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## Abstract

### Six Ministry Strategies for Planting a Seeker Sensitive Church

by

Mark Steven Davenport

The purpose of this dissertation was to determine which "seeker sensitive" ministry strategies contributed most to the effectiveness and growth of a Free Methodist Church planted by the writer in Atlanta, called The Church at Whitewater Creek.

In an effort to narrow down the scope of the study, the researcher identified from the literature, and by participant observation, six ministry strategies which seemed to be essential to the success of "seeker sensitive" churches. The six ministry strategies were: Persistent Philosophy of Ministry, Relevant Preaching and Teaching, Big Church Mentality, Quality Ministry, Indigenous Music, and Empowered Visionary Leadership.

Two instruments were used to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing the six ministry strategies in the new church. Systematic interviews were conducted with 20 people who were either members of the church, or who were enrolled in the membership orientation process. A Ministry Evaluation Form was distributed to all regular attenders following a morning worship service. In addition, the researcher observed and recorded worship, small group, profession of faith and membership figures as key indicators of the new church's growth and effectiveness.

On February 5, 1995 The Church at Whitewater Creek conducted its first Sunday morning service. Exactly 250 people attended. One year later, the church averages 150 in morning worship and

continues to grow. During that first year, the church experienced 15 conversions, many reflecting dramatic changes in the lives of these new Christians.

Perhaps the most significant finding in this study is the fact that it adds to the existing body of evidence that church planting remains the single most highly effective means of reaching the unchurched.

The data show that in the case of The Church at Whitewater Creek all six "seeker sensitive" ministry strategies were significant contributors to the church's growth and effectiveness. The evidence indicates that these six strategies touched secular people in areas where they had strong feelings and preferences. It is suggested that the implementation of these six characteristics, as well as a couple of others mentioned by the researcher, can directly contribute to the success of other new church plants.

Six Ministry Strategies For Planting A Seeker Sensitive  
Church

by  
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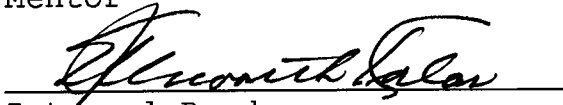
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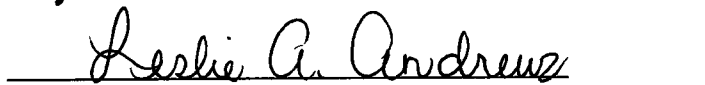
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## CHAPTER 1

## Understanding the Problem

The precipitous decline of mainline Protestantism since about the mid-1960's is well documented. The United Methodist Church has lost approximately two million members, from 11 million in 1965 to 8.9 million in 1990. Losses in the Episcopal Church are even more dramatic, spiraling from a high of 3.4 million in 1965, to a low of 2.4 million in 1990. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. lost approximately 1.5 million members during this same period (Roozen and Hadaway 393).

Naturally, a plethora of scholars, denominational executives, social scientists and prominent pastors have appeared on the scene to offer their best insights about mainline Protestantism's reversal of religious fortune in America. The publishing of Dean Kelly's controversial book, Why Conservative Churches Are Growing (1972), sparked a lively debate over the *actual* causes for the decline. In 1979, the first comprehensive collection of research on the decline was published under the title: Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978 (Roozen and Hadaway 15). Among other conclusions, this study postulated that losses in the mainline churches were "more a result of fewer people joining than of members leaving" (Roozen and Hadaway 25).

Curiously, many conservative denominations enjoyed a steady growth in membership during this same tumultuous

period. However, as Roozen points out, even conservative churches faced a decline in their growth rate. In other words, conservative Protestantism continued to grow in total membership, but at a slower rate.

My research project began as a search to determine why so many churches, in nearly every denomination, are losing members. I realize church leaders must interpret the meaning of "numbers" quite differently than profit oriented organizations. A church's effectiveness in fulfilling its mission and expanding the Kingdom of God is not always reflected numerically, but most would agree, that numerical growth is often a powerful indication of an organization's vitality, openness, and attractiveness to outsiders. Growth, in most cases, is a positive condition for local churches and the denominational family to which they belong.

The longer I studied the problem of decreasing membership in once flourishing denominations, the more I was convinced that something greater was at stake than merely why churches are losing people. The more critical question for me became, "Why isn't the church reaching more unchurched people with the Gospel message?"

One of the bright spots on the landscape of the research examining this problem is the promise of new church development for reaching previously unchurched people. It appears, based on unprecedented research data, that starting new churches may be the single most effective way to reach

new people for Christ and His church (Roozen and Hadaway 86). Lyle Schaller, who brings nearly forty years of expertise to this field, suggests that, "While it is impossible to prove a cause-effect relationship, the evidence suggests that rapid increase in the number of new congregations was the most influential single factor in the numerical growth of scores of denominations" (44 Questions 21).

Research continues to suggest that new churches are more likely to grow than old ones. As Lyle Schaller wrote, "Perhaps the simplest explanation for this pattern is that new congregations are organized around evangelism and reaching people not actively involved in the life of any worshiping community" (44 Questions 22). Naturally, this raises the question, "Why are not more new churches started?"

#### Background to the Study

In the summer of 1993, as I prepared to enter the Beeson Pastor Program at Asbury Theological Seminary, I began asking that question of myself, especially as it related to my calling. After six years in full time ministry, serving in traditional churches, I no longer felt fulfilled performing the role of a pastor. Professionally, I was becoming acutely aware that I lacked many of the gifts and graces valued in traditional pastorates. This deficiency, coupled with the fact that my passion was to

reach non-Christians, rather than nurture the already convinced, created a real crisis in my ministry. Disillusionment set in quickly and nearly drove me from pastoral ministry. I questioned God's choice of a person with my personality traits to function in the capacity of a pastor in the local church. For the first time in seventeen years I began to doubt my calling into the ministry.

During this period of testing by fire, my old, secure paradigms for doing ministry were shattered, making room for a new vision of effective, fruitful ministry. I began to hear more about the pace-setting Willow Creek Community Church, in Chicago, Illinois. Willow Creek's "seeker sensitive" approach to ministry, and their enormous success in reaching "unchurched Harry and Mary," piqued my curiosity. Given my passion to reach the unchurched, I was immediately attracted to the "seeker sensitive" model. A number of other factors in my life such as upbringing, interests, talents, personality, theology, musical preferences, and ministry style all converged to make the "seeker sensitive" model extremely attractive.

While rediscovering the church, I was also rediscovering the uniqueness of my personal role in ministry. Among other things, I discovered that some pastors, including myself, possess natural entrepreneurial skills well suited for church planting. These skills are imperative for the specialized work of the church planting

pastor. Often, these skills are not appreciated by ecclesiastical leaders on the denominational level or members in well established churches. The more I read in the area of church planting, the more I realized that my personality, evangelistic passion, gifts and graces fit the church planter profile. Furthermore, I discovered that many of the skills and competencies ignored by established churches doing business as usual, turn out to be valuable gifts for the specialized role of church planter.

At this same time I became familiar with the work of Dr. George Hunter, professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary. Dr. Hunter's writings and lectures centered largely around the theme of churches shifting their paradigms in order to reach secular people living in contemporary society. Among other things, Dr. Hunter began to challenge my colleagues and me to consider starting new churches aimed at reaching secular people.

Dr. Hunter, in his book, How to Reach Secular People, suggests that "our greatest priority is to raise up a very great number of intentional missionary congregations. Such congregations will no longer be content to merely nurture and counsel the diminishing ranks of the faithful; their primary mission will be to reach people who do not yet believe, to make the christian faith, life, and mission a live option for undisciplined people" (35). He goes on to say that, "at least 120 million secular unchurched people(aged

fourteen or older) will not be reached by traditional congregations" (136). What is needed according to Hunter, are new churches **intentionally** planted to reach secular populations. He calls this moving from "tradition to mission" (136).

Of course, no church in America is more intentional about its strategy to reach secular populations than Willow Creek Community Church. Willow Creek is one of the most successful churches in America today. The church not only draws over 15,000 to its weekend "seeker services," but most church leaders who visit Willow Creek leave deeply impressed by its commitment to biblical Christianity, quality holistic ministry, and life changing evangelism. Of all the churches in America, few in recent decades have challenged the local church to question its priorities, paradigms, and approach to ministry as Willow Creek has done.

Although some critics of the "seeker sensitive" movement say Willow Creek and its associated churches compromise the cost and confrontational nature of Christian discipleship, a closer look reveals, ironically, that Willow Creek is more successful than many of its critics doing the things the Church is commissioned to do, namely making fully committed followers of Jesus Christ.

Given the phenomenal success of Willow Creek, it is not surprising that each year thousands of pastors and lay leaders flock to Willow Creek's Church Conferences to study

and analyze this famous church. They study such things as strategy, mission statements, programming, music, worship styles, administration and program budgets. Many leave anxious to duplicate the Willow Creek model in their own communities.

George Barna, a leading research expert, says that "Willow Creek may well be the most copied church in America" (User Friendly 18). According to Barna, this may not be a good thing, since research indicates that many of these Willow Creek copies don't succeed. He writes:

Unfortunately, research of the results of numerous attempts to implant Willow Creek knock-offs around the country shows that most of these purists-leaders who have tried to implement the entire Willow Creek ministry in their area, lock, stock, and barrel-have failed. (19)

It is, however, my observation that many Willow Creek models have not failed. As a whole the "seeker sensitive" movement, and those churches which have wisely adapted Willow Creek's model to fit their situation seem to be flourishing. One such Willow Creek model which has been extremely successful is Crossroads Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky. This is the same church that introduced the author to the "seeker sensitive" movement.

In five short years Crossroads Christian Church grew from a new church to well over 400 in average worship attendance. Under the visionary leadership of Pastor Glen Schneiders, the young church officially began with two public services on November 15, 1987. There were 176 people



present on that first Sunday, meeting in a room at the new Shoneys Inn on Richmond Road. Of the 176 who attended the first Sunday, 125 were unchurched or were not currently attending a church.

The idea for the new church originated from a Christian Church men's fellowship group. The group selected Glen Schneiders to be the founding pastor, and gave him two year's salary support to get the church started. Moving from Cincinnati, Ohio, Schneiders arrived in Lexington about six months before the church was officially started. During that six-month period he began to lay the philosophical and administrative foundations for the church.

According to Schneiders, "people are not turned off to God, they are turned off to the church" (Schneiders). Therefore, the church, not the Christian message itself, needs to discover new ways of making the message fresh and relevant, since the needs and values of Americans moving into the 21st century are changing rapidly.

Schnieders describes the process of shaping the philosophical foundations for the church in providential terms. He claims that through a series of training events and research on church planting the vision for Crossroads began to take shape. He attended seminars and studied successful growth models such as Willow Creek Community Church and the Saddleback Church. Of course, he sought God's heart and mind about His vision for the church.

Gradually, a vision for the church arose.

Once the vision of the new church in the Handover area of Lexington began to take shape, Schneiders shared it with as many area Christian churches as possible. He recruited people and financial resources. With a touch of humor Schneiders said, "I was so dynamic that 25 people from all the churches, said we will come and join with you" (Schneiders 3). This core group of 25 started a tele-marketing campaign. Thousands of people were targeted in an area around Handover and were informed about the new church.

Crossroads averaged 205 in worship by the end of the second year. One year later, 1990, they grew by approximately 40 to a total of 245. In 1991 they saw an increase of 55, which put them at 300 in worship. In 1992, they celebrated their largest increase, adding 90 more, pushing their Sunday morning worship to 390. In 1993 they peaked out in April with an average attendance of 484. This would be an increase of nearly 100 in 1993 alone.

It is obvious that no single cause can account for Crossroads' phenomenal growth. Several factors are influencing growth at various levels of the church's program and ministry. Schneiders himself attributes the causes for the church's growth to the church's entire philosophy of ministry. When asked to give reasons for the church's growth, Schneiders went on to describe virtually every facet

of the church's ministry. Moreover, he did not point to any one event, new program, or schedule change to account for significant increases in growth.

What then, does account for the phenomenal growth at Crossroads? Is the "seeker sensitive" movement just a fad, or is it pointing the way to a more enduring paradigm shift for how church should and will be done in the new millennium? And what can other churches, especially new "seeker sensitive" church plants, and their pastors, learn from Crossroads to increase their own possibilities for growth?

In the case of Crossroads Christian Church, the Willow Creek model proved to be effective in an entirely different geographical community. Although the "seeker service" at Crossroads is very similar in content, scope, and style to the Willow Creek seeker service, it is imperative to remember that the target audience for Crossroads is similar to Willow Creek's in many ways. Both churches primarily target "Baby Boomers." Both are located in upper income, white collar areas, and so on.

