vary significantly from the profile in the State church where 41% are male and 59% are female.

There is a significant difference in the age structure, however, in comparing the free or newly established churches with the State church.

Figure 3
Age of New church attenders



Nearly 1/2 of all adults in newly established churches are between 20-30 years of age. By including the 30-40 year olds, as well, then they comprise over 70% of all the adults in newly established churches. In this age range,

this high percentage is even more astounding when compared with a 1984 State church study, in which only 12% of all Protestant worship service attenders were between the ages between 25-34. This is strong evidence that newly established churches are effectively reaching the 20-40 age group, an age group that is not being reached by the national church.

Just the opposite is true for those 50 and older. While approximately 50% of all worship service attenders in the national church are 50 years of age or older only about 12% of those 50 and up were represented in the newly established churches.

Figure 4
Education of new church attenders versus the general public

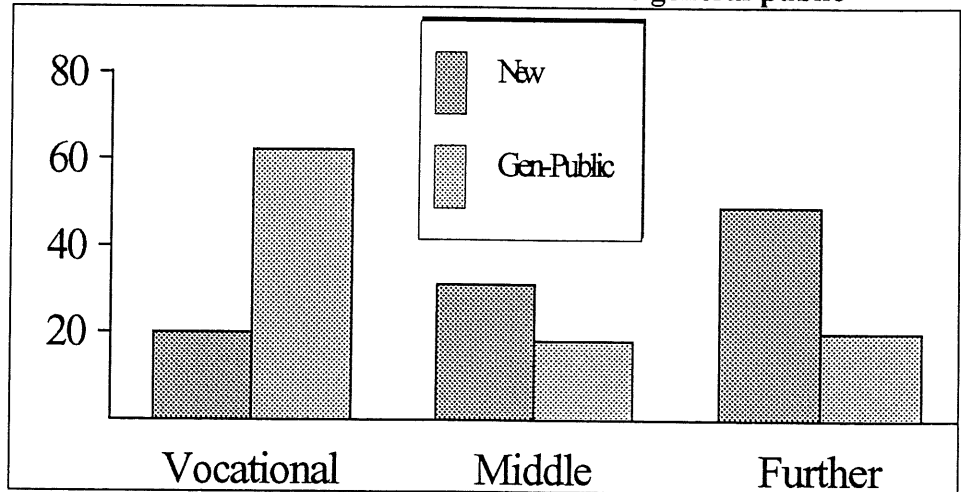


Figure 4 indicates that the people in newly established churches tend to have more education than the general public. The corollary of this is that the working class is *under* represented in the newly established churches. This may be explained by the fact that the newly established churches were more often located in sections of their city with a higher socioeconomic profile. In any event, this undermines the belief that newly established churches only reach *fringe* people from society.

Conversion Growth: We define new converts as, people who say " I wasn't born-again before I had contact with this church and I became a born-again Christian through the ministry of this church." Or: "My conversion was the reason that I became associated with this church. "

From the data gathered we find that new converts in these newly established churches were people with the following characteristics.

- more women than men
- most between the ages of 20-30
- most have at least a middle track to upper track high-school education

- most were previously a member of another church.

It is apparent that these churches found a way to reach precisely the age group that other churches have failed to reach.

Thirty three percent of the total respondents indicated they became associated with their church through conversion. Two thirds were transfers or other reasons.

Since we were particularly interested in conversion growth we looked at the profile of new converts. The age distribution corresponds closely to that of all new church attenders. (Figure 3) Once again it was the 20 to 30 year olds which were led to the churches by their coming to faith in Jesus Christ. One church had as high as 67% of its converted in this age group.

