

FINDING CHURCH PLANTERS

Discovering and Discerning Those God Has Called to Start the Next Generation of Churches

by Josh Hunt

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Google, currently the world's most popular Internet search engine, can find almost anyone or anything—but only if the user has the right criteria for the search. The more specific the search criteria, the more limited the pool of possibilities. In less than a second, it can sort through billions of options and then present an ordered list of the top-ten options.

Those with a passion to see many new churches planted may often wish for the spiritual equivalent of Google, especially in finding the people God has called as church planters. The search often feels more like the game where a child guides a playmate to find a hidden object with only one of two clues: “warmer” and “colder.” As crude and unsophisticated as it is, with a little patience, the object can be found with only these clues.

This paper will seek to review the best practices of strong church-planting churches as they discern those called to do church planting. They don't offer Google-style speed, but they can definitely tell you when you are getting warm by using the following clues to identify the person called and gifted to plant a church. You are getting “warmer” when . . . :

- *You work with someone you know*
- *You reference objective standards such as those developed by Charles Ridley*
- *You use a behavioral interview approach*
- *You work with people who pass the “hang-out” test*
- *You find a prospective church planter through a mix of passion and divine “accidents”*

Most churches that have planted two, three, four, five, and more churches have learned these practices the hard way. After all, learning from experience (including mistakes) is one of the definitions of *wisdom*. They pray and seek God through Scripture just as much as they previously did—perhaps even more so now. But their selection process now follows less of a “flying by the seat of their pants” approach and more of a “getting warmer” approach.

i. Familiarity

You are getting warm as you work with someone you know

It is hard to fake it over the long haul. Over time you get to know a person—really know them—how they work under stress, how they are with their kids, and how they think about money, and what they think is funny. The more time you invest with a prospective church planter, the more you minimize the chance of surprises. Dramatic discoveries after damage has been done are seldom good.

Some churches call church planters from their own staff. From the viewpoint of the people selecting the church planters, trusted staff members are a proven commodity. They are not perfect, but at least the sponsoring church knows up front what their weaknesses are.

Emmanuel Faith Community Church in Escondido, California (<http://www.efcc.org>) is an example of such a model. In the recent years they have planted four churches and have 400 people meeting in two services in their gym, in what could be described as a planned pregnancy resulting in the birth of a new church. The new church does some cooperative ventures with the sending church, but it's purposely developing its own name and identity: Mission Hills Church. For churches that are land-locked, this is a proven model—to hive off several hundred people every few years. One great way to do this is to use someone you know—a staff member. Does it create tension? Sure. Chico Goff is the pastor of Mission Hills, and he puts it this way, “A child cannot live in the parent's house forever.” Still, this hiving off model is a very effective way of church planting.



CHICO GOFF

Columbia Crossroads in Columbia, South Carolina (<http://www.columbiacrossroads.org>) has also followed the hiving-off model, using a staff member to do it. They have planted ten churches so far. After an initial assessment using their own internal guides, Columbia Crossroads partners with one of four denominations to put prospective church planters through the denominational

assessments and boot camps, then their own internal, 20-session training called “Finding God’s Purpose for the Church.” From there, they bring the church planter onto their leadership team for a season, and then they hive off. In 2005 they launched a new church with 100 people using this model.



Mission Hills campus

Columbia Crossroads also provides a different example of working with “who you already know.” Staff member Dave Steinberg from Naples, Florida, had a friend from the same town who was interested in doing some new things. He had a vision for planting a church that would reach every man, woman and child in their area. Columbia Crossroads was able to sponsor their dream as a new church plant. It all started with the personal connection of an old friend.

West Ridge Church in greater Atlanta, GA, (<http://www.westridge.com>) is an eight-year-old church that is already bumping 4,000 in attendance. They are convinced Atlanta does not need another megachurch and have opted for a strategy of aggressive church planting. They have already been involved in seven church plants. In the beginning, many of their church planters were referred by old friends from the past—perhaps a fellow pastor from a previous city, or an old college buddy. Now, they recruit from other pastors and people that they know. Several of their more recent recruits have sought them out. They learn about the West Ridge church planting school by word of mouth or by searching the Web. West Ridge tends to go with those they

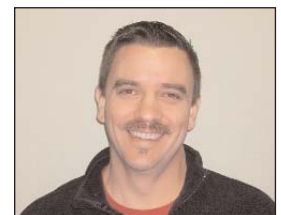


West Ridge Church

know. Here is an excerpt from West Ridge’s church planting blog:

It can be an incredible win to hire staff from within your church. Our philosophy on team building from the inception of West Ridge has been to hire from close to home. (It is the responsibility of the church planter to develop a core group to start the new church.) When Brian Bloye, lead pastor of West Ridge, planted the church, he made the commercial pitch to his friends and students he had worked with. As we hired positions over the next few years we continued this approach, often calling friends or students we had had in our ministries. This was our main strategy with pastor/director level hires. (<http://www.westridgeworks.blogspot.com/>)¹

After the church planters are recruited, they will spend a year attending West Ridge’s church planting training school. Presently they have 11 men in this year’s process. From each group that goes through the church planting process, West Ridge will keep two of the church planters as interns. They serve as paid staff and are mentored for two years. During those two years the church planters will recruit a core group to start a new church and raise financial support. Members may be recruited from the membership of West Ridge. On Easter Sunday 2006 the Church at the Ridge was begun with 250 people. The church planter and pastor is Steve Whipple.