It is my belief that those Willow Creek models that fail, fail not because of the model, but because church leaders fail to understand and implement some of the principles which have undergirded the Willow Creek model in the first place. George Barna correctly asserts:

Having worked with a myriad of churches from coast to coast, I am certain that we do not need

examples to imitate. What we do need are models to study so we can understand how transferable principles can be adapted to the environments in which we have been called to minister. (User Friendly 18)

The question for the church planter who desires to start a Willow Creek model church in another area is not whether or not the model will work in other places. If the target area, similar to Willow Creek, is rapidly growing, predominately white collar, upper income baby-boomers, I am convinced that the model can be effective. But if church planters attempt to implement the model in form only, without first having a profound understanding of the principles underlying the model, not to mention a specific calling from God to use that model to reach secular people, very likely they will end up like numerous leaders who try to copy Willow Creek in their community but fail.

#### Context of the Study

In the summer of 1994, I was appointed as a church planter to Fayetteville, Georgia, by the Free Methodist Church. The Free Methodist Church provided approximately \$60,000 in financial support for me and for Dwayne Thorne, a full time associate. This money came from various sources including denominational, conference, and local church budgets. The second year we received approximately \$30,000.

Demographic studies performed on Fayette County indicated that the majority of the population are white-collar, upper-income families. The residents are 95%

Caucasian. Baby-Boomers comprise 70% of all Fayette County residents. By all standards it is a rapidly growing, metropolitan suburb of Atlanta. Many of its new residents are northern transplants. For the most part it is a religiously and politically conservative area.

#### Purpose Statement

In view of the successful growth rate of "seeker sensitive" churches like Willow Creek and Crossroads, my purpose is to determine what ministry strategies contribute to this success, and what happens when these ministry strategies are implemented in a Free Methodist church plant in Atlanta, called The Church At Whitewater Creek.

#### Research Questions

Research Question 1. What are the ministry strategies that contribute most to the growth and effectiveness of "seeker sensitive" churches?

Research Question 2. How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of the six ministry strategies identified by the author.

Research Question 3. What ministry strategies besides the six identified by the researcher seemed to emerge as major contributors to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek?

#### Definition of Terms

### Definition of Terms

Below the author will define what he means by certain popular terms used throughout this study. Unless otherwise noted, the reader should assume that whenever these terms appear in the study, the author's meaning is the same as below.

#### Seeker Sensitive

What is meant by "seeker sensitive"? The term "seeker sensitive" is used and understood in various ways among pastors, church growth consultants, and lay people. Therefore, it is important to differentiate between the various levels commonly associated with the "seeker sensitive" movement. It may suffice, for the purposes of this study, to identify three levels of seeker sensitivity employed in churches. For the purist, the first level is termed "seeker targeted." This term differentiates churches which "target" the unchurched exclusively. The "seeker targeted" church intentionally shapes its missional objective, program, and church culture to attract and meet the needs of seekers. Willow Creek would fall into the "seeker targeted" category. In their case, the number one missional priority of the church is to minister to seekers. This priority is reflected in their mission statement which says, "The mission of Willow Creek is to turn irreligious people into fully committed followers of Jesus Christ" (Olsson 49). Everything they do, from the design of the

worship service, program development, to the allocation of resources, flows from the missional priority to reach and minister to the unchurched or seekers.

The second level includes those churches which have borrowed any number of ideas, principles, and formats from "seeker targeted" churches like Willow Creek, and then applied them to their own ministry context. For instance, they might include drama in their Sunday services or contemporary music in place of the traditional organ and church choir, both of which are distinctive of the seeker sensitive movement. These churches, however, can be differentiated from the "seeker targeted" church in that they do not exist "exclusively" for the seeker. Their number one priority might be culturally relevant worship for believers. Philosophically, they may believe that the best way to reach the unchurched is through a culturally relevant worshipping community of Christians.

The third level includes churches which continue to minister in largely traditional forms, but have become sensitized to the specific needs and sensitivities of non-Christians in their ministry context. This new sensitivity might be as subtle as not asking visitors to sign registration pads or give to the morning offering. The pastor may work hard at interpreting unfamiliar biblical terminology or symbolism to those who possess a limited pre-understanding of Christian doctrine and forms.

For the purpose of this study, the term "seeker sensitive" refers to the first level, that is, the "seeker targeted" church.

### Growth and Effectiveness

For many years, church advocates have been debating what constitutes a "growing and effective" church plant. Some would argue that a church plant is growing and effective only when it reproduces itself in the form of another new church. Social activists would argue that a new church is growing and effective to the degree that it identifies with the poor and marginalized in and beyond its "ministry area." Some would say that a growing and effective church is one experiencing rapid numerical growth. All of these are legitimate measures of a new church's growth and effectiveness.

In this case study, a growing and effective church plant is defined and measured according to five membership strength indicators in Hunter's, To Spread The Power (195). These indicators are based on Hunter's assumption "that through appropriate increases in its membership strength, a movement attains the 'critical mass' needed to become more effective in achieving its social objectives" (195). The five indicators which constitute whether or not the Church at Whitewater Creek is "growing and effective" are as follows: (1) Active resident membership at year's end; (2) Average worship attendance for the year (perhaps the most



important indicator of membership strength); (3) Average church school attendance for the year; (4) Number of persons regularly involved in the church's ministry of the laity to persons, inside or outside the church's physical facilities; (5) Number received as new Christians for the year.

#### Outline of Methodology

I have chosen a single unit case study as my primary methodology for this research project. Case study falls under the general category of qualitative research which uses verbal data as a basis for making inferences and gaining knowledge about one's study. For this reason, the general intent of this study is "explanatory." My "case" is a new Free Methodist congregation located in metropolitan Atlanta. The new church is modeled after Willow Creek Community Church, and in some respect after the Crossroads Christian Church which is also a Willow Creek model. My hope is that this research might aid other pastors and lay leaders who may want to use the model in starting new churches.

The purpose of my study is to determine what ministry strategies contribute to the success of "seeker sensitive" churches and then to describe what happens when these strategies are implemented in the church plant in Atlanta.

In an effort to narrow down the scope of this study, I have identified six ministry strategies which seem to be essential to the success of "seeker sensitive" church

plants. The six ministry strategies are as follows: Persistent Philosophy of Ministry, Relevant Preaching and Teaching, Big Church Mentality, Quality Ministry, Indigenous Music, and Empowered Visionary Leadership. I will attempt to implement all six ministry strategies in the church plant in Atlanta and evaluate what I learn against what is written in current literature on church planting. My sincere desire is that what is learned can be used to help other church planters advance God's Kingdom through the "seeker sensitive" model.

I arrived at these six ministry strategies by two primary means: participant observation and review of the literature. My personal observations took place at a very successful "seeker sensitive" church in Lexington, Kentucky called Crossroads Christian Church. This experience is explained more fully as a Pilot Study in Chapter 3. I spent an entire year at Crossroads observing the ministry, interviewing staff, and participating in various programs. From this invaluable experience I was able to arrive at six primary ministry strategies which seemed to contribute substantially to the church's success and effectiveness.

By reading the salient literature in Church Growth and church planting, I discovered the literature supports the vital role these six ministry strategies play in successful church plants. Of course, these six ministry strategies do not exhaust all the ministry strategies one might discover

an excellent starting point. In Chapter 2, I review and critique what various authors in the field are saying, directly or indirectly, about each of these six ministry strategies.

To help me evaluate the effectiveness of these six ministry strategies in the Atlanta church plant, I used Systematic Interviews and a Ministry Evaluation Form with participants from the new congregation. Their observations further the value of each ministry strategy. Although questions forming these instruments analyzed one or more of the six ministry strategies, some open-ended questions were asked in order to determine other ministry strategies related to the success of the church planting project in Atlanta.

### Instrumentation

#### Systematic Interviews

Systematic, open-ended interviews referred to as Systematic Interviews were conducted by the researcher with participants who were either members, or who were enrolled in the membership orientation at the time of the study. The purpose of these interviews was to find out what ministry strategies identified with the "seeker sensitive" movement contributed to the growth of Whitewater Creek. The questions were researcher designed (see Appendix A). Three of the questions were taken from George Hunter's, To Spread the Power (194).

The Power (194).

### Evaluation Forms

I used a Ministry Evaluation Form to evaluate the effectiveness of the "seeker sensitive" model for the new Atlanta church and the degree to which members perceived this model to have contributed to positive outcomes in the new church (see Appendix B). The evaluation form was researcher designed using a modified form of Asbury Theological Seminary's end-of-term evaluation form for Integrative Reflection Communities. These forms followed a modified Likert scale to measure the strength of each item.

### Delimitations and Generalizability

The question could be raised as to how to generalize from a single case study of a new church start to other new church starts. A sufficient answer would be that case study research is not generalizable to other populations, rather the goal of the researcher in case study research is to build on theoretical foundations and to provide findings which could potentially contribute to the effectiveness of other new church starts (Yin 21).

### Overview

The remainder of the dissertation will cover the following matters. Chapter 2 will review the literature covering the major formative works in new church development. Chapter 3 will spell out in detail the research design of the study. Chapter 4 is a report on the

most significant findings of the study. Chapter 5 will include a summary of the major findings, interpretation of the data, and conclusions of the significance of the study.

## CHAPTER 2

## Precedents in the Literature

The following review of literature looks at the major formative works in new church development, the "seeker sensitive movement," as well as other pertinent writings from Church Growth literature. To narrow the focus, I have reviewed and critiqued the literature especially as it pertains to the six ministry strategies of successful church plants. We begin, however, with some of the salient literature in case study research and why I have chosen the case study method for my research.

Case Study Research

"The task of the qualitative researcher is one of analysis and synthesis" (Leedy 141). Robert K. Yin, in his book, Case Study Research, writes, "The case study, like other research strategies, is a way of investigating an empirical topic by following a set of pre-specified procedures" (25).

The reason I have chosen case study method is that it has proven to be a valuable research methodology for persons who wish to study real-life events such as the new church project I am assigned to in metropolitan Atlanta. Primarily, I want to know how, why, and even if principles learned from the "seeker sensitive" model will contribute to the growth and effectiveness of a new church plant. According to Yin, "In general, case studies are the

preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (Yin 13). My proposed study meets the first and last of these qualifications appropriately.

In addition, the use of case study methodology for my particular project is further strengthened by the fact that organizational and managerial processes often are better understood over longer periods of time, rather than mere frequencies of occurrence (Yin 18). The time frame for my study will cover the first two years of the new church.

Organizational effectiveness in the church, similar to other non-profit organizations is a complex matter and in my mind rarely explained by quantitative research alone. Case study, on the other hand, has the advantage of retaining a human feel, thus increasing our ability to understand and interpret relevant data by remaining grounded in the concrete reality of real people and events. Of the four different applications of case study methodology, "the most important is to explain the casual links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies" (Yin 25). This application refers to the "explanatory" case study approach which I have chosen to use for my study.

#### What Type of Pastors Make the Best Church Planters?

One issue nearly always addressed as a top priority in

church planting literature is the selection of the church planter or founding pastor. The researcher refers to this as Empowered Visionary Leadership, and has identified it as one of the six ministry strategies of successful "seeker sensitive" church plants. The researcher defines empowered visionary leaders as "leaders who have been given permission and authority to make decisions and initiate plans in accordance with personal and shared vision." The focus is on initiating the future of the organization, not maintaining the present, nor celebrating the achievements of the past.

Most experts agree that no other single factor will predict the initial success, as well as the future vitality of a new church, like the leadership ability of the church planting pastor. The often heard cliché "organizations stand or fall on leadership" appears to be particularly pertinent to new church starts. Lyle E. Schaller, in his 44 Questions for Church Planters, writes:

Experience suggests the best way to start a new church that will attract a large cadre of enthusiastic charter members and continue to grow in numbers year after year is to identify the right person to be the mission-developer pastor and for that minister to continue as the pastor for a minimum of twenty-five years. Choosing and retaining the right pastor clearly is the key variable in planting a new mission that will continue decade after decade to challenge an ever growing number of people with the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. (38)

Schaller is certainly not alone in his contention that the most critical first question is "Who will be the church



planter?" Compton and Sallee, in Growing New Churches, write:

The selection of the right pastor for a new congregation is perhaps the single most important factor in the success or failure of the infant ministry. Pastoral leadership can be more pertinent to the congregation's initial success than location, finances, and architecture.  
(21)

In Peter Wagner's, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest, he writes:

As I will reiterate time and again, the leader is the principal key to a successful church planting endeavor. There are many other important components of church planting, but they will stand or fall depending on the leadership available.  
(51)

Some denominational executives, pastors, and even lay people shy away from the notion that so much of the effectiveness of a new church plants rests with the church planter. One fear is that the church will develop around the personality, priorities, and style of the pastor, and will therefore be doomed upon his or her departure. Lyle Schaller sees the alternative to a strong, gifted, aggressive, visionary, and long tenured founding pastor in terms of trade offs. Churches and denominational leaders who view pastors as interchangeable typically misunderstand the relational dynamics that allow churches to flourish and grow. Which is preferable? A church with a strong founding pastor effectively serving a growing population for 20 or 30 years, or a church which changes pastors every four or five years and sees its attendance, program, missional priorities

and financial base rise and fall with each change of leadership? (Schaller 39) Once again, strong leadership is everything if new churches are to succeed. To ignore this truth, is to ignore what most church planting experts are saying and writing based on their study of successful church plants.