Figure 5
New converts: Age distribution

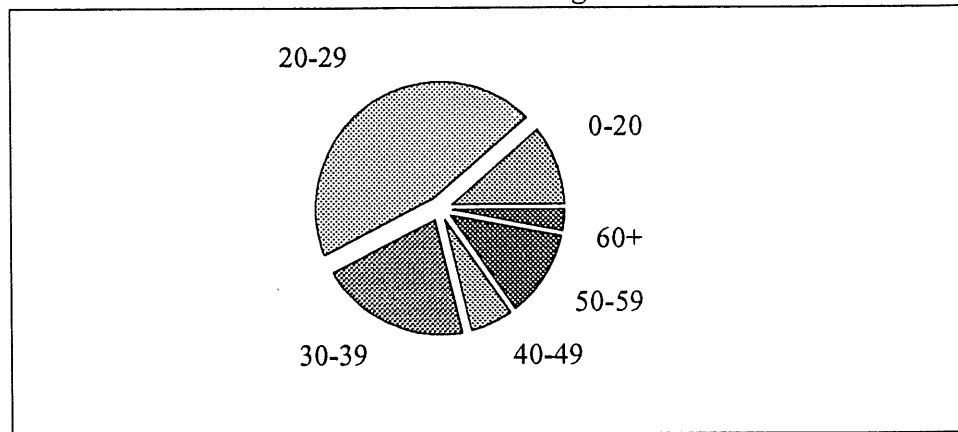


Figure 6
New Converts: Educational background and church type

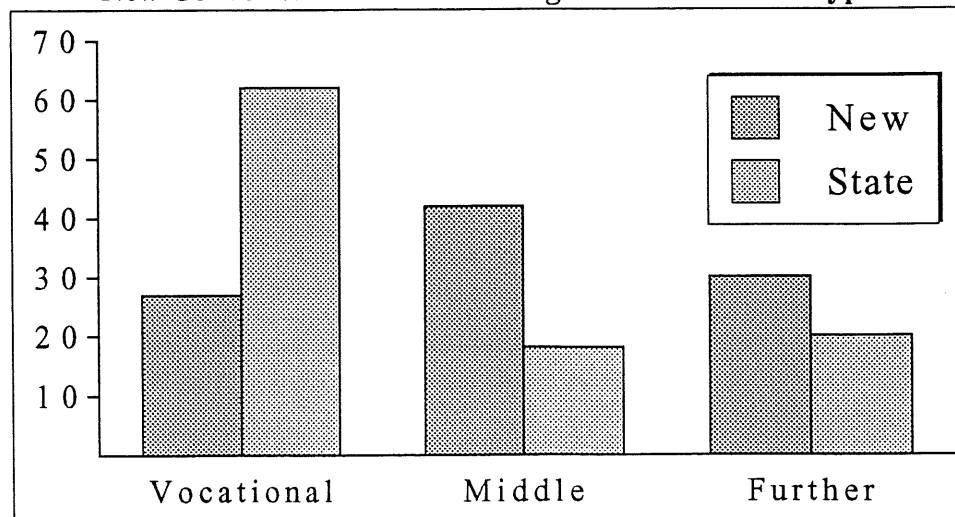


Figure 6 indicates that new converts at the newly planted churches tend to have a higher level of education than the State church attenders.

Figure 7

New Converts: Educational background according to worship service size

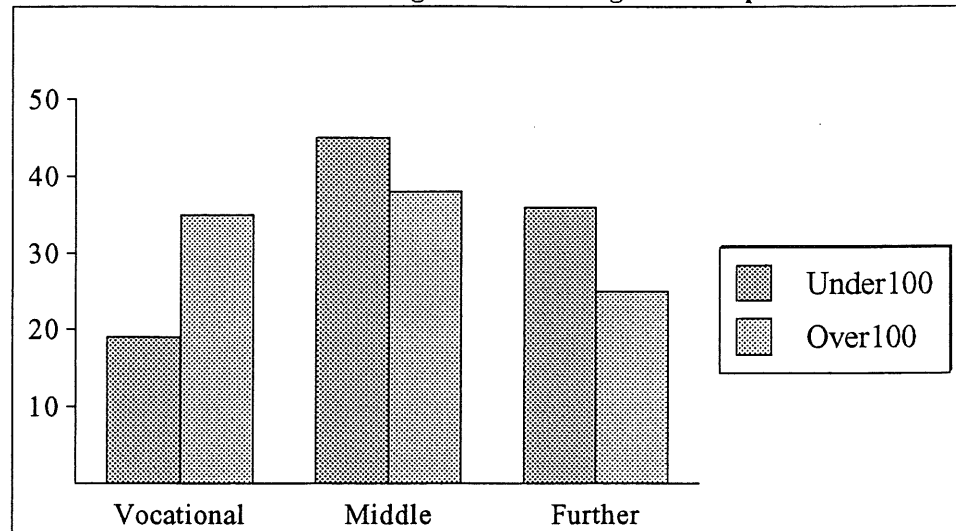


Figure 7 indicates that new converts with greater educational background are somewhat more attracted to the churches with smaller worship services.