Steve Whipple, pastor at Church at the Ridge, started Easter 2006, first service attendance 310, averaging 210 since their inaugural service.

Of the remaining church planters going through the process, some will be referred to other church planters as potential staff members, others will go out on their own to start a church. West Ridge continues to support anyone who has been through the program and even allows them to attend West Ridge’s staff meetings.

West Ridge is forming a network with other existing churches to plant more churches. Once a new plant has reached 200 members

and self sufficiency (including at least four elders) they are invited to become part of the network, designating 1% of their budget for church planting.

One model that West Ridge has followed is **Willow Creek Community Church** in greater Chicago (<http://www.willowcreek.org>). West Ridge's Executive Pastor, Matt Willmington interviewed Tammy Kelley of Willow Creek and discovered that Willow hires about 75% of their staff from the inside. They go with who they know.²



Joe and Becky Ciresi, commissioned from West Ridge Church to plant a church in Cleveland, Ohio.

An even more powerful way of ensuring that you can get a critical mass of people to go with the new church plant is for the senior pastor to leave. One example of this is

New Life Ministries in Virginia Beach, Virginia (<http://newlife.cc>). They have started nine churches, seven of them planted by the same senior pastor. He moved to a new location, taking a core group with him. After the church plant got up and running, he moved on to another location to start still another church.

A different spin on the “go with who you know” approach is to utilize a preaching team. In this scenario, the church has a multi-campus arrangement with a team of preaching pastors. At some point, one of these pastors could hive off one of the campuses to form a stand-alone church.

It has not happened yet—the church is only 20 months old—but **Church of the Highlands** in Lakeland, Florida (<http://www.lakelandhighlands.org>) is using the model of “go with who you know.” Their DNA is built around the idea of reproduction. They call each small group a “small church” and challenge it to reproduce. They gather the

small churches together into “big church.” This approach is based on the biblical model of the church, meeting both house to house and in temple courts. “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” (Acts 5:42) They opened their third location, a church near Disneyworld. They will take some of the small churches from one big church and move them to a new big church. They use a preaching team, so the congregation does not have to get used to a new preaching pastor. The dream is to start a whole string of interconnected churches all along the I-4 corridor from Tampa, through Orlando, out to Daytona. Small churches are challenged to grow and divide, and they are grouped into big churches that will grow and divide. The church is all about growing and dividing, and this has an impact on recruitment. They undoubtedly will stumble across some sharp lay leaders who are able to grow and divide multiple small churches. Along the way they expect to find good candidates for more church planters and preaching pastors.

Hill Country Bible Church (<http://www.hcbc.com>) has planted four churches in the Austin, Texas area. They know the value of going with known individuals rather than depending on advertisements. When asked what he wished he knew ten years ago about recruiting people to church planting, Peter Horn, who directs their Church Planting Training Center, was quick with a reply, “It is really important to build a network and let people know what you are doing; to seek those people out, rather than just depending on some postings on the Internet.”

Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis, Minnesota, (<http://www.bbcmpls.org>) has started thirty-five churches in their hundred-plus year history. They understand the importance of selecting the right leader. “We are not locked into one particular model of doing church. Rather we are looking for church planters called by God,” says Kenny Stokes, who leads their church planting initiatives, “If we find the right leader, we go with him.”

Sometimes plants happen accidentally. A negative example of the go-with-who-you-know approach is, perhaps the most common form of church planting—the church split. Although not intentional and sometimes ugly, it is perhaps the single most common source of new churches in America. As ugly as church splits are, they do result in lots of new churches. Tom Walsh, Pastor of **Church of the Savior**, in Wayne, PA, (<http://www.cosnet.org>) concedes that the two largest churches in his town were birthed because of unfortunate splits from his church. People go with who they know.