If leadership is so critical for a new church, what then, are the characteristics desirable in a church planter? It is important to note at first that church planters require special gifts and aptitudes to succeed. Church planting, by its very nature, is a narrowly focused enterprise. In many ways, it is similar to starting a small business, demanding for its very survival, entrepreneurial skills, the ability to motivate people, and strategic leadership that pushes the organization into the future. These types of qualities, along with extraordinary vision and passion, are not always rewarded and appreciated in pastors serving established churches where the number one priority has become maintaining its current staff, ministries, and facilities. By and large, the best church planters are not conventional pastor types serving the majority of existing churches. Wagner writes, "The characteristics of an ideal church planter are not the same as those of the pastor of an existing church, although there is considerable overlap" (51).

Wagner's discussion on modalities and sodalities, in his book, Leading Your Congregation to Growth, describes the dynamics of specialized ministry tasks, such as church planting, and the types of leaders needed to fulfill them. Modality is a term Wagner uses to identify congregational structures. Sodality is a term he uses to identify missionary structures. In the secular world the modality is the city. Wagner writes:

The essential nature of the city is that it is a people-oriented structure. Members of the city are born into it, they do not have to apply to join. When people move into the city and take up residence, they are automatically members, and they get a vote in the affairs of the city . . . The basic purpose of the structure is to keep the people in it happy by promoting peace, harmony, and justice. The method is consensus taking. The politician who becomes the mayor is a person who knows what the people want and does his or her best to see that they get it. The ideal is a government "of the people." (143)

Sodalities, according to Wagner, are significantly different in the way they are structured. Describing the sodality, he writes:

The sodality is not people-oriented, but rather it is a task-oriented structure . . . People do not automatically become members of sodalities, they have to join. They have to make an adult decision and choose to apply to become a member. Examples in the city would include grocery stores, factories, hospitals, theaters, restaurants, and the Rotary club . . . Notice that in all of these sodality structures the organization is more important than the people . . . Obligations in the sodality are many and the discipline is high . . . The leadership cares much less about the consensus of the opinions of the members than about accomplishing the task for which the organization was established. (133-134)

The sodality leader stresses doing versus being, are task-oriented versus people-oriented, govern by vision versus by consensus, are mission oriented versus maintenance-oriented, and push for higher commitment versus lower commitment (157).

As one continues to read Wagner on this point it becomes clear he favors a sodality type leader for churches wishing to grow and focus on mission. Although Wagner doesn't specifically identify church planting as a sodality structure, many of the dynamics and characteristics of church planting are consistent with that particular structure. Wagner does, however, identify as a sodality, Paul's missionary band, whose primary purpose was to start new churches (149).

Lyle Schaller adds the following qualities to the list of useful predictors of effective church planters: Religious commitment, enthusiasm, productivity, creativity, energy, entrepreneurial skills, persistence, personality, ability to motivate volunteers, vision, future-orientation, zeal, communication skills, patience, competence in raising money, self-reliance, and relational skills. He also adds, "relatively few self identified "enablers" or "facilitators" have been effective church planters (40).

The implications of this discussion for church planters are enormous. The task of church planting demands the gifts and graces of a sodality type leader, and the success of the

church plant can be largely predicted on the degree to which the church planter possesses these skills. The researcher emphasizes this type of leadership under the ministry strategy Empowered Visionary Leadership. In many respects, what the researcher means by empowered visionary leadership resembles Wagner's sodality type leader. The church planter, according to this model, makes decisions and initiates plans in accordance with personal and shared vision in order to move the new church forward.

#### Creating a Seeker Sensitive Service

One common ministry strategy of successful "seeker sensitive" churches is that the leaders know what they believe about ministry, how it should be done in their case, and why they believe what they believe. I refer to this strategy as a Persistent Philosophy of Ministry. This persistent attitude is needed to establish ministry priorities and stick with them even in the face of the inevitable criticism that often is aimed at seeker styled ministries.

One of the primary principles underlying the creation of the "seeker service" is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to both evangelize and worship in the context of the same service. For instance, it is understood by leaders in the seeker movement that seekers and believers are at vastly different stages of their spiritual journey and therefore require radically different styles, methods, and

themes to minister effectively to each. Thus, Willow Creek and its imitations, *intentionally* separate the two functions of reaching seekers with the basic claims of Christianity, and building up believers through in-depth teaching and corporate worship.

There are several reasons for dividing Christian worship into two distinctly different services for seekers and believers. Traditional services which emphasizes a formal, liturgical worship experience tend to presuppose a level of Christian pre-understanding which is often lacking among the unchurched. The unchurched are often unfamiliar with our symbols, rituals, language, and hymnody. These things, for various reasons, become barriers, keeping the unchurched from gaining access to the transforming message of the Gospel.

Ed Dobson, in his book, Starting a Seeker Service, points out how easily even evangelicals get "trapped in an evangelical subculture." He writes:

As evangelical Christians we are isolated in our own little world. That world is basically out of touch with the broader culture. We have our own heroes, books, media, music, language, educational institutions, and taboos. All these add up to a language and culture understood by, defended to, and passed on for another generation of evangelicals. It also removes evangelicalism further from the unchurched community. Nonevangelicals have never heard of our heroes, read our books, tuned in to our television and radio programs, bought our music, or given a second thought to our taboos. (14)

The "seeker service" is designed intentionally to eliminate barriers in whatever forms they present themselves so that the basic message of Christianity can be heard, understood, and applied to unchurched persons living in the broader secular culture.

When leaders from "seeker sensitive" churches defend a theology of worship and the components of a seeker service, they do so in the context of services intentionally created to reach secular people. The key word here is context. The "seeker sensitive" service is not meant to encompass all of the elements commonly associated with the historic, liturgical service. The seeker service is intentionally designed to attract and challenge the unchurched to consider the truth claims of Christianity. It is not meant to be a full expression of historical, corporate Christian worship. Those who criticize the "seeker service" for failing to meet these requirements fail to understand what the service is intended to do, and that is evangelize. Although the "seeker service" fails many of the requirements for full, corporate Christian worship, what is of primary importance is whether or not the worship experience is true to the purposes and designs for which it is intended.

This author believes it is very unfair to evaluate a church's "worship" style on the basis of standards and expectations which fail to take important contextual factors into consideration. Much of the criticism leveled at the

"seeker sensitive" movement is of this kind. For example, Patrick Keifert, in his book, Welcoming the Stranger, rejects "entertainment evangelism," a criticism often leveled at the seeker sensitive movement, in favor of his own idea of how one should rightly worship God—proper "liturgical worship." He writes:

By "liturgical worship," I mean worship consistent with the historic public liturgy of the Christian church whereby "the full, conscious, and active participation" of the people takes place. This definition of liturgical worship is in explicit contrast to worship understood as "presentation evangelism," which leaves people passive observers of a few who seek to evangelize them. (5)

Churches like Willow Creek with alternative worship styles, which more than likely qualify for Keifert's category of "presentation evangelism" often view themselves as "mission outposts" of the traditional church, designed intentionally to reach people who can not comprehend traditional liturgies, and who have been turned off by the traditional church. Churches like Willow Creek don't pretend to worship God in the full, mature, historical expression of the Christian faith. In the Church Leaders Handbook, Olsson defends Willow Creek's emphasis on presentation over participation. He writes:

A common criticism about the seeker service format is that it is non-participative for the congregation. While this is an accurate observation, there are specific intentions behind the design. Willow Creek highly respects the process of the seeker's spiritual journey, and believes that the seeker needs to be in control of the process in order to feel safe. Therefore,



seeker services intentionally avoid asking the seeker to say anything, sign anything, sing anything, or give anything. The only exception to this is participation in a short chorus at the beginning of the service. Apart from that, seekers are allowed to be anonymous spectators, and given time to assimilate the information that they need to make a life-changing decision. (177-178)

In this statement one can detect a Persistent Philosophy of Ministry coming through boldly. Willow Creek church leaders know not only what they are doing, but why. Often times they will recognize criticism as accurate, but then go on to show why they choose to persist with their philosophy of ministry. The researcher contends that this Persistent Philosophy of Ministry is one of the chief reasons so many "seeker sensitive" church plants are successful.

In spite of criticism, Willow Creek, and other "seeker sensitive" churches, continue to be out on the front lines of mission, making worship, albeit in an elementary form, intelligible to the unchurched(or underchurched), welcoming people who would otherwise not darken the door of the church. The author's conviction is that such "mission" oriented evangelistic services are completely legitimate in this context, even when they fail to incorporate all of the elements of traditional "liturgical worship."

The best way to make people "passive observers" is to slavishly keep to traditional forms and orders of liturgy that millions of people find boring and unintelligible.

Secular people will passively observe the church as they drive by on their way to the golf course on Sunday morning! If Keifert is serious about full, conscious, active participation in worship on the part of people, he may want to reconsider the value of the church growth literature and contemporary worship styles which he consistently opposes in his book, Welcoming The Stranger.

Indeed, part of the fault with Keifert is that his ideas about worship, at times, have an "ivory tower" tone about them. For instance, Keifert rightly recognizes the need for both "home" and "away" worship strategies as an effort to disciple the faithful at "home," and reach the seekers with an "away" strategy. The problem is Keifert fails to give any clue at all about what an "away" service might actually look like. He seems unwilling to embrace any of the new contemporary liturgies and rituals. One gets the feeling, sticking to his baseball metaphor, that he would always go to home games.

The researcher does, however, agree wholeheartedly with Keifert's controlling metaphor of welcoming the stranger as a way to link worship with evangelism. The way to do this, according to Keifert, is to re-establish worship as a public act, rather than a private, intimate experience for the chosen few. He writes that many of our congregations, "imagine themselves as one extended family and limit both the number and variety of people they can care for and

involve in their congregational life by so imagining themselves" (10). As a result, they "tend to devalue the public nature of the liturgy and turn it into the worship of their extended family" (10).

#### Components of a Seeker Service

The following components represent what one might find in a typical "seeker sensitive" service. Although seeker sensitive services vary from one church to another, these components are generally found in the "typical" seeker oriented service.

Further, it should be noted at this point that the seeker service is the very heart of the seeker strategy to reach the unchurched. Several of the six ministry strategies of successful "seeker sensitive" church plants are reflected throughout the service.

#### Gathering/Meditative Music

The people have gathered around coffee and donuts being served in the front lobby of the celebration center. Some have come from Sunday school, others are just arriving from home. This is a time for people to enjoy each other's fellowship, minister to one another, and welcome newcomers. As the time for worship approaches, the people are called to worship by the gentle sounds of an acoustic guitar, the sophisticated sounds of a flute and cello, the contemporary sounds of an electronic keyboard, and the upbeat sound of drums. The music of the band signals the people to finish

their coffee and donuts, find a seat, and begin to focus their attention on God. It is a familiar piece of music so people know what it signifies. The music is upbeat but not promising too much. The band itself is off to the side of the platform.

One of the ministry strategies of successful "seeker sensitive" church plants which continues to surface is what the researcher calls Indigenous Music. Although Hunter, in his book, To Spread The Power, uses the "indegenizing" principle in a broader context than just music, he essentially affirms Indigenous Music as a significant factor in a successful ministry to secular people. Hunter's story of a fictitious pastor who goes away to the theological academy where he learns how to "exegete" a text, but fails to learn how to "exegete the context into which the text's meaning must be communicated," is illustrative of this point (152). Hunter refers to the importance of Indigenous Music more directly when he writes:

Ironically, this same young pastor would have adhered to a different script if he had been a cross-cultural missionary to people of another nation and language. His good sense would have instructed him to learn Aymara his first months in the high Andes, and as he formed a church he would not force-feed Gothic architecture, or *pipe organs*[italics mine], or Elizabethan English, because he would know that to be effective, his mission work must be expressed in *indigenous* cultural forms. A people's culture is the incarnate medium of God's revelation to them.  
(153)

The reason seeker sensitive churches use contemporary music styles is because it matches the tastes and styles of millions of people living in the 1990's. It is indigenous to a large segment of American culture not attracted to traditional church music and hymnody. This is particularly true of the baby-boomer generation often targeted by seeker sensitive churches.