The claim that newly planted churches grow primarily through the changing of church members and not through conversion, is clearly not true. While the strength of the transfer growth is still to be analyzed, we can say that 1/3 of those integrated into new churches were new converts. This is consistent with international conversion growth rates.

Perhaps the most noteworthy observation is the effective evangelistic outreach to 20-30 olds with a middle to advanced educational background.

Suppose each of the 10 churches that were surveyed had approximately 100 adult participants which would total 1,000 individuals (10x100). From these 1000, according to our statistics, 338 individuals would have come into the church through conversion. Would these 338 individuals have become Christians without a new church having been planted? Even among those who are already active in another church, it took the planting of a different type of church for them to hear and respond to the call to follow Christ.

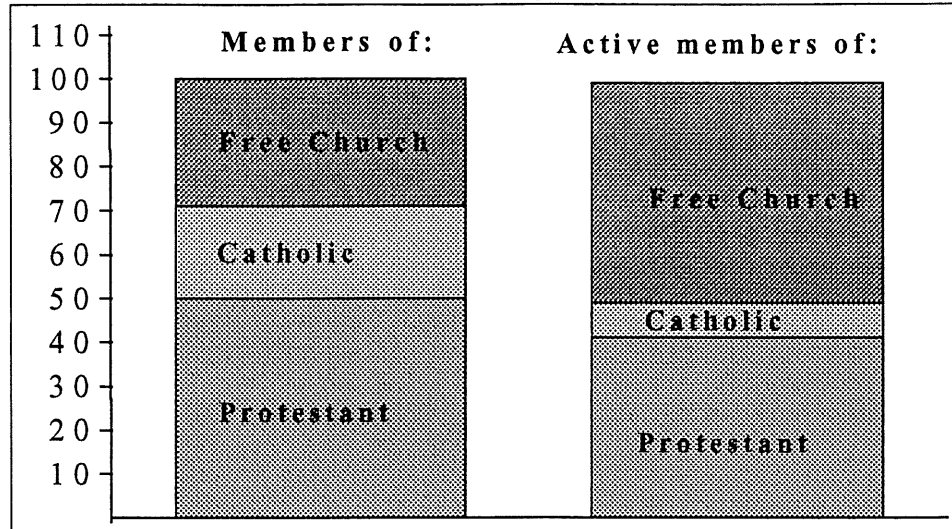
Transfer Growth: Church growth by transfer occurs when those who are born-again and are active church members move their attendance to another church. In evaluating transfer growth, the following observations may be helpful:

- Transfer growth deals exclusively with those who are already active members. This does not include those who have nominal involvement and church membership
- Transfer growth involves only those who are already born-again before the church change takes place

- Transfer growth does not include those who transferred into new churches as a result of moving their family, such as with the transfer of employment.

When these three limitations are used for the definition of transfer growth, we come to a rate of 35% of those who became involved in newly planted churches through transfer.

Figure 8
Transfers: Where did they come from?



When we asked "Were you a member of another church just prior to your contact with the church you are now in?" 92% responded positively. **Figure 8** shows where newly transferred members came from. Most respondents indicated that they were previously members of the Protestant Church. But most of those who were active in their previous church were from the Free Churches.

Figure 9
Transfer growth according to age.