One last example of recruiting according to the who-you-know idea is working the old fashioned networks. Ask some of the best church-planting churches where they find leaders and you will hear things like these:

- *“Oh she was a longtime friend of the pastor.”*
- *“He was a college buddy.”*
- *“I met him at a networking event, and we struck up a friendship.”*
- *“I used to be on staff with her.”*

Churches that have planted multiple churches don't always go with people they know. These churches don't rely exclusively on existing contacts, but they do tend to have a strong preference for known individuals. When they don't know the person, they often provide an apprenticeship arrangement where the potential church planter could hang about the mother church for a year or more so everyone can get to know each other. If problems are discovered during this stage, there is a cost of terminating the relationship, but the cost for all parties becomes much higher after the church is launched. Some churches have paid that cost and don't want to go there again. Instead they decide to go with who they know. There is an old country song that goes, “Dance with the one who brung ya.” Leading church-planting churches tend to go this way.

People can make mistakes in many areas with minimal consequences. Discerning who is called to do church planting is not one of them. Few are called as full-time pastors, evangelists,

teachers and leaders in the church. Fewer still are called to do church planting with those gifts. Still fewer are called to this particular setting at this particular time. Church planting requires a widely diverse gift mix as well as an incredibly resilient spirit.

Summit Church in Bonita Springs, Florida (<http://www.summitlife.com>) is only two years old and has been involved in forty-one church plants. Their staff member in charge of church plants, Greg Kappas, tells of one church planter he knew (not one of theirs) who got so discouraged in the loneliness and frustration of the work, that he actually took his own life. While that situation is quite rare, the price of making a mistake is high.

Church of the Savior, in Wayne, Pennsylvania (<http://www.cosnet.org>) has successfully birthed three churches. Pastor Tom Walsh tells the story of one of their best church plants. It was 300 strong—until they handed the reigns to the wrong person. Years of good work can be lost when a mistake is made in discerning the called. Today, that church has less than 70. It would be nice to think that the other 230 made their way back to the mother church or to other churches. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be true. Some of them transitioned successfully, but many became disillusioned and dropped out of church.

The problem here was not that they found a bad person. It was not a moral failure. It was a mix failure. This man may have even been called to church planting, but not here. His style and approach were such a mismatch to the original vision of the core group, he became like a transplanted organ that was rejected by the body.

A DESIRE TO PLANT A CHURCH IS NOT THE SAME AS A CALL TO PLANT A CHURCH.

Steve Thompkins, former president of **Acts 29**, a church planting network (<http://www.acts29network.org>), emphasizes the importance of assessment this way, “There are so many stepping forward. . . a lot of people have a desire to plant a church but they do not have a call to plant a church. A

desire to plant a church is not the same as a *call* to plant a church.”³ According to Steve, some are finding a glut of willing potential church planters, who may not all be qualified or called. The question for these churches is not “How can we find those willing to plant a church?” but “Of the ones who express interest in church planting, who has God called to church planting?” Weeding out those not called is as important as finding those called. How then, do we discern the called?

An estimated eighty percent of new church plants fail.⁴ The number one reason for failure is related to leadership. The price of failure is high. What are the secrets for finding leadership known by those churches that have planted three or more churches? How do we discern the called? How do we weed out those who are willing, but not called? We can’t offer a Google search, but we can offer a map and a flashlight.

2. Benchmarking

You are getting warm when you reference objective standards such as those developed by Dr. Charles Ridley

The best of church-planting churches do more than just work a good-old-friend network. They also develop rigorous systems to discern the called and to weed out the not-called.

In the marriage market, counselors recommend that single adults make a list of qualities that they are looking for in a spouse. Such a list is useful in helping to objectify the decision once in the euphoria of the emotion of young love. Emotions are a good thing, but they can cloud one’s judgment. There is a reason for the common wisdom, “love is blind.” Sometimes it is too blind.

In a similar way, experienced church planters have learned to objectify their decision-making process with a list. By far the most commonly used list is one developed by social scientist Dr. Charles Ridley. Neil Cole, author of *Organic Church* and executive director of Church Multiplication Associates (<http://www.cmaresources.org>)—a church planting movement based out of Los Angeles—calls Dr. Ridley “the premier church planting assessment expert.”⁵ Church Multiplication Associates has launched 800 churches since the year 2000,⁶ but an interesting parenthetical note is that Neil flunked Ridley’s assessment the first time he took it. You might think this is an indicator of an inadequate test; rather Neil found it a helpful tool to point out some blind spots and growth areas. Charles Ridley’s thirteen qualities are widely respected and used to assess potential church planters.

To say that Ed Stetzer is an expert in church planting is to call Michael Jordan a basketball player. Jordan is no ordinary basketball player and Stetzer is no ordinary researcher on church planting. His web page, www.newchurches.com, has over 3000 pages of information relevant to church planters. He directs the Southern Baptist Convention’s Nehemiah project, recruiting and training church planters. He speaks of the Ridley assessment in a rather matter of fact way, “It is the Ridley assessment to which most people refer when they speak of church planter assessment.”⁷ Ask churches that have planted multiple churches about assessment and the name Ridley always comes up.