#### Special Music-Saxophone Solo

As the band finishes their selection, a saxophone soloist walks out on the platform and begins to play a jazzed up version of Amazing Grace. He is not "introduced," nor are his talents overtly praised by the worship leader. The saxophone player is a recent convert. He has been playing in local nightclubs, but now desires to offer his enormous talent for the glory of God. As the solo comes to an end, the people are free to clap to show their appreciation.

The importance of music is highly valued in seeker services as a means of engaging people's hearts and emotions with the gospel. Music is a major part of many people's lives--what they value, what they enjoy, and what they find meaningful. If the style of music invites people to investigate Christianity by saying to them--this celebration is for you, it's your style--they are more likely to enter in and find it meaningful.

The music strives, like all other acts of worship in "seeker sensitive" services, to be first-class quality. Often, these churches recruit musicians and singers from other churches so that there is always good music on Sunday morning. To be sure, contemporary music in church is not for everybody. Yet, when it is performed professionally and sincerely, and in good taste for the glory of God, it is hard to imagine anyone not appreciating its value for worship and evangelism.

#### Choruses of Praise

At this time the minister of music/program would go to the platform lectern and greet the congregation with: "Good morning and welcome to this service!" The initial greeting should be positive and enthusiastic--worship is not a dead, formal obligation, but a joyful celebration of new life in Christ. The people are glad to be alive, thankful to be in the presence of God and each other, and it shows on their faces as well as in their body language. The attitude of the worship leaders is vital in this regard, for they, knowingly or unknowingly, will set the tone for the entire service. This positive attitude of celebration is normative for "seeker" congregations. It does not deny the regular ebb and flow of emotional energy, nor the variety of feelings and themes represented by the seasons of the Christian calendar, but rather seeks to signify that Christian worship is best characterized by a note of joy and

enthusiasm.

### Ritual of Friendship

Before the people are asked to sit down, they are invited to greet one another as friends on a common journey. Here the service leader challenges the people to "act out" through mutual participation, the public identity of the congregation. This is a time to "welcome the stranger." This part signifies all are welcome, and all have ownership in the service.

Regular church members should be encouraged to recognize newcomers and make them feel welcome. The author appreciated Keifert's suggestion that appropriate boundaries are needed to protect visitors from a type of intimacy and friendliness that is overdone. He writes:

Social psychologists argue that such openness and visibility inhibits human interaction because people who are not intimately related are sociable only when they have some tangible barriers between them. Human beings need to have some distance from close observation by others in order to feel safe enough to converse and interact. "Increase intimate contact," says social psychologist Richard Sennett, "and you decrease sociability."  
(109)

When regular members suffocate visitors with intimate words and gestures that are incongruent with the level of actual intimacy present in their relationship, the greeting is dishonest. The effect will be to turn people off and away.

For instance, this author once visited a church where the worship leader asked everyone in the congregation to find someone they did not know and give them a hug and say

to him or her "Jesus loves you." As important as friendliness is in the congregation, this level of intimacy was highly inappropriate for what should be a "public" audience. This church, functioning more like an extended family, exhibited the ideology of intimacy, which Keifert rightly suggests can "exclude as well as embrace" (29). "The extended family can become a small clique that establishes the norms for worship; its needs and interests become the focus of worship. For the inner circle, worship therefore seems very warm, open, and intimate. To other members, it appears exclusive" (29).

Many churches are known as a "friendly" church, but if they were able to look at themselves through the eyes of an outsider, they would realize that they are primarily friendly to one another, that is, to long-time members who managed to work their way into the inner circle of power and intimate relationships.

#### Welcome/Announcements

As the energy for the ritual of friendship begins to run down, the congregation will instinctively be seated. At this time, on behalf of the entire congregation, the pastor or staff should welcome visitors. The metaphor of the "gracious host" suggested by William Willimon in his book, Preaching and Leading Worship, is a fitting description of how pastors should think of their role here, and in other parts of the service. He writes:



In the Word and Table pattern the leader of worship might think of himself or herself as host at a meal. The gracious host makes people feel comfortable, welcomed, prepared for. The good host knows that in order for people to feel comfortable they need someone in charge, someone to give them the directions they need in order to participate fully. (30)

A seeker sensitive service resists having visitors stand to be recognized, or the equally embarrassing practice of having them remain seated while the members stand and suspiciously look down on those who remain seated. Newcomers don't want or expect ribbons, special name tags, tracts, brochures, or any other special attention. Most visitors prefer a simple acknowledgement from the pastor that they are welcome to worship God in His house, and free to worship in anonymity if they so choose. At the close of the service the pastor can greet them, ask them to introduce themselves, and invite them to come back.

Community life is important and needs to be celebrated through the announcements. If the pastor enjoys this part of the service so will the congregation. Announcements are short, engaging, and inclusive of the whole congregation. They are made in order to be comprehensible to the stranger. Often announcements leave out important information that regular members take for granted, but leave visitors feeling like they don't know what is going on.

The announcements are not the time to parade individual self-interest or pet projects. Only matters that are of

crucial importance to the entire congregation are mentioned. Examples might include: deaths, births, hospitalizations, youth retreats, children's activities, important Board decisions and so on. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, Worldly Preaching, comments on the matter of announcements:

The announcements from the pulpit should include those things that are of significance for the entire congregation. Much effort should be devoted to these announcements. They are the life of the congregation as the body of Christ. An elder may take this responsibility, but it must be made clear that these announcements are a spiritual matter. (126)

### Prayer

The prayer, although properly the responsibility of the pastor as the representative of the body, is not the exclusive domain of the clergy. Sometimes God speaks powerfully through the simple, awkward pray of a lay person. A typical prayer might take the form of a confession for the times we have sold out to the glitter and glamour of the world. "Dear Lord, we confess that often we fail to be faithful to your plan for life. Our distorted ambitions, desires, and deeds reflect our lack of trust in you. We ask that you help us to love the things that you loves and to hate the things that you hate. Forgive us, and free us to live responsibly in the world, knowing that this world is not our true home."

### Offering/Special Music

The offering is introduced with a phrase such as "Our offerings are the financial resources that we make available

for God to use in the ministry and outreach of this church. God's word challenges us to give what we are able, and to give with a cheerful heart. If you are a visitor, please do not feel obligated to give, we want this service to be our gift to you. Let us worship God with our gifts." As the plates are passed, a gifted member of the congregation plays a beautiful violin instrumental. A few minutes after the plates have all been passed she continues to play. The music creates a quite, meditative mood as people continue to worship God.

### Drama

The scripture text for the day is Matthew 16:26, "For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" The drama will directly relate to the theme of the sermon and will be presented to express the truth of the text in a very concrete way. A ladder is placed on the stage and a young man, dressed in a well-tailored suit, begins to climb to the top. Meanwhile, his wife and children are gathered at the bottom of the ladder urging him with tears to come down. The message is about "climbing the ladder of success." The drama raises the question and the sermon attempts to give some answers. One may forget a message communicated as a proposition in a sermon, but remember it for days and even weeks from the drama.

Message

Preaching to secular people requires a commitment to speak to issues important to them in a language they understand. The researcher refers to this ministry strategy of "seeker sensitive" churches as Relevant Preaching and Teaching. Typically, this means preaching topically about the values and current needs of the audience, rather than expository, verse by verse preaching. Once people connect their felt needs, hurts, and interests to the transforming power of the Gospel, they are more willing to examine the deeper truth claims of the Gospel. In general, sermons targeted to seekers deal with issues of values, meaning, identity, and relationships. These are issues important especially to baby-boomers. The Bible speaks to these issues around the themes of creation, atonement, forgiveness, reconciliation, community, abundant living, adoption, and eternal life. Being sensitive to the subjects of interest to the seeker, does not, however, mean the preacher should avoid putting Christ at the center of the sermon. Karl Barth says, "Like the Christ who has appeared already, the Christ who is still to come must be the center of every sermon" (54).

Timothy Wright, in his book, A community of Joy, provides several helpful insights with regard to preaching effectively to irreligious people. He rightly points out that the average secular person does not know or understand

our language. He writes:

Words like justification, reconciliation, sin, and even grace sound like a foreign language to irreligious people. So, to communicate the truths of the gospel relevantly, effective Christian communicators use new language. (86)

Wright points to the example of how Norman Vincent Peale effectively translated the biblical concept of faith by the phrase "positive thinking." "In his attempt to talk about faith with those unfamiliar with it, he uses language that secular people understand" (86).

Bill Hybels, in the book he co-authored with his wife Lynne, Rediscovering Church, answers the concerns of many sincere Christians that "the use of modern art forms and language to communicate the Gospel will subtly change its content." He writes:

In terms of using contemporary language, a distinction from theologian William Hordern might be helpful. He stresses the difference between *translating* and *transforming* the Gospel. Those who transform the Gospel are watering it down into something it isn't, in order to make it more palatable to seekers. That's totally unacceptable, and that's not what we're doing at Willow Creek.

We're committed to keeping the Gospel intact while merely translating it into words and images that our modern audience can understand. This has to be done carefully so that the original meaning of the scriptures is captured, but we are convinced that it's essential to use contemporary communication in order to help today's seekers grab hold of biblical truths.

The ironic downside of not translating the gospel has been described by evangelist Alan Walker: "An idolatry of words has grown up in evangelism. There are people who, if they fail to hear the repetition of phrases and words with which they are familiar, make the sometimes absurd claim that the Gospel is not being preached.

(207)

On the issue of relevancy and preaching to seekers, Wright says:

One of the problems with the church is that it often answers questions no one is asking. People want to know what the gospel has to say about everyday life. Effective preaching begins by speaking to people's needs: stress, grief, failure, family, jobs, and so on. (101)

Wright goes on to make the important observation that Jesus often "used the people's needs and their questions as a starting point for his sermons" (Wright 101).

### Closing Song

The final song is performed as a special music number. This song is in keeping with the theme of the message. Unlike the opening choruses, which nearly always start the service on a positive note of celebration, the closing song sometimes calls for something more reflective, challenging, or sensitive to the theme of the message.

### Final Words of Encouragement

The seeker service typically ends with a benediction, or what this author calls final words of encouragement. The theme of the service is re-stated in the form of a blessing. Willimon is right when he says:

The blessing is not a prayer; it is a farewell word from one person to another in God's name. Therefore it should be done audibly in front of the congregation, or with hands raised over the people. (35)

In a seeker service the pastor might say something like, "God is able to do infinitely more in your life than you could ever think or imagine. You don't have to lose your soul to fulfill your ambitions. Put God first, and God will give you the right kind of ambition. As you go into your world this week, may God be at work for you and in you, prompting you to be ambitious for the things that really matter. We hope to see you next week."

#### Strategic Planning for New Churches

Most church planters could identify ten or twelve ministry strategies of successful new churches beyond the six that the researcher has identified. Church planting tool-kits, seminars, books, and manuals all outline the essential ingredients of effective and successful new churches. Often these church growth principles are presented in the form of "how to's" or "steps" for starting new churches. Information like this can be a tremendous help to able, but often times, inexperienced church planters (Compton and Sallee, Logan, Redford, Jones, Chaney).

Of course, many of the ministry strategies that make a new church successful are the same ministry strategies which make well-established congregations successful too (Callahan xi). The six strategies identified by the researcher would potentially enhance the growth and effectiveness of almost any congregation in any context. What is needed, however, is a systematic approach to help the church planter put

these strategies in place, enhancing the church's ability to achieve its vision. This systematic approach is referred to as strategic planning, and it holds much promise in the area of new church development for it provides a synthesis of the ministry strategies common in successful congregations, new or old.

Once this author had a conversation with Dr. George Hunter, a Wesleyan scholar in the field of management and church growth. He said that sadly, "four out of five churches in North America do not have a process of planning by which the church's vision is communicated to the membership and they are able to see signs that it is being implemented." Kennon L. Callahan, an expert in congregational long-range planning writes:

Twelve characteristics can be identified that contribute to a church's being effective and successful. In the years to come, it is important that churches put these twelve characteristics well in place. Those churches that do so with a long-range plan are most likely to be effective in mission and successful in outreach. (xi)

Most new churches do some kind of long-range or strategic planning to accomplish their goals and mission. Since new churches are faced with the special challenge of forming their mission and envisioning their ideal future, often out of nothing, planning becomes an essential task. The question then, is not "should the church plan?" but rather "is the planning process effective and helping the church to achieve its purposes?" The author's answer to



that question, based on personal observation and conversations with other pastors, is that many new churches fail to plan as effectively as they could. Robert E. Logan, in the Church Planter's Toolkit, says that many new churches fail because of poor planning on the part of church leaders (Logan 5).