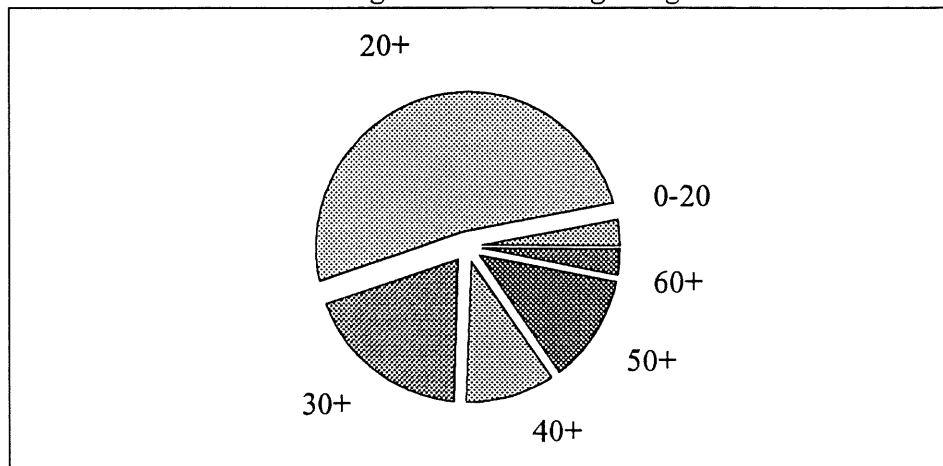


Figure 9 indicates that fifty-one percent of all transfer growth comes out of the 20-30 age group.

Figure 10
Education of Transfer Growth Individuals

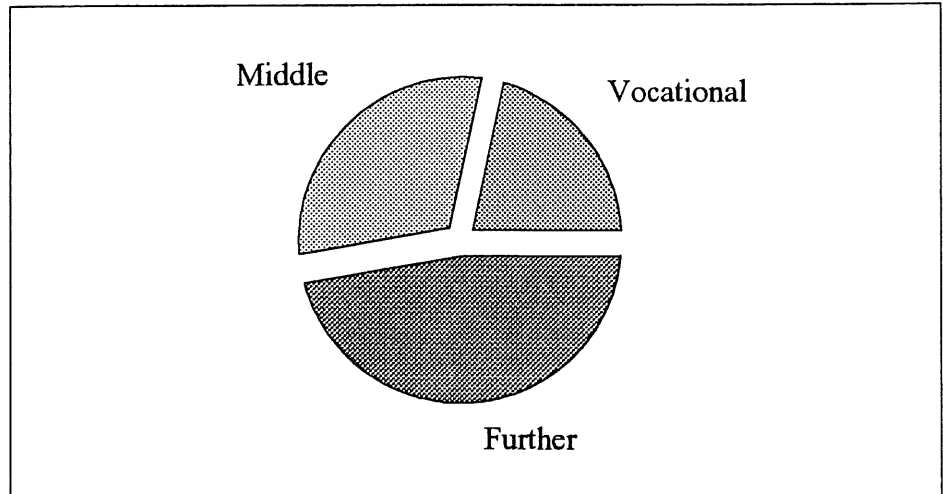


Figure 10 shows that 46% of those individuals who were integrated into their church through transfer have an advanced education.

Figure 11
Previous attendance record of new Transfers

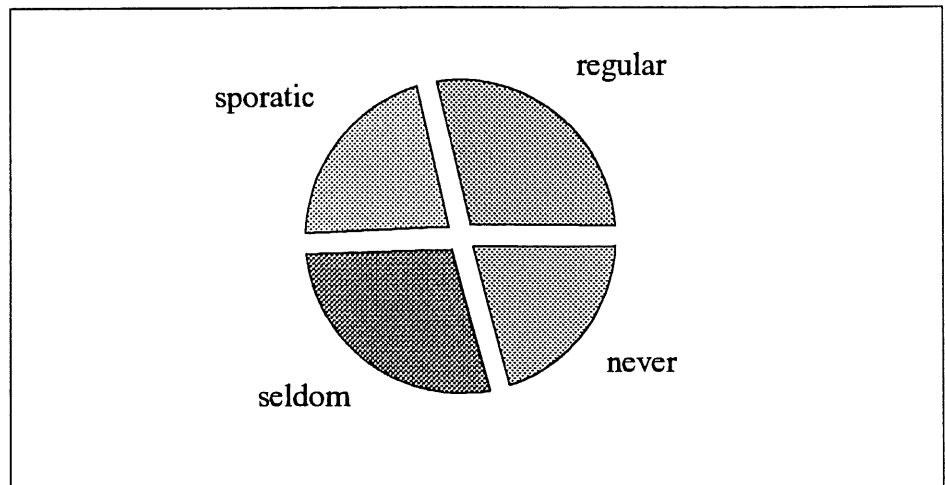


Figure 11 indicates that less than a third of the transfers to newly planted churches were regular in their attendance at their previous church.