What are these thirteen Ridley qualities? Here is a summary:

Thirteen Essential Qualities For A Church Planter: A Self-Rating Scale⁸

<p>1. Visioning Capacity: Being a person who projects into the future, able to develop a theme highlighting the vision and philosophy of ministry; ability to persuasively “sell” the vision to the people; establishing a clear church identity related to the theme and vision. Challenges are approached as opportunities rather than obstacles, with ability to cope effectively with non-visioning elements, with the overarching belief in God’s capacity to do great things.</p>	Low ————— High				
	1	2	3	4	5

<p>2. Intrinsically Motivated: Having a desire to do well with a commitment to excellence; persistence; willingness to start from nothing and work long and hard; self-starter with high energy level and physical stamina; having initiative and aggressiveness without negative connotations.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>3. Ownership of Ministry: Helping people to feel responsible for growth and success of church; gaining commitment of people to the vision; establishing a congregational identity; avoiding stereotyping of congregation by imposing unrealistic goals for which it cannot claim ownership.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>4. Relates to the Unchurched: Communicating in a style that is understood by the unchurched; understanding the “psychology” of the unchurched and breaking through the barriers erected by them. Ability to move and function in the “personal space” of the unchurched without fear; quickly getting to know them on a personal level. Able to handle crises faced by the unchurched.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>5. Spousal Cooperation: Having an explicit agreement regarding each partner’s respective role and involvement in ministry; agreeing upon and sharing the ministry vision, functioning as a team through individual and collective action; with explicit rules regarding the use of home as an office and having a strategy for dealing with strangers; deliberately planning and protecting private family life; evaluating the consequences of ministry demands upon the children and modeling wholesome family life before church and community.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>6. Effectively Builds Relationships: Displaying Godly love and compassion to people, getting to know people on a personal basis; responding with urgency to expressed needs and concerns of people; making others feel secure and comfortable in one’s presence, not responding judgmentally or prejudicially to new people, appreciating and accepting a variety of persons; spending quality time with present parishioners without overstepping them for new people.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>7. Committed to Church Growth: Believing in church growth as a theological principle and seeing the church project within the larger context of God’s Kingdom; committing to numerical growth within the context of spiritual and relational growth (more and better disciples); appreciating steady and consistent growth without preoccupation with the quick success factor; recognizing that non-growth is threatening and self-defeating; establishing the goal of becoming financially self-supporting within a specific time frame; not prematurely falling into a ministry of maintenance.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>8. Responsive to Community: Understanding the culture, character and “pulse” of the community and adapting the philosophy of ministry to the community profile; identifying and assessing community needs; not confusing these identified needs with what the church wants to offer; responding to community needs on a priority basis such that resources are most efficiently used; determining successes and failures of other organized religious attempts to respond to community needs.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>

<p>9. Utilizes Giftedness of Others: Discerning of spiritual gifts in others; equipping and releasing people to do ministry; matching giftedness with ministry needs and opportunities; not prematurely assigning ministry tasks before adequate equipping; delegating effectively in areas of personal limitation and to avoid personal overload; not placing unwarranted restrictions on others’ spiritual giftedness.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>10. Flexible and Adaptable: Coping effectively with ambiguity, constant and abrupt change; doing “whatever” is necessary “whenever” necessary; shifting priorities and emphasis during stages of church growth; adapting oneself and one’s methods to the uniqueness of the church planting project.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>11. Builds Group Cohesiveness: Developing a nucleus group(s) as a foundation and engaging others in meaningful church activity; quickly incorporating newcomers into a network of relationships, monitoring the morale of people; utilizing groups effectively; dealing with conflict assertively, constructively and tactfully.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>12. Resilience: Experiencing setbacks without defeat; expecting the unexpected; rebounding from loss, disappointments and failure; riding the “ups and downs” (i.e. attendance).</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>
<p>13. Exercises Faith: Possessing a conviction regarding one’s call to church planting ministry and believing in God’s action; having expectation and hope; having a willingness to wait for answers to specific prayer requests.</p>	<p>Low ————— High</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>

Whether using this assessment, some adaptation of it, or a completely different assessment, the best of church planters have learned to rely on objective standards of assessments to discern the call of God on church planters. Some churches, like Columbia Crossroads, farm the formal assessment out to various denominational agencies, but they still see that it is done. Mark Driscoll pastors a church he planted, Mars Hill in Seattle, and he also helped form the Acts 29 Network of church planters. He says, “We are very particular in seeking a particular kind of man.”⁹ Formal assessment is part of the process.

The length of the assessment varies widely from a few hours to a few weeks, depending mostly on how well the planting church knows the church planter. In some cases it is more formal, while in others, more informal.

In some cases it is done internally, while in other cases it is farmed out to an agency of denominational entity.

Ultimately, assessing is about asking questions—often, the hard questions.