The church is not alone in its failure to plan effectively for its future. Many businesses, governmental agencies, and non-profit organizations function daily on the basis of poor planning. Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeifer, the authors of Applied Strategic Planning and strategic planning consultants write:

However, our experience as consultants to a wide variety of organizations has convinced us that most strategic planning processes are poorly conceptualized and poorly executed; the process is often not very creative and it is tactical rather than strategic in nature; and the so-called strategic plan rarely impacts the day-to-day decisions made in the organization. (1)

One solution to the problem of poor planning in the church, would be to adopt a strategic planning process from the beginning. Thus, in a new church start, a strategic planning process could be adopted from its inception and used to provide the criteria for making day-to-day decisions and implementing the characteristics of successful and effective churches. Many such models exist today in both the business literature as well as the church growth literature. For instance, during a former pastorate, the author led a church through a substantial long-range

planning effort that eventually produced a detailed, five year plan for the church. We used Twelve Keys to an Effective Church and the Planning Workbook, by Dr. Kennon Callahan, a professional planning consultant, to guide our planning. The final plan included objectives and goals to improve and extend the church's effectiveness in such diverse areas as buildings, program ministries, worship, and financial accountability.

One business model which could be adapted to the arena of the church is the Applied Strategic Planning model by Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeifer found in their book, Applied Strategic Planning: How To Develop A Plan That Really Works. They write succinctly of the adaptability of the model to organizations like the church:

The model of strategic planning presented in this book is based on existing models; but it differs in content, emphasis, and process. This model is especially useful for medium-sized and small organizations, and it is as useful for governmental agencies and not-for-profit organizations as it is for business and industrial organizations. Using this model will provide both new direction and new energy to the organization. The model differs from others in its continual concern with application and implementation-not only after its completion, but every step along the way; hence the title "Applied Strategic Planning." This model also differs from others in its emphasis on values-driven decision making and its heavy focus on creatively envisioning the ideal organizational future. (7)

Robert Schuller once quipped, "those who fail to plan, plan to fail." Galsworthy said, "If you do not think about the future, you cannot have one" (Spread Power 187). Could

the failure to plan strategically be one of the reasons that over half of all new churches fail within the first year? The alternative to strategic planning is the kind of ministry which shoots from the hip, reacting to events, circumstances, and undesirable outcomes from a defensive posture, rather than advancing the church's mission by envisioning its future and pushing ahead strategically. Page Smith, a historian and student of movements once said, "the leader with a system, however inadequate it may ultimately turn out to be, is at a vast advantage over a systemless rival, however brilliant" (Spread Power 187).

Systemless management is non-integrative in its approach. It takes the various parts of the ministry and tries to implement them one by one into the overall plan. Strategic planning on the other hand is more holistic in its approach to ministry. In strategic planning the process is more important than the plan itself. Not just trying to anticipate the future and plan accordingly, strategic planning creates its own future. Consequently, this approach to ministry is better equipped to anticipate what must be done, by whom, and on what timetable in order to achieve the church's desired future.

Once the author was in a seminar with a young pastor in his first year of beginning a new church, and enjoying a certain level of success. He was commenting on the importance of the first public Sunday service for a

successful beginning. He believed that many new churches unwisely rush into taking the new church public. But then he added that no matter how hard one works and however long one takes, remember Monday comes after Sunday. The Monday after the first Sunday is really the first day of the new church because so much will depend on how well the church leaders follow up and assimilate the people in attendance the first Sunday. Without realizing it, this young pastor was talking about strategic planning. Planning and managing strategically means systematically moving the organization toward achieving a vision of that organization's ideal future (Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeifer 51). Monday always will be the critical day for the church because it represents the potential of the church's ideal future. Bishop Ensley is known to have paraphrased that great line from Toynbee:

Apathy can be overcome only with enthusiasm and that enthusiasm can be aroused only by two things. One is the ideal that takes the imagination by storm. The other is a definite and intelligible plan for carrying the ideal into practice (Spread Power 187).

Advancing the church's future by the use of a "definite and intelligible plan" is what strategic planning, rightly done, promises to do.

#### Callahan's Strategic Planning Process

One of the better books in Strategic Planning written specifically for churches is Twelve Keys to an Effective Church by Kennon L. Callahan. The book comes with a

Planning Workbook and also a training guide for church leaders involved in the planning process. As mentioned earlier this author has used this system and with generally good results. Callahan identifies twelve characteristics which he believes can be identified that contribute to a church's being effective and successful (xii). According to Callahan, successful and effective churches, generally, have nine of the twelve in operation. Strategic planning provides the most effective means of putting these characteristics in place.

1. Specific, Concrete Missional Objectives. The missional church has two or three such objectives that involve strong groupings of the congregation in mission with persons who have specific human hurts and hopes.

2. Pastoral and Lay Visitation. Though a lost art in many churches, the missional church does consequential visitation with the unchurched, newcomers, constituents, and members on a weekly basis.

3. Corporate, Dynamic Worship. The weekly worship services are holistic in music and message, corporately planned, and led by a compassionate, competent team of laity and pastor.

4. Significant Relational Groups. Most people come to church looking for community. Instead we put them on a committee. Missional churches are constantly and intentionally starting new caring groups in which people may

discover roots, place, and belonging.

5. Strong Leadership Resources. Many churches train leaders to fill functional slots inside the church's program. Missional churches nurture a majority of their leaders to be relational and caring with individuals and groups in the regional community.

6. Streamlined Structure and Solid, Participatory Decision Making. Missional churches plan on the basis of their strengths, hopes, and objectives. They are less preoccupied with their own needs and problems than many churches. They have streamlined organizational structure.

7. Several Competent Programs and Activities. Missional churches know people attract people more than programs do. Generally, they have two or three really competent programs that serve, rather than use, people.

8. Open Accessibility. A physical location that is accessible in terms of major traffic patterns and average trip time and leaders who are accessible to the community are both important.

9. High Visibility. Successful missional churches have a high degree of geographical and grapevine visibility with churched and unchurched persons in the community.

10. Adequate Parking, Land, and Landscaping. As a national average on parking space permits 1.75 persons to participate in the church.

11. Adequate Space and Facilities. More churches underbuild than overbuild, and thereby limit their growth. They build fixed rather than flexible structures. Missional churches build for the future, with a clear perspective that this is the eleventh, not the first, most important characteristic. Increasingly, they take energy and debt interest issues seriously.

12. Solid Financial Resources. Missional churches know people give money to people more than programs, purposes, or paper. Missional churches tend to put their money into people rather than property. They exercise responsible, courageous stewardship.

#### Mathis and McGavran on Strategic Planning

Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church, one of the fastest growing United Methodist Churches in America, hinges much of its success on an effective strategic planning process. At Frazer they call their planning team the "Joel Committee." The name Joel, according to John Ed Mathison, Frazer's pastor, is taken from the Old Testament prophet who encouraged "the old men to dream dreams and the young men to see visions" (Joel 2:28).

Mathison's book Tried and True, although not presented as a strategic planning model per se, is essentially eleven church growth principles developed around the theme of strategic planning. Many of the strategic planning ideas in the book apply to small churches or large churches, new

churches or old churches, traditional churches or non-traditional churches.

For instance, Frazer's "In His Steps" commitment campaign is fully outlined in the book, and there are even forms that churches can copy to get them started on a program of their own (74). "In His Steps" is essentially a yearly system for helping each member of the congregation decide what financial resources and personal talents they want to commit to their church each year. This is based on Frazer's conviction that "there is a ministry niche for every person. Every new member at Frazer is told that he/she is expected to become involved in a ministry," thus one of their driving values as a church is "every member a minister" (80).

The driving force behind the "In His Steps" campaign is the concept of volunteerism. Many churches rely more on recruitment than they do on allowing the people to volunteer according to their sense of spiritual giftedness and where they might make a creative, responsible and worthwhile contribution. Typically a nominating committee or other such personnel committee will anxiously try to "fill in the slots" of leadership positions deemed necessary to carry on the mission of the church. Often one will hear questions from such committees like "who can we get to teach the adult Sunday school class" or "who can we recruit to work with the youth." Too many lay people are failed by a "recruitment"



mentality in the church and become burned out serving in positions they have reluctantly accepted. Frazer turns the whole process around by giving the ministry back to the lay people through volunteerism. John Ed Mathison writes:

One of the important aspects of volunteerism is that it gives a great responsibility to lay people. If the church is really going to turn ministry functions over to lay people, it should also trust the lay people to know best where they can serve. Staff persons are never smart enough to be able to determine where people should be recruited to serve. The volunteer concept says that individual members should prayerfully consider the opportunities and let God lead them to the place(s) where they ought to serve. God doesn't make mistakes! The Spirit of God places people in the right place...When lay persons volunteer for ministry rather than being recruited for it, they have ownership of that decision. When lay persons prayerfully consider their own gifts and match them to an area of ministry, feeling God leading them to this service, they have ownership of the decision and commitment to the ministry. (81)

Donald A. McGavran in his landmark study in Church Growth literature, Understanding Church Growth puts forth his theory of the vital importance of strategic planning for church growth. In his chapter entitled, "Make Hard, Bold Plans," McGavran takes issue with what he perceives is a growing body of pastors and missionaries who say that evangelism, church growth, and church planting are only part of the whole program of God, not deserving a special, strategic position in the spread of Christianity. According to McGavran, it is believed that "as the whole intricate operation is carried forward, church growth will take place, it is held, in whatever degree is pleasing to God and

according to his timetable" (282). McGavran counters this common assumption by saying "church growth seldom comes without bold plans for it" (283). He critiques from scripture this mis-guided assumption:

The assumption is contrary to the New Testament practice. We do not see the apostles carrying out a genial program of *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *kerygma* and the churches happily rising here and there like dandelions in a well-watered lawn. There we see Paul and Barnabas throwing their lives into a tremendous program of church planting, racing against time to reach as many as possible with the message of salvation before the Lord returned. (283)

Of particular interest to this Free Methodist author was McGavran's premise that "every great forward movement has planned for church growth" (284). To substantiate his point, McGavran retells the story of the great growth of the Methodist church made possible by Wesley's careful attention to strategic planning. He writes:

Wesley's class meetings did not arise by chance as he led a devout Christian life. He created them. He standardized them. He required new believers to form themselves into them. He monitored them. As long as he hoped that through them the Anglican church might be renewed, he called them class meetings. When that hope faded, or in countries where the Anglican Church was merely one of many denominations, class meetings became Methodist churches and continued to be planted according to plan. Revival meetings on a grand scale were held in order to save people, whose salvation was not complete till they were firm members of Methodist churches. Wesley, Asbury, Coke, and others would have laughed at any idea that church growth took place by itself without any planning. (285)

A modern day strategic planning success story at the denominational level, according to McGavran is the Christian

and Missionary Alliance Church. In 1977, the Christian and Missionary Alliance was a church of 192,000 members in North America (88). The denominational leadership planned strategically to double its membership, reaching 384,000 by 1987. It also planned to double its overseas membership which would bring the denominational total to 1,904,000 by 1987. Louis L. King, the president of the denomination spelled out the vision with enthusiasm saying:

To reach these goals we are calling the church to a renewed emphasis on evangelism, to maximum participation, to *planning* at every level, to teaching and training for outreach, to accurate reporting, to sacrificial giving, and to much intercessory prayer. (288)

McGavran continues:

The whole story is told in the *Church Growth Bulletin* for September 1979. I know of no better example of hard, bold plans, and of no more dramatic examples of positive results. In 1987, the centennial year of the C&MA, the worldwide goals were reached (288).

### Hunter's Strategic Planning Process

George Hunter, in his book, To Spread The Power has succeeded in providing an excellent rationale for planning for church growth, as well as sketching out a basic strategic planning process helpful to local churches. Of all of the church related strategic planning literature, Hunter's book is as readable and inspiring as any, thus making it a good starting point for the novice planner.

In a section on "Why Rethink Our Planning" Hunter writes:

Most churches do not yet perceive their need for more effective planning, because they already do a lot of it. They do, indeed, because most churches are beehives of programs and activities, and each program and activity is planned, usually in meetings, as the people nail down 'who will do what by when?' When people regard themselves as 'experienced' at something, it seldom occurs to them to learn to do it better or differently. Yet, despite all those plans, programs, and activities, most churches do not achieve much, and their people lack the satisfaction of being involved in significant achievement. (185)

Hunter continues with a quote from Hemingway: "Never mistake motion for action," of which he says "about four-fifths of our churches are beehives of random (or inherited) motion, but not of action that will achieve something" (186). Finally Hunter says, "I have observed no church experiencing sustained growth where there was not also an informed strategic plan being implemented and with widespread ownership" (186).