It has generally been assumed that most people transferred because they were dissatisfied with their old church. This is an important reason but it

takes second place as shown in the following list of reasons for changing churches:

1. Search for spiritual nurture - 51%
2. Dissatisfaction with the previous church - 31%
3. Theological superiority - 25%
4. The new church or pastor suited me better - 23%
5. A better children's or youth program - 16%
6. My friends go there - 8%

It is recognized that there are other possible reasons for changing churches, but these were the most significant that were listed. Some of the other reasons that were listed included the leading of God, working with the daughter church, a desire for charismatic expressions, conflicts in the previous church, marriage, occult experience in the previous church, and home Bible studies.

According to this study, among active born-again Christians, those who are more likely to change churches include:

- men
- those between 20 and 30 years of age
- those with a higher education
- Protestants
- those who have a hunger for spiritual nurture
- those from a denominational background, rather than those with an independent church background

Pastors losing members to other churches because they are transferring to other churches often cry sheep stealing. There was never any indication that new and growing churches had ever tried to steal anyone. As a matter of fact, just the opposite is true. Our study has indicated to us that most of the leaders of church planting groups are characterized by the following points:

- They are skeptical of church hoppers. They know that these people have been dissatisfied in other locations, and will likely be dissatisfied in theirs.
- Their desire is to earnestly determine with the potential transfer person whether changing churches is consistent with a biblical viewpoint.

- The church planters are prepared to speak with the church leaders from which the transfer candidates have come.

Figure 12
Membership of those attending new churches

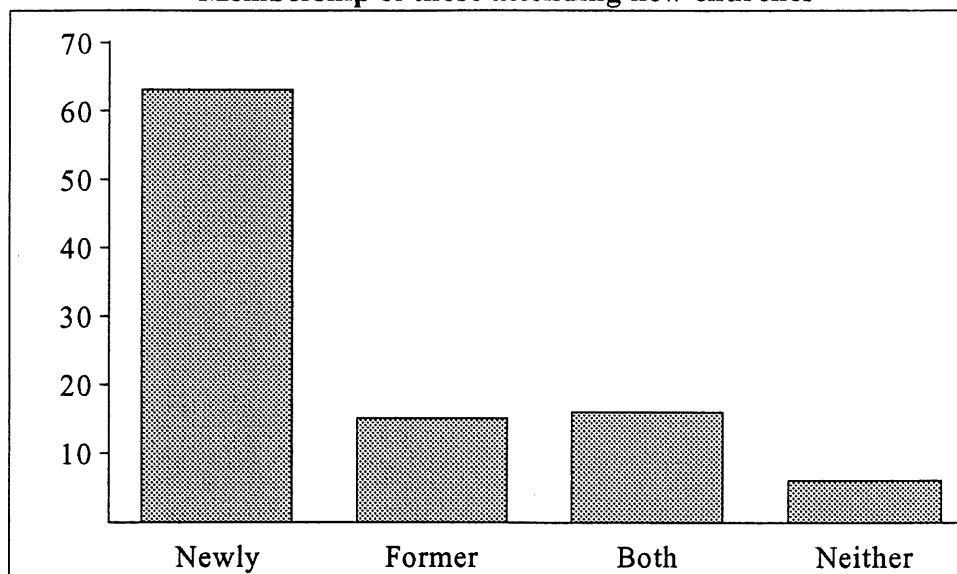


Figure 12 indicates that 63% of those surveyed had already moved their membership to the newly planted church; 15% still had membership exclusively in a former church, 16% had membership in both the newly planted church and an old church and 6% were members of neither an old or a newly planted church. Of those who maintained membership in the old church, this is apparently not an active membership but a passive membership which reflects a fading tie to traditional national church structures.