3. Asking the Hard Questions

You can tell if you are getting warmer by conducting a past behavioral interview

Common sense suggests that a lengthy and in-depth “what would you do if . . .?” interview would prove to be a useful tool in selecting a church planter, and an accurate predictor of a church planter’s future success. Common intuition, in this case, could be wrong. Interviews, unless conducted in a very specific way, are only mildly helpful in discerning who can successfully plant a

church. Business leaders have learned the same thing.

In 1911 Alfred Binet conducted experiments to measure the accuracy of interviews as a means of evaluating future job performance. The results were disheartening. Unstructured conversations, even when conducted by experts, proved unreliable.¹⁰ Walter Dill Scott conducted a similar study with similar results. In 1915 he published a study where thirty-six prospective employees were interviewed by six personnel managers. There was almost no agreement among the managers as to who was most likely to succeed. In fact, in 77% of the cases, the managers could not even agree if the applicant belonged in the top or bottom half of the applicants.¹¹ Similar findings followed in a series of studies between 1911 and 1945.

In 1945 Edwin Ghiselli, professor of psychology at the University of California-Berkeley, began working with a financial firm to help them improve hiring practices. He first identified specific skill sets that applicants needed to be successful in the work place. These included such things as strong interpersonal skills, dedicated and responsive work ethic, and sound judgment about financial decisions. Then he developed a series of questions that could demonstrate whether the applicant had demonstrated this capacity in the past. Over the next twenty years, he interviewed 507 potential applicants. He did not ask questions of a personal nature; instead, he asked about past performance as it related to each of the items on his desired skill set list. The result was an evaluation system based on a 5-point scale. He then correlated this grade with actual job performance after three years of employment. The results were significant. Ghiselli's interviewing method was predicting job performance with substantial accuracy.¹² Thus was born the practice of past behavioral interviews.

For the past twenty years, past behavioral interviews have been widely accepted as the best practice in executive evaluation.¹³ In the world of executive assessment today, past behavioral interviews are widely touted

as the Holy Grail—a single, all-encompassing process that can provide a clear picture of each and every individual's strengths and weaknesses and predict his or her leadership ability.¹⁴

The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. It is not the only predictor; sometimes people change. But, it is the best predictor around. The best candidate to start a church, then, is one who has successfully done it in the past. That approach is problematic because a large pool of successful church planters who are ready to launch their next church doesn't exist! A past behavior interview helps to solve this problem. By breaking down the skill sets needed, and then asking questions that relate to each one of those skill sets, the interviewer is able to predict, with some accuracy the success of the potential church planter. The potential church planter may have never planted a church, but still may have demonstrated each of the specific skills that are required to plant a church. Past behavioral interviews serve as a powerful flashlight to help discern the called.

Hill Country Bible Church of Austin, Texas has launched four church plants. Peter Horn, church planting director for Hill Country, utilizes behavior interviews as a way of discerning those called to church planting. He defines behavioral interviewing this way, "Not so much asking what they *would do*, but asking them what they *have done* in certain areas to demonstrate competencies." They also have the potential church planter take personality assessments. Then, they compare the results of the assessments to the results of the behavioral interview. In this way they can test for accurate self-awareness.

West Ridge Church in Atlanta is another example of a church that uses past behavioral interviews to discern the called. Executive Pastor Matt Wilmington says of Church Planting Pastor Jim Akins, "He can normally discern who has got it and who doesn't in a thirty minute interview at Starbucks." But, he went on to say they still do the full four-hour past behavioral interview based on questions they have developed.

What is a behavioral interview? Let's look at some example questions:

- *Describe a situation in which you were able to cast a vision and the group bought it.*
- *Describe a time when you were able to motivate yourself to do something that was difficult for you.*
- *Give a specific example of a time when you were able to instill in a group of people a sense of ownership and personal responsibility.*
- *Give an example of a time when you connected with an unchurched person. Tell me about a time when you were able to develop rapport with someone who was far from God and did not have a lot of experience in church.*
- *Recount a time when you had to change and adapt to deal your plan.*
- *Describe a time when you stuck with it when you wanted to quit.*

Behavioral questions are widely used among the best of church-planting churches, but there are not the only kinds of questions used. Greg Kappas of Summit Church in Florida along with Gary Rohrmayer has developed *Twenty Five Questions for Planting a Healthy Church*. It has been translated into multiple languages and is widely used as a tool for assessing church planters. What are these twenty five questions? Here is a summary:¹⁵

- 1. What is your plan for spiritual development?**
- 2. Who will pray for you?**
- 3. How will you ask people to support you?**
- 4. Who do you need to meet first?**
- 5. How do you find receptive people?**
- 6. What do you do with converts & team members?**