The following is a strategic planning process which Hunter claims to have taken from many sources in Church Growth, management, and planning. It is taken from his book, To Spread the Power:

1. Church and Community Identification. Here the church defines its "ministry area," which Hunter believes includes many people who will drive twenty minutes or more to a "church that understands them, meets their needs, and speaks their language" (190). The second task of this step is for the church to identify its basic type, according to the following typology: downtown old first church, the

neighborhood church, the metropolitan regional church, the special purpose church, the town church, and the open country church. The church must know what type it belongs to in order to plan intelligently for that particular church.

2. Situation Analysis. The second step involves gathering data about the church and the community (195). This step is based on the assumption that the outcomes of the planning process will largely depend upon the scope and quality of data gathered about the church and community. Hunter cites five pieces of data which will aid the discovery of the relative membership strength of the congregation: (1)Active resident membership at year's end; (2)Average worship attendance for the year (perhaps the most important indicator of membership strength); (3)Average church school attendance for the year; (4)Number of persons regularly involved in the church's ministry of the laity to persons, inside or outside the church's physical facilities; (5)Number received as new Christians for the year.

3. The strategic Framework. The third step in Hunter's planning process is important for psychological reasons. According to Hunter, "It prepares people in the whole organization to own and carry out the resulting plan" (198). This essentially becomes a brainstorming session between key stakeholders in the congregation to determine what key outcomes the church desires, but is not achieving.

This process helps to increase the chances of the plan actually being implemented. Hunter points out, "The planning committee's goal is not to construct the **best** possible plan, but rather the best plan that will be implemented" (199).

4. The Mission Statement. Hunter cites the fourth step as the most important single step because the last four flow from it. This step asks the question, "What is the supreme purpose the congregation exists?" Hunter writes, "A strong mission statement becomes the driving force of the organization, shaping decisions (including budget priorities) and holding the church on course" (199).

5. Objectives and Goals. The fifth step is setting clear objectives in terms of what the congregation hopes to achieve. It is important, according to Hunter, that all of the church's objectives and goals flow out of the mission statement. Hunter writes, "In strategic planning, each objective should be matched with one or more goals. Setting goals for which the people hold themselves accountable is a pivotal variable in Church Growth" (202). Hunter cites an informal study Peter Wagner performed among Latin American pastors regarding the relationship of goal setting to church growth. He writes:

A decade ago, Peter Wagner led week-long Church Growth seminars in Latin America, giving participants an opportunity to complete their training by setting growth goals for their church for the next year and agreeing to report a year later. Some set goals, some did not, but all had

the same training. One year later, those who had not set goals were only slightly more likely to have experienced church growth, but those who set goals were much more likely to have experienced church growth. (202)

Hunter himself comments on Wagner's discovery:

Admittedly, reaching our numerical goals may not be intrinsically important, but our objectives are. The goals help us to see whether we are reaching our objectives, and our willingness to set goals indicates the seriousness of our objectives, our willingness to own them, and our willingness to manage the church by objectives. (202)

6. Strategies. Hunter defines a strategy as a broad action a church takes to meet their goals. For instance, Willow Creek uses a seven step strategy to meet their goal of turning irreligious people into fully committed followers of Jesus Christ.

7. Programs and Activities. The seventh step is promoting programs and activities which will help the church reach its goals. Again, these programs and activities, according to Hunter, ought to flow out of the mission statement. They are not just activities for the sake of something to do, nor are they merely mechanisms to organize the church calendar. For instance, this researcher knew of a church which often told its members, "programs do not make disciples, people make disciples." Ironically, this church has some truly outstanding programs. But they understood the proper relationship between programs as a means, and discipleship as the end.

8. Operational Plans. The last part of Hunter's planning process is where most churches begin. It is asking the operational questions like, "who will do what by when?" Typically this problem arises when the mission for the particular church in question has not been clearly defined and articulated. When the hard work of clarifying, owning, and committing oneself to the church's mission is left undone, the easy work of taking care of the church's business will dominate the agenda.

#### Summary

In this chapter the researcher has reviewed and critiqued some of the more salient literature on church planting, Church Growth, and the "seeker sensitive" movement. Whenever possible the researcher has attempted to establish support from various authors for the six ministry strategies of successful "seeker sensitive" church plants identified earlier.

The discussion by Wagner about "sodality" type leaders is similar to the researcher's definition of Empowered Visionary Leadership. Lyle Schaller, in his list of qualities for effective church planters also was descriptive of what this researcher means by an empowered visionary leader.

Dr. Hunter's principle of "indigenizing" ministry applied to the ministry strategy of Indigenous Music, establishing it as an important gauge of a church's



effectiveness in getting its message across to secular people. Ed Dobson, in Starting a Seeker Service, pointed out the existence of an "evangelical subculture" complete with its own language, taboos, and music style. The implication of such a subculture, according to Dobson, is to further isolate evangelicals from the unchurched community.

The researcher also showed how Bill Hybels articulates a Persistent Philosophy of Ministry whenever he defends the intentional reasoning behind Willow Creek's use of contemporary communication styles. This ministry strategy is evident throughout many of the authors mentioned in the last chapter.

Relevant Preaching and Teaching was emphasized by Hybels, Wright, and Dobson. Hunter implied the importance of this in his discussion on "indeginizing" ministry.

In the section on strategic planning, much was said about the importance of pulling together ministry strategies which make churches effective into a systematic, strategic plan. This is true for six strategies or sixty strategies, new churches, or old churches.

The next chapter will focus more narrowly on the six ministry strategies identified by the researcher. Each strategy will be described in full, using a Pilot Study conducted at a successful "seeker sensitive" church plant called Crossroads Christian Church. The Pilot Study, as well as the Literature Review in Chapter 2, provides a

starting point for the researcher from which to gather and evaluate data from the church planting project in Atlanta.

Whether or not these six ministry strategies actually contribute to the growth of "seeker sensitive" congregations, and whether or not they are transferrable to the church in Atlanta will depend on the overall success of that project, and what the people are actually saying about how these ministry strategies influenced them to join the church.

## CHAPTER 3

## Design of the Study

The following chapter is a road map of how the design of the study will facilitate understanding the problem and fulfill the objectives of the purpose statement. Here then, is the design of the study.

Summary of the Problem and Purpose Statement

The "seeker sensitive" movement is spreading across America more rapidly than many believed possible. It is a "new paradigm" for how the church worships and ministers to an ever growing number of consumer oriented church goers. The Willow Creek Association, an association of "seeker" styled ministries currently numbers around 1000 members. It is expected to grow to 2000 by the year 2000. The exciting thing about this movement is not merely its statistical success, but rather the way God is using the contemporary methodology to get the old message of salvation across to modern men and woman. Hundreds and thousands of people are finding Christ in these churches and are growing into fully committed followers of Jesus Christ. Ironically, the "seeker sensitive" churches seem to do a better job of evangelism and discipleship than many of the more traditional churches which criticize the movement for "watering down" the Gospel and merely "entertaining" people in worship.

What then, does account for the phenomenal growth and

effectiveness in the spread of vital Christianity in "seeker sensitive" churches? Is the "seeker sensitive" movement just a fad, or is it pointing the way to a more enduring paradigm shift for how church should and will be done in the new millennium? And what can other churches, especially new "seeker sensitive" church plants, learn from Willow Creek to increase their own possibilities for growth?

#### Purpose Statement

In view of the successful growth rate of "seeker sensitive" churches like Willow Creek and Crossroads, my purpose is to determine what ministry strategies contribute most to this success and what happens when these ministry strategies are implemented in a church plant in Atlanta called The Church At Whitewater Creek.

#### Pilot Study

In preparation for my doctoral studies in new church development at Asbury Theological Seminary, I spent a whole year at Crossroads Christian Church, in Lexington, Kentucky, to learn as much as I could about how they got started and how they continue to grow. I obtained membership and attendance records, interviewed the pastor, staff members, and lay leaders. My desire was to learn more than just a few new church growth techniques. By this time I was committed to starting a new Willow Creek model in Atlanta with the Free Methodist denomination. I had heard the horror stories of failed Willow Creek models and was even

cautioned by some to not try Willow Creek in Atlanta. "Atlanta is not Chicago," they would say. Still, I went with an open mind and eager to learn.

After spending a year at Crossroads I came away convinced of six foundational ministry strategies that helped explain Crossroad's growth and vitality. These are strategies drawn and analyzed from data obtained through interviews, church publications, and personal observations.

### Persistent Philosophy

From the beginning, Crossroads has remained persistent about their philosophy of ministry. As Pastor Schneiders put it, "Crossroads was going to be a new direction for searching people." Without apology, Crossroads has identified itself as a "seeker sensitive" church after the model made popular by the Willow Creek Community Church. Schneiders said, "we tried to formulate a church that could do as much as possible to break down any of the negative [negative feelings about going to church], which is a Willow Creek approach" (Schneiders). Besides eliminating the negative feelings people have about church, Schneiders said:

We tried from day one to be a church where people could come and start over. We talked about being a trauma center for hurting people. We have a lot of people who have been bruised and damaged either by the church or by other people. (Schneiders)

The whole ministry, then, is focused on reaching hurting people who are honestly seeking faith in God, but have been turned off by the traditional church scene.

The important thing to see here, is not Crossroad's philosophy of ministry per se, though that is part of their success, but the persistence with which they have stuck to the original vision. This church sticks to its mission. Even at first when Schneiders was soliciting support for the project from other churches there were threats to their "seeker sensitive" philosophy of ministry. According to Schneiders, "we had Southland [Southland Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky] promising a hundred people, Southern Acres [also a Christian Church in Lexington] saying we can give you fifty, but as we looked at what we wanted to do, we asked for that not to happen. If one hundred people came from Southland, they would have expectations of what the church should be" (Schneiders). Another time when a struggling Christian church in the area approached Crossroads about a possible merger, Crossroads was very firm about the terms of the merger. The leadership of Crossroads would agree to merge only if the other church would agree to turn over all leadership and financial responsibility to Crossroads. Schneiders referred to the merger as a friendly takeover. "We didn't think we could go in two directions. We quite frankly didn't think they would go for that. But we didn't think we could have two segments and take their leadership and ours, their philosophy and ours" (Schneiders).

Crossroads communicates a well-defined philosophy of ministry at every level of the church's program. Church leaders are expected to "line up in the area of philosophy and vision" to serve as leaders. Each new member is given an opportunity to explore the church's philosophy through a new member's class with the pastor. At this time prospective members examine Crossroads to determine if it is the kind of church that will meet their needs, and if not, they are encouraged to find another church that will. According to Schneiders, "we find it's better to take people out on the front end than to let them become disgruntled and try to take several people with them on the back end" (Schneiders).

#### Relevant Preaching and Teaching

When asked to put his finger on one or two keys to Crossroad's phenomenal growth Schneiders pointed to relevant preaching and teaching. As he put it, "I think the fact that we have shown a relevance of the Word of God in people's lives has been very refreshing" (Schneiders). People respond to Schneiders' practical, unpretentious preaching style. He preaches topical sermons rather than the more traditional expository sermons. Traditional church members, who like the expository approach often are critical on this point. Schneiders uses lots of illustrations about the family, sports, and famous people to keep people interested in his message. Although he preaches an

authoritative, biblical message, he does not badger people about how they "ought" to be living; he is not condescending; and he does not lay guilt trips on his audience.

Schneiders' preaching is all done in short series ranging from four to six weeks. This keeps a first time visitor coming back to hear "the rest of the story," to use a line from Paul Harvey. His series titles include: "Running on Empty," "Why People Don't Go To Church," and "Why Are There So Many Hypocrites in the Church?" These titles are interesting and relevant enough to keep people coming back to hear more. According to Schneiders, "I work hard on my titles. Again, I talked with Bob Russel in Louisville who told me they saw a 5% increase in their attendance when they advertise the titles versus when they didn't" (Schneiders).

Besides strong preaching, Crossroads offers a series of basic Christian Life and Service seminars for new members and believers who are ready "to get serious about their commitment to the Lord and become involved in some of the habits which characterize the Christian lifestyle." These courses were adapted from a program started at Saddleback Community Church. They are called Christianity 101, 201, 301 and 401. The first is a basic investigation of Christianity and a look into responsible membership at Crossroads; the second is about discovering spiritual



maturity and provides practical guidance for developing a deeper spiritual life; the third is about spiritual gifts; and the fourth is about leadership.

Small groups known as E-groups (for encouragement) round out the discipleship program at Crossroads. These groups offer Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and food in a family setting. Friends bring friends, and when the group gets larger than fifteen or so they split to form new groups.

Worship at Crossroads is exciting in large part because of the way the church uses various mediums through which to tell the gospel in fresh, relevant ways. For example, a small drama that directly relates to the theme of the sermon is presented each worship service to express the truth of the gospel in a very concrete way. Briggs Cochran, the director of outreach, told about the lasting impact that one such drama had on his own life. A ladder was placed on the stage and a young man, dressed in a well-tailored suit, began to climb to the top. Meanwhile, his wife and children gathered at the bottom of the ladder urging him with tears to come down. The message was about "climbing the ladder of success." The drama raises the question and Schnieders' sermon attempts to give some answers. One may forget a message communicated as a proposition in a sermon, but remember it for weeks, months, and even years from the drama. This is just one example of how Crossroads presents

Christ in ways people today can find meaningful.

### Big Church Mentality

Crossroads has always been a big church, if not in reality, then in the minds of its founding pastor and leaders. They tote a big church mentality. Many churches consider two services only as last resort. They think of themselves as small but growing and gradually will make room for growth. Crossroads has always been a big church. Even when Crossroads was a small church, they thought, planned, and operated like a big church. They started that first Sunday with two identical services to accommodate the growth and to "communicate that we were a big church getting bigger, not a little church" (Schneiders).

Crossroads hired a second staff person in the first seven months showing again their big church mentality. The pastor and leadership of the church had researched the phenomenon known as the 200 barrier in church growth circles. According to the 200 barrier theory, many churches that experience rapid growth in the beginning, plateau at roughly 200 members. Many churches never overcome this barrier and achieve the status of a large church. The people of Crossroads were intentional about overcoming the 200 barrier. When asked to justify the need to hire another staff person so soon into the life of the new church, Schneiders said, "we wanted the opportunity to get through the two hundred barrier and the idea of being a large

church, included the idea that it was not going to be a one guy deal" (Schneiders).

This is a church that wants to grow! Unfortunately, not every church wants to grow. Some churches are very satisfied massaging their small membership and keeping things the same. They see growth negatively, as a threat to their tightly knit church "family." The feeling one gets at Crossroads is that this church expects to grow, plans to grow, and celebrates growth about the same way a young couple celebrates the arrival of their newborn baby. That is what real families do; they celebrate growth!

#### Quality Ministry

In my interview with the pastor of Crossroads, one word kept coming up repeatedly. The one word was quality. From the music, to the sermons, to the dramas, to the nursery, to the printed materials, to the youth program there is quality ministry at every level at Crossroads. These folks want quality for themselves and they want to show quality to visitors. Commenting on the music ministry, Schneiders said "what we tried to do was to model excellence . . . again, quality begets quality. We have tried in that whole area of ministry to do it really well. We will pull the plug on it before we do it poorly" (Schneiders).

Crossroads knows that it can't do everything well, so it doesn't try. But with quality as the goal, they focus on a few areas of ministry they know they can do well. They do

not claim to be a full service church equipped with every conceivable ministry. If people and resources are not available to produce a quality program, they don't attempt it. The result is that nearly everywhere one looks one sees quality programs.

Crossroads takes a page right out of the Total Quality Management (known as TQM) handbook. W. Edwards Deming, the father of the movement, placed great emphasis on continually improving products and services until they are the finest available. "Made in Japan" used to mean junk; now the whole world knows it is synonymous with quality. That is because the Japanese have become obsessed with Deming's concept of TQM. The movement is based on five key principles: (1) everybody in the organization can innovate, (2) teams of workers are self-managed, (3) a return to craftsmanship, (4) return of spirit--"it's not doing your best that corrupts the soul," and (5) build every product for just one person.

Each of these principles is evident in the organizational life at Crossroads. Quality programming, quality music, quality preaching, quality publications and quality facilities define the church's life. Crossroads is a TQM organization, emphasizing a team driven, action oriented commitment to total and not just partial quality. They are continually looking for ways to make improvements on every aspect of the ministry.

### Indigenous Music

If you like saxophones over organs you will like the style of worship at Crossroads. Most Sundays, you will get to enjoy the gentle sounds of an acoustic guitar, the sophisticated sounds of a flute and cello, the contemporary sounds of an electronic keyboard, and the upbeat sound of drums. The music at Crossroads fits the tastes and styles of people living in the 1990s. It is indigenous to a large segment of American culture that is not attracted to traditional church music and hymnody.

The importance of music should not be underestimated as a significant cause for the growth of Crossroads. Pastor Schneiders points to the importance of music:

We found that the people that we were trying to reach were predominantly in the 25-40 age group, so music was really important. I felt that we would touch people through their emotions before we would ever touch them in their heads (Schneiders).

Music is a major part of the Sunday morning worship experience, and again, it is first class quality. Many times musicians and singers are recruited from other churches so that there is always good music on Sunday morning. To be sure, it is not for everybody. Yet it is performed so professionally and sincerely, and in such good taste, it is hard to imagine anyone not appreciating the music at Crossroads.

### Empowered Visionary Leadership

It would be difficult to analyze the causes for growth

at Crossroads without at last focusing our attention on the dynamics of leadership. Leadership has been defined as, "The ability to take a dream/vision and turn it into reality with other people."

Empowered visionary leadership could be the single most important cause of growth at Crossroads. By empowered visionary leadership I mean leadership that takes risks, leadership that is persistent, leadership that is open to change, leadership that is innovative, leadership that is given not only the responsibility to lead, but the power and authority and resources to lead effectively.

Glen Schneiders, the pastor of Crossroads, is a visionary leader. Many characteristics described in Bennis and Nanus' ten characteristics of most effective leaders can be found in the person of Glen Schneiders (1-229). Schneiders possesses a strong, clear sense of purpose; he is persistent; he has self-knowledge, that is, he knows his strengths and skills and doesn't compromise by taking a job that doesn't fit his personality for reasons such as status, money or security; he is a perpetual learner (much of what he is doing at Crossroads was learned from Willow Creek Community Church); he loves his work; he can attract and energize people; he shows emotional maturity in human relations; he is a risk taker; he learns from failures; and he is responsive to the visions and aspirations of his people and to needs in the market place/community.

Truly, the vision for Crossroads was born in the heart and mind of this gifted pastor. Schneiders refers to himself as the "vision caster" at Crossroads, "I think in a new church in particular you (the pastor) have to set the pace and a lot of what the church is going to become is based on your vision for it" (Schneiders). He sums up his leadership style this way:

I think as I study my gifts, I do have the gift of leadership, I am a visionary and I don't quite understand that frankly, but I do know that people follow and I guess that is the bottom line. I have always been, I think, a team player. I have never been an authoritarian sort of person. I think that if we build a team everybody wins.  
(Schneiders)

The fact that the "people seem to want to empower the leadership" enables Schneiders and the rest of the staff to do their responsibilities as a team, under his leadership, without having to jump through many administrative hoops. One of the ten signs of a healthy organization, according to Hunter, is much trust in the organization rather than suspicion. This describes Crossroads. The spirit of mutual trust and cooperation at Crossroads between pastor, lay leaders and the congregation is a wonderful reality and a big part of their success.

Just as the congregation empowers their pastor with the authority to make final decisions and hold the staff accountable, he returns the favor by empowering the staff to fulfill their responsibilities as creatively as possible. This is consistent with another sign of healthy

organizations mentioned by Hunter, that the people with the data and the answers are the best equipped to inform the decision process (Spread Power 183). The staff, which now includes a program director, youth minister, and music minister is granted, by the Board of Elders, a great deal of freedom and authority to perform their ministries.

Schneiders encourages a team approach between church staff and ruling board, "We (the Board of Elders) are more and more trying to work as a team to just give general oversight to the church. It is real important that we try to empower the ministries to do the majority of the work. They have the authority to make the calls" (Schneiders).

If empowered visionary leadership begins with the pastor it doesn't end with him. One key to Crossroad's success is their emphasis on empowering lay people to do the work of ministry. Glen Schneiders is not "the" pastor, he is one of many pastors. Lay people are encouraged to reach out to hurting people and offer their unique talents to enrich body life. Schneiders does not necessarily make all hospital calls or visit people in crisis. He assures people that he is always available, but he dispels the myth that only trained pastors can be effective care givers. Thus, small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, lay leaders and other staff members share with Schneiders much of the pastoral care load that is traditionally reserved for ordained ministers. Furthermore, most new ministries are



initiated only when lay people sense a special call of God to perform God's work in a particular area of the church.

Other key ingredients of the leadership style at Crossroads are openness to change, creativity, innovation, and the willingness to take risks. Schneiders encourages his staff to "let the creative juices flow." Their use of drama during worship, various musical styles and instruments, special training sessions for prospective members and new believers, are all indicative of innovative thinking so prevalent at Crossroads.

Greg Chandler, who is currently the program director, was at one time a disc jockey at a local radio station. He didn't have the type of technical training in music that most churches would demand, but in the words of his pastor "he can lead people and he is very creative" (Schneiders). He is very adept at moving the service along so that there is no dead space in the service. People raised on 30-60 minute situation comedies interspersed with five minute commercials find the constant movement in Crossroad's service appealing. Greg capitalizes on this uniquely American cultural form, removing barriers that keep people from hearing and understanding the meaning of the Gospel.

It is not enough to possess vision, that is, a big picture of how the organization might look if it reached its full potential both now and in the future. Visionary leadership transforms dreams into reality; it takes risks.

It steps out in faith, not always knowing final outcomes and consequences but daring to experiment with the unknown, to at least try and see if a new idea will work. Pastor Schneiders shares one risk taken by Crossroads early in the ministry:

We didn't have the \$5,000.00 to do the telemarketing, we said God will provide, and He did. I am convinced that when we do things like that, we are giving God a chance to show us how great he really is. He is able to do immeasurably above. . . . It is when you take risks that are thought out, that are not fool hearted. We have all seen things like that where God has really responded. (Schneiders)

The church went ahead with the telemarketing anyway, and God responded by moving a woman who was called and told about the church to give \$20,000.00 to help get it started!

I left Crossroads convinced that the Willow Creek model would work in suburban Atlanta, but only if these six characteristics, undergirding the model, could be transferred and adapted to fit the target area where I felt God calling me to plant a new church. What follows, then, is largely a description of what happened as I set out to take what I had learned at Crossroads and start a new "seeker sensitive" model church in Atlanta, Georgia.

#### Research and Operational Questions

Research Question 1. What are the ministry strategies that contribute most to the growth and effectiveness of "seeker sensitive" churches?

Operational question 1. What does the literature report about ministry strategies of growing and effective new churches?

Operational question 2. What ministry strategies were observed by the researcher through the Pilot Study at Crossroads Christian Church?

Research Question 2. How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of each of the six ministry strategies identified by the author?

Operational question 3. How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of a Persistent Philosophy of Ministry?

#### Persistent Philosophy

The first of the six ministry strategies is a Persistent Philosophy of Ministry among the church's leadership, beginning first with the pastor and including both staff and lay leadership. The leadership is able to articulate what they believe about ministry, how it should be done in their case, and why they believe what they believe. The core leadership group does not deviate from this philosophy.

Operational question 4. How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of Relevant Preaching and Teaching?

### Relevant Preaching and Teaching

Relevant Preaching and Teaching refers to all of the areas of proclamation and education throughout the church's ministry. The sermons are topical in design, beginning with the felt needs of the people. The language is practical, contemporary, and emphasizes personal application.

Operational question 5. How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of a Big Church Mentality?

### Big Church Mentality

Big Church Mentality refers to the preferred future pictured by church leaders. These leaders believe that God will use them to build a large church. They never see themselves as a small church. Even from the beginning they think, plan, and perform their ministries like a large church with a multiple staff.

Operational question 6. How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of Quality Ministry?

### Quality Ministry

Quality Ministry reflects a commitment on the part of church leaders to give their best for the work of God's Kingdom. Evaluation and improvement are stressed and encouraged across the church. The commitment to quality ministry, however, is more than mere improvement of current ministries. It is a commitment to the transformation of

each ministry to ever increasing effectiveness and appropriateness in meeting the needs of people where they live today. The commitment to quality transcends the improvement of ministry tasks, focusing itself more on the people for whom those ministries are created.

Operational question 7. How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of Indigenous Music?

#### Indigenous Music

Indigenous Music refers to the style of music that is preferred by the people, in the area one is ministering to. At Whitewater Creek, the style of music preferred is "light rock" or "easy listening." The church, therefore, will style its music after the preferred tastes and styles of its people.

Operational question 8. How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of Empowered Visionary Leadership?

#### Empowered Visionary Leadership

Empowered Visionary Leadership is defined by the researcher as "leaders who have been given permission and authority to make decisions and initiate plans in accordance to personal and shared vision." The focus is on initiating the future of the organization, not maintaining the present, nor celebrating the achievements of the past.

Research Question 3. What ministry strategies besides the six identified by the researcher seemed to emerge as major contributors to the growth and effectiveness of the church plant in Atlanta?