Figure 13
Baptism in New churches

| | |
|---|-----|
| Baptized as infants only | 38% |
| Had already been previously baptized as believers | 27% |
| Baptized as both infants and as adults | 19% |
| Baptized in the new church | 8% |
| Had not been baptized | 3% |
| Had a second believer's baptism | 3% |
| Did not respond | 1% |

Figure 13 shows that nearly 1/2 of all those baptized as babies had themselves baptized again as adults.

Figure 14
How far does one drive to church?

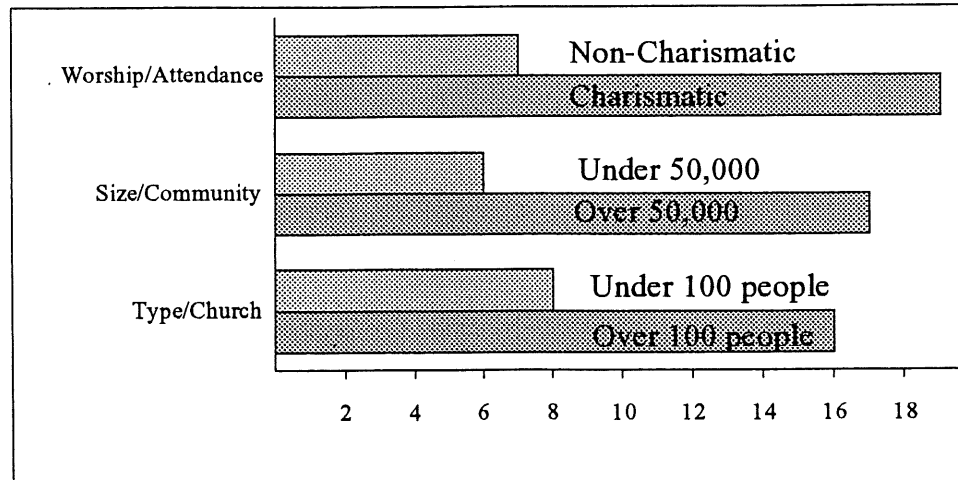


Figure 14 Members of Charismatic churches were willing to drive longer distances (16km) than non-charismatic members. Members living in large communities were willing to travel substantially more kilometers than members of smaller communities. Finally, members that attend worship in a church of 100 or more are willing to travel on the average 10 km more than those members that attend a smaller church.

Impact: This study debunked some of the myths that were held about the planting of new church. People who go to newly planted churches aren't the fringe people in society, they are relatively well educated. The newly planted churches tend to draw their transfer growth from other free churches. Many who come are from the state church or the Catholic church but they tend to have been sporadic attenders at best before they switched.

After this survey was done several other similar studies have been done. Evidently, some have found it very useful.

Appendix A: Interview Form

Interview

Research Project: Growth of newly planted Churches:
Where do the regular attenders come from?

Interviewer: KC EM FM KY Date _____

Information about the person being questioned.

1. M F

2. Age: Under 20 20 - 30 31 - 40 41 - 50 51 - 60 60+

3. Education: Vocational School Technical School College Prep University

4. In the church since 19 _____

5. In relationship to your *previous church* (immediately before your change to the present church you are in):

a. Membership:

- Protestant Church of Germany (State Church)
- Roman Catholic
- Free Church
- None
- Other *which church* _____

b. How often did you attend church? Weekly Occasionally Holidays Never

6. Church Membership:

- Only in the present church
- In both churches
- Only in the previous church
- None

7. Conversion: *Please note, you cannot answer the first two questions both with Yes*

"Before the contact with the present church I was already a born-again Christian." Yes No Not sure

"My conversion resulted from the contact with the present church" Yes No Not sure

"I was already baptized before coming to this church." Including *being baptized as an infant* Yes No Unsure

8. Reasons for Changing Churches *This question is unnecessary if question 5a was none or other.*

More than one reason can be checked.

- conversion
- theological issues
- better children's and youth program
- moved
- dissatisfaction with the previous church
- new church and or pastor is better for me
- my friends attend the new church
- other _____

9. I live _____ km from the church.

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