- 7. Do you have the same vision & values?**
- 8. What are the criteria for joining?**
- 9. Who will sign the checks?**
- 10. How will you get a crowd?**
- 11. What will Sunday mornings look like?**
- 12. How will you turn the crowd into a church?**
- 13. What are the membership criteria?**
- 14. How do you define spiritual maturity?**
- 15. How will you place people in ministry?**
- 16. How will your converts reproduce?**
- 17. How will you teach on giving?**
- 18. How will you select leaders?**
- 19. How will your leaders reproduce?**
- 20. How will you handle conflict?**
- 21. How are you involved in regional missions?**
- 22. How will you multiply?**
- 23. How will you plan for the future?**
- 24. How will you measure church health?**
- 25. Who will you leave in leadership?**

NorthWood Church in Keller, Texas, pastored by Bob Roberts, is one of the most aggressive church-planting churches in America. In 2005 they planted ten churches. Add this to the sixty-five churches that were planted this past year by daughter, or grand-daughter churches of theirs and we get a total of seventy-five new churches in one year. Here is a list of the 13 qualities that they use in assessing church planters. Notice the overlay with the Ridley list, as well as the use of behavioral questions.



BOB ROBERTS

The 13 characteristics of a successful church planter¹⁶

The questions below are based on the 13 qualities that are considered to make up the profile of a successful church planter (according to Charles R. Ridley of Indiana University). Due to the unique ministry role

of the church planter, it is important to process answers to these questions. Be as brief and clear as possible, but feel free to use an additional page for your responses.

- 1. Having a commitment to church growth**
What have you done in the last two years to help yourself grow in this area? What have been the growth patterns of your past ministries?
- 2. Having a visionizing capacity**
When you had a vision for a God-sized project, how did you gain it? How did you develop and communicate the vision?
- 3. Being flexible and adaptable**
What did you do the last time a ministry project didn't go as planned? How did you react emotionally?
- 4. Being personally motivated**
What is the largest, most effective project you have accomplished, and what motivated you to accomplish it?
- 5. Building group cohesiveness**
What process have you used to assimilate people into teams or groups?
- 6. Creating ownership of ministry**
Describe a ministry or situation where people "owned" a project you were leading. How did that happen?
- 7. Utilizing giftedness of others**
How have you helped people utilize their spiritual gifts once they were identified? Give examples.
- 8. Exercising faith**
What is the most faith-filled step you have ever undertaken?
- 9. Reaching the unreached**
What have you done to deliberately connect with unchurched people?
- 10. Responding to community**
What are you doing now that has cultural relevance to your community? How do you know?
- 11. Building relationships**
What methods have you used to build relationships with people over the last two years?

12. Gaining spousal support (if married)
Describe how you and your spouse have functioned as a team in your past and current ministries.

13. Having resilience
How have you maintained ministry momentum in difficult circumstances?

Mark Driscoll of **Mars Hill Church** (<http://www.marshillchurch.org>) and Acts29 Network talks about interviewing candidates based on the biblical criteria of "manages his own family well" and "not a lover of money." (1 Timothy 3:3-4). So his conversation might go like this with a male applying to be a church planter:

Driscoll: Show me your checkbook or something that confirms that you are tithing to a local church and that you are managing your finances well. Now tell me how are things at home with your family.

Would-be church planter: Just great. Everything is going great at home.

Driscoll: Okay, now I'd like to interview your wife

Driscoll to wife: How is sex?

Wife: We don't have sex often.

Driscoll: Well, what about your finances?

Wife: We have a lot of credit card debt.

Driscoll: Really? How is your husband's health?

Wife: He eats poorly, he is up late and he drinks Wild Turkey bourbon—a lot.

Driscoll then decides that the would-be church planter is a liar, with a truth teller for a wife. He then asks the kids questions like "How is your time with your daddy? Is your daddy a good daddy? Do you love your daddy? When is the last time your daddy prayed with you? How often does your daddy read the Bible with you?"

In short, says Driscoll, "I dig deep. I want to know."¹⁷

Churches that have successfully planted multiple churches have learned the importance of asking hard questions. They ask them in different ways,

asked by different people. At **Summit Church** they take a team approach, each interviewing the candidate separately. Then, they compare notes to see if they are all getting the same story.

Some of these questions are asked in formal, sit-down-at-the-table interviews, while others are discussed informally through intentional hang-out sessions.

What Exactly Is an Assessment?

What exactly is an assessment? They take on a wide variety of forms. One model comes from **Perimeter Church** in Duluth, GA (<http://perimeter.followers.net>) where Bob Cargo has participated in many assessments. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Bob:

What would normally happen prior to a formal assessment?

We do a pre-assessment interview which lasts approximately one hour. In this interview, we seek to determine if it is wise to take the next step. From there, there is an application to be filled out. There are questionnaires sent to references. There is psychological and personality testing. They turn in a sermon that is listened to by the assessors, and other background material is obtained, such as typical resume information, philosophy of ministry, financial status, etc.