Operational question 9. What do the participants at The Church at Whitewater Creek indicate about the importance of ministry strategies not identified by the researcher?

One of the major concerns of this study is to describe what happens when the six ministry strategies observed at Crossroads, and further established in the literature, are implemented in Atlanta, and to what degree these six strategies contributed to the growth and effectiveness of the new church. If, however, other factors unrelated to these six ministry strategies are observed to have actually contributed more to its growth and effectiveness, those factors will need to be fairly examined and included in the study. Admittedly, identifying and interpreting all of the possible ministry strategies contributing to the success of a new church is a difficult assignment.

The focus of the study is on six ministry strategies which are linked to research questions one and two. In general the study will focus on why certain ministry priorities were established, how they were implemented, and with what result (Yin 23).

Research Question 1.

Research question 1 is answered by operational

questions 1 and 2. The bulk of the data for operational question 2 is in the Review of Literature in Chapter 2, and also in Chapter 5 as the researcher evaluates the findings of the study against the existing body of literature. Operational question 2 is answered by the Pilot Study found in Chapter 3.

#### Research Question 2.

Research question 2 is answered by operational questions 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. Operational question 3 is answered by data received from questions 8 and 9 in the Systematic Interviews, as well as evaluation items a, b, and c under category number one of the Ministry Evaluation Form. Operational question 4 is answered by data received from questions 20, 21, 22 and 23 in the Systematic Interviews, as well as evaluation items a, b, c and d under category number two of the Ministry Evaluation Form. Operational question number 5 is answered by data received from questions 10 and 11 in the Systematic Interviews, as well as evaluation items a, b, and c under category number three of the Ministry Evaluation Form. Operational question 6 is answered by data received from questions 14 and 15 in the Systematic Interviews, as well as evaluation items a, b, c, d, e, f and g under category number four of the Ministry Evaluation Form. Operational question 7 is answered by data received from questions 16 and 17 in the Systematic Interviews, as well as evaluation items a and b under category number five

of the Ministry Evaluation Form. Operational question number 8 is answered by data received from questions 7 and 24 in the Systematic Interviews, as well as evaluation items a, b, c, and d under category number six of the Ministry Evaluation Form.

### Research Question 3.

Research question 3 is answered by operational question 9. Operational question 9 is obtained from data received from questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 18, and 19 in the Systematic Interviews as well as from any suggestions or remarks on the Ministry Evaluation Form.

Finally, data obtained from open-ended questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 18, and 19 in the Systematic Interviews as well as remarks on the Ministry Evaluation Form may confirm or deny the importance of several of the six ministry strategies identified by the researcher.

### Instrumentation and Data Collection

To gather data, the researcher used Systematic Interviews and Ministry Evaluation Forms. Below are the procedures followed to obtain the data from each instrument.

#### Systematic Interviews

Systematic, open-ended interviews (see Appendix A) were conducted with 20 people who were either members of the church, or who were enrolled in the membership orientation process. Nearly all of the persons interviewed were involved with the church during the entire first year. In



addition all staff personnel and lay ministry team coordinators were interviewed. The Systematic Interview questions were pre-tested on members of my Congregational Reflection Group. The eighteen months for which the data were collected began with the first public worship service and ended eighteen months from that time. The researcher personally conducted the interviews. All interviews were conducted sometime after the first year. Each interview instrument had questions and a place for the researcher to record answers. The researcher asked open-ended questions (with opportunity for follow-up) like, "What was it that first attracted you to this church?" "How important was leadership to your decision to join the church?"

#### Evaluation Forms

The Ministry Evaluation Forms were distributed to 65 regular attenders following a morning worship service on March 10, 1996. Of these, 32 people responded by filling out the form. The Ministry Evaluation Forms were pre-tested on members of my Congregational Reflection Group. Slight adjustments were made as a result of the pre-test. The researcher used the Ministry Evaluation Form (see Appendix B) to evaluate the presence of the six characteristics and the degree to which regular attenders perceived the six ministry strategies to have contributed to the growth and effectiveness of the new church.

### Direct Observation

The researcher made direct observations and recorded these as they occurred during the first year. For instance, the researcher observed why certain ministry priorities emerged, how they were implemented, and what were the positive or negative outcomes of those priorities. This data was recorded in an "Observation Notebook." In addition, the researcher observed and recorded worship, small group, profession of faith and membership figures as key indicators of church growth.

### Reliability and Validity

This case has clearly specified what constitutes "success" for a new church development project, and has designed the instruments specifically to explain the relationship between the six ministry strategies and growth in the church. Furthermore, each strategy has been operationalized, thus delimiting the scope of the study. The Ministry Evaluation form attempts to stay within these specified parameters of inquiry. Another way of protecting the validity of the study is to come at the problem using multiple sources of evidence, which is what this study does. Therefore, the reader should be able to tell if there is a possible relationship between the six ministry strategies and the growth and effectiveness of the church plant in Atlanta. Reliability would depend upon the subsequent researcher's ability to conduct the case in a new church

setting with similar cultural and contextual characteristics. Assuming these conditions were met, the study would likely generate similar conclusions.

### Data Analysis

The data for this research is derived from three sources. First, there are observations and assumptions drawn from the Pilot Study performed at Crossroads Christian Church. This data is organized by recurring themes into six ministry strategies which this author believes contributed significantly to the success of Crossroads. These strategies are: Persistent Philosophy of Ministry, Relevant Preaching and Teaching, Big Church Mentality, Quality Ministry, Indigenous Music, and Empowered Visionary Leadership.

The second source of data for this project was published studies and works related to church planting, church growth, and the "seeker sensitive" movement. As much as possible, this data is limited to writings dealing specifically with the six ministry strategies arrived at from the Pilot Study.

The third source of data is the responses from church participants to the Systematic Interviews and Evaluation Forms. The data from these instruments is organized around the six strategies outlined in the study. For the Systematic Interviews the researcher made lists of answers

and key terms most often mentioned. These are reported as either percentages or as actual numbers of participants who answered in a particular way. More significance is attached to answers most often mentioned by the participants.

The data from the Ministry Evaluation Forms are organized into tables showing the percentages of how the participants answered, as well as the mean score of each category on the surveys. Those categories with the highest mean score received the highest positive response from the participants. The researcher interpreted positive responses to these categories as an indication of their importance to the growth and effectiveness of the church plant. Overall conclusions about the data are made on the basis of whether or not the data support or reject the assumption that these six strategies contribute substantially to the success of new "seeker sensitive" churches. Furthermore, what is learned from the Systematic Interviews and Ministry Evaluation Forms is interpreted against what was learned in the review of the literature. Finally, my desire is that collectively, this data will lead to new discoveries that will help church planters effectively reach secular people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## CHAPTER 4

## Findings of the Study

The purpose of this chapter is to describe what occurred at The Church at Whitewater Creek when the six characteristics were emphasized in the planting phase, and to present the findings of the study in order to answer the research questions raised in Chapter 1. Research question number one is answered by the Review of Literature in Chapter 2, and by the Pilot Study in Chapter 3.

On February 5, 1995 The Church at Whitewater Creek in Atlanta, Georgia conducted its first Sunday morning service. Exactly 250 people attended the Grand Opening service, making this one of the largest openings for a new church in the history of the Free Methodist denomination. Of the 250 who attended, 75 comprised the core, which started with two families. The core developed over a period of eight months prior to the opening service. Another 10 were out of town family members of the church planter. This means that a total of 165 were new prospects. Most of these people came in response to three consecutive direct mail pieces mailed throughout Fayette County three weeks prior to the first service. The response rate of the direct mail campaign was fairly typical. Fifteen thousand pieces were sent, putting the response rate between 1% and 2%. The average for direct mail is between 1% and 5%.

One of the exciting occurrences at Whitewater Creek was the large number of previously unchurched people who attended the Grand Opening and who continue to attend the church. The church achieved its goal of targeting and reaching the unchurched. Based on informal surveys, approximately 60% of the people now attending come from backgrounds of either no previous faith involvement, or no church involvement for several years.

#### Membership Strength Indicators

The purpose of the following section is to identify the fact that The Church at Whitewater Creek qualifies as a growing and effective church. It is not a research question, however, the information is a critical factor in evaluating the effectiveness of the six ministry strategies.

Based on Hunter's membership strength indicators, from his book, To Spread the Power, every indication is that The Church at Whitewater is enjoying much early success (195).

(1) Active resident membership at the end of the first year stands at 33. At the time of this study there were another 37 people enrolled in the membership orientation process. This may seem low by the standards of some denominational traditions, but in Free Methodism there is an emphasis on high commitment for membership, therefore the numbers of actual members do not necessarily reflect the strength of the church. (2) Average morning worship attendance at the end of the first year is approximately 143. Easter

attendance in 1995 was 163. This was three months after the church started. Easter attendance for 1996 was 230, a significant increase in one year. Hunter identifies morning worship attendance as perhaps the most important indicator of a church's strength. Two hundred and four people are associated with the church and attend on a regular basis. (3) The church averaged 48 people in its small group discipleship ministry the first year. (4) There was an average of 37 lay people involved in various ministries throughout the week, both inside and outside the church's facilities. (5) There were 14 conversions during the first year.

#### Interviews

In addition to the 32 people who filled out the Ministry Evaluation Form, 20 people were interviewed by the researcher. Only persons who were currently members, or enrolled in the membership orientation process were selected for interviews. Generally the people interviewed were much more involved in the church than those who filled out the Ministry Evaluation Forms. Many of them had been with the church since the Grand Opening. The interviews were conducted by the researcher, who in this case, is also the church planter.

All of the participants interviewed were enormously positive about their new relationship with The Church at Whitewater Creek. They shared enthusiastically how the

church, its pastors, and its people had impacted their lives. Approximately 80% of those interviewed were not attending church at the time The Church at Whitewater Creek began. About half of these had some religious background and experience attending church. Four of the participants had virtually no faith involvement at all before coming to The Church at Whitewater Creek. Fifteen out of 20 participants interviewed first learned about the new church from the direct mail piece received at their homes which introduced the "style" of the new church and invited them to attend the Grand Opening. The following are their thoughts and expressions about the church which they now consider their church home.

#### Research Question 2

How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of each of the six ministry strategies identified by the author?

Relevant Preaching and Teaching. It seems clear that one of the most important ministry strategies of growing and effective church plants is Relevant Preaching and Teaching. When asked in question number 2, "What was it that first attracted you to this church?" the two most common answers were "the atmosphere" and the "messages." Over half of the participants pointed to the messages or sermons as a major attraction for them. Question number 20 asked, "What one or two words best describes the preaching at Whitewater Creek?"



The most commonly mentioned characteristic describing the sermons were their "relevance to every day life." Although many of them described the relevance factor with different terminology, again and again this factor surfaced as an important attraction for the participants. They described the preaching as "directly relevant," related to "everyday life," "contemporary," "practical," "to the point," and "straight forward." Another very attractive feature of the preaching for several of the participants was that it was "non-condemning." Two participants said they liked the fact that they were "talked to and not preached at." Others said the preaching of the sermon didn't try to impose "guilt trips" and that it was "non-judgmental." One participant said "The messages are messages that people need. They are encouraging versus condemning, but they are still challenging. It is not easy believism. It doesn't let people off the hook." Some other words used only once to describe the preaching were "thought provoking," "enlightening," "moving," and "inspiring."

Indigenous Music. Based on the research, another important ministry strategy of growing and effective church plants is Indigenous Music. Question number 16 asked, "How did the music influence your decision to join the church? Of the 20 participants, 6 said the music was important, but not the most important. One participant said, "I enjoy it, but that's not the reason why I came back." Two of the

participants actually rated the importance of the music with a percentage. One said "it was 15% important versus 70% for the sermon." The other said it was "20% percent" of the reason they joined the church. Four out of 20 said the music had a "very important" influence on their decision to join the church. About half of the people referred in one way or another to how much they enjoyed the music, showing for the most part that the music itself was not the primary reason for attending the church, but that it continued to be a source of real enjoyment for the people.

When asked if the participants thought "the contemporary style of music attracted people to the church?," 19 out of 20 said yes. The two most common words used by the participants to describe the contemporary music were "upbeat" and "uplifting." Each word appeared 4 times in the responses.

Several of the participants voiced negative feelings toward the more traditional style of music. Approximately half expressed negative feelings about "old fashioned" or "traditional" music. One person contrasted the contemporary music with the "same old run of the mill music from hundreds of years ago." The most common target of their criticism was the organ. Three people referred to "hymns" in a negative way.

Four of the participants associated the organ with feelings of "depression" or "sadness." They said the

traditional music "dragged along" and went "too long." One participant said, "I like the contemporary music. It's upbeat and uplifting, not like organ music. Organ music makes me feel sad. It drags. It puts me in a down mood." One participant summed up