Where does the assessment take place?

Normally a conference center or hotel.

Who is there?

We are a part of the Presbyterian Church in America, and we do the assessment with them. There is a team of assessors made up of men and women. All assessors have been successful church planters, or wives of planters. We will also have one psychologist trained to interpret the psychological profiles that are given. Then, there will be 8 or 10 couples who are being assessed.

How long does it last?

Normally four long days.

What happens at the assessment?

We do team exercises. We see how they interact with other people. We normally start with a fun exercise where the people being assessed are broken up into teams and are asked to do a skit. They each preach a brief sermon and explain why they feel called to church planting and where they desire to plant, if they know. We give them hypothetical situations they will face in church planting and ask them to evaluate how they would respond. We divide them into teams, assign a geographic location to each team and ask the team to prepare a church planting proposal for that area.

What comes out of the assessment?

In our denomination the assessing group does not have the authority to hire. We only recommend. The assessment is given to the candidate and whoever paid for them to go through it. They can come out with one of several ratings:

- Top rating: you are qualified to plant, even in an area that will provide little relational support (i.e., a new territory for the PCA)
- #2 Rating: qualified to plant a church, but need strong support and supervision
- #3 Rating: we think you are qualified, but we think you need two years (or less) of experience.
- #4 Rating: we think you can do this, but you likely need more than two years of experience
- #5 Rating: we don't think you are cut out for church planting ministry
- #6: Rating: we think you are cut out for church planting but you have some outstanding issues—perhaps financial or marriage issues—that you need to deal with before you plant a church.



BOB CARGO

4. Hanging Out

You are getting warmer as you work with people who pass the hang-out test

Jesus called twelve disciples that he might be “with them” – Mark 3:14. The Navigators, a parachurch group committed to discipleship (<http://home.navigators.org>), call this the “with them” principle. Not with them to attend a class or take notes at a seminar. Rather, with them to hang out and breathe the same air. Many of the most important things in life are caught more than taught. You catch them the same way you catch a cold—by hanging out in the same space and breathing the same air.

Churches that have started multiple churches rely on this principle. They don't depend solely on formal assessments and objective criteria. As Greg Kappas of Summit Church says it, “We like to hang out, shoot pool, eat meals together, and play golf.” Greg is looking for people who can not only exegete scripture but exegete culture. 1 Chronicles 12:32 speaks of the men of Issachar who knew the times and knew what they should do. Greg is looking for men like that. Hanging out is a good way to find out if you have one.

Nolan Rollins, missions pastor at **Summit Church** put it this way, “We want church planters to breathe our air. We want to make sure a candidate has our DNA and that he is

not thinking of his church as the end goal, but he is thinking of a church that produces churches. We want to see that he is thinking globally. We want to see that he is thinking lateral growth.” By “lateral growth” he means not building a mega-church, but building a movement of multiplying churches. The

leaders at Summit Church know they can't persuade church planters to buy this vision later. They need to have it from the beginning. The surest way to find out if someone does is by hanging out together.

Perimeter Church in Atlanta has a long history of church planting, having planted twenty-four churches since 1981. They involve prospective church-planters in a residency program for two years. Part of this training is about specific skill development, but part of it is simply about hanging out with the church planter to see that this is a good match between the church planter and the church. Long experience has taught them the value of hanging out.

Chico Goff from **Emmanuel Faith Community Church** utilizes the metaphor of “tossing the salad.” By this he means exploring how the core group and the church planter and the community will work together. It is not enough to just have fine ingredients. We have to toss the salad.

New Life Ministries International (www.newlife.cc) in Virginia Beach, VA has started nine new churches. They are deeply committed to starting multi-racial churches and this value drives their selection of church planting. Formal assessments and formal interviews don't always sort out who really is a “son of the house” as staff member Dan Backens likes to put it. For example, it is common among some groups in black culture for ladies to wear a large, decorative hat. It is fashionable in their culture, and appropriate church dress. If a church planter makes a joke about such a hat and makes fun of her behind her back, it is a sure sign that he doesn't get the culture. He is not a “son of the house.” You wouldn't hire a youth minister that made fun of the dress of youth and they don't hire church planters with this kind of cultural insensitivity. But, this kind of thing may not show up on an assessment, no matter how many questions are asked. Some things are learned only by spending some time hanging out.

The best of church-planting churches tend to prefer working networks of known individuals. They rely on formal assessments. And, they hang out. But there is still one more criteria that is more important than all the rest combined.

WE WANT TO
MAKE SURE A
CANDIDATE HAS
OUR DNA

5. Is God in It?

You are getting warmer when a mix of passion and divine “accidents” lead you to a prospective church planter

Imagine a young church planter were to explain his strategy to you this way, “I am going to pray and follow the heart of God and get close to God, and seek God, and discover where God is at work and seek to join Him in that work. I am going to pray that God would bless us and pray as Jabez prayed in *The Prayer of Jabez*¹⁸, that God would bless us indeed. Then, I am going to see what God does.” Imagine that this same church planter told you that some time later Disney CEO Michael Eisner, who was the target of an eight-year boycott by the American Family Association, would retire and the next president of the Walt Disney World Resort would be the son of a church planter. This father, Robert Weiss, would then challenge his son to continue the family legacy. This son, Al Weiss would then put up six million dollars to launch VisionUSA (<http://www.vision4usa.com>) with a goal of raising 300 million dollars to plant churches in the fifty fastest-growing regions in the United States. These churches would then be required to give back 5% of their offerings to VisionUSA to form a perpetual fund that would fuel a church planting movement. What would you think? Would you think this is a God thing? Would you agree with the light humor of World Magazine¹⁹ and call it a Minnie Movement?



Crosspoint Presbyterian, planted by Perimeter Church, members celebrate their 2nd anniversary.

Such is the heart of a new generation of churches like **Crosspointe Church** in the Orlando, Florida area (www.xpointe.com). It was the first of VisionUSA’s projects. Crosspointe is a four-year old church plant that has already launched ten churches in the Orlando area—made possible in part by God moving through a partnership with VisionUSA that is investing six million dollars into the Orlando Area. They currently have 60 to 80 church planters attending their regional networking and training events. Only God could do that.

God is not only raising up resources, he is also calling people into the harvest. Mark Driscoll of **Mars Hill Church** in Seattle observes, “Church planting is hot right now. For years, guys wanted to get out of seminary and go get a church that had a nice salary and would call them pastor. Today, young entrepreneurial guys don’t want to take over a church. They want to start one.”²⁰

“God doesn’t like to be assumed.” Kenny Stokes of **Bethlehem Baptist** quotes his pastor, author John Piper, and emphasizes the importance of keeping God in the equation. The best of church-planting churches have thought carefully about how to recruit church planters. They work hard at it. They think. They study. They assess. But, ultimately, they ask the question, “Where is God in all this? What is God leading us to do? Who has God called?” Ultimately, it is about discerning the called, not about finding the qualified.

In his classic book *The Purpose Driven Church* Rick Warren speaks of catching the wave of the Holy Spirit.²¹ We can learn all kinds of things about surfing—how to pick the right board, how to discern a ride-able wave, how to catch the wave, how not to get killed by a wave. One thing they never teach is how to create a wave. Only God can do that. Experienced church-planting churches

TODAY, YOUNG
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THEY WANT TO
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are trying to do just that—ride the wave of what the Holy Spirit is doing.

Nolan Rollins of Summit Church put it quite strongly, “We have not sought any church planters, we have not sought any partnership, we have not sought anyone we are connected to in the church planting movement. God has brought all of them to us. God has initiated each one and brought them to us.”

The perspective that God is at work changes everything. Neil Cole tells the story of two men who saw an advertisement placed by local farmers who were tired of having their livestock eaten by a pack of wolves. The ad offered \$500 per wolf, taken dead or alive. The two entrepreneurs set off with their camping supplies and rifles. After a couple of days of fruitless hunting, the two collapsed in fatigue by a warm campfire they had built. Hearing a noise, one awoke, only to notice the glow of fire reflecting off the eyes and teeth of a pack of hungry wolves surrounding their little camp. He slowly, yet urgently reached over to nudge his partner awake. In a hushed and frantic voice he whispered, “Jerry! Jerry, wake up! We’re going to be *rich!*” Perspective changes everything.²²

Church-planting churches have a perspective that God is at work. They are constantly on the lookout for that divine accident-seeming coincidence that leads them to see that God is at work.

Greg Kappas of **Summit Church** tells a story of this very idea. He was praying one day that God would raise up laborers for the harvest. The very next day a man called him. The man, on staff at another church, felt that God was calling him to church planting. This kind of thing happens all the time for Greg and other intercessors.

“Passion and divine accidents”—these four words summarize how some leading church-planting churches go about recruiting and training their church planters. They don’t have all the Google search criteria but they do have a passion to find the people who can launch the next generation of churches. God

often honors that passion by bringing a prospective church planter across their paths. With the right passion in place, divine accidents just seem to happen. A chance conversation here, an email from an old friend, a grant from an unexpected source—these things seem to happen to those who want it badly. Continually.

The Need Is Great

The need has never been greater to discern who God is calling to plant churches. The tools and resources to help have never been more available. And God seems very eager that church leaders find and deploy those who have been called. With God, the search for those God has called to start the next generation of churches can end up even better than what Google can find. But it does take a little more than Google’s fraction of a second.



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ENDNOTES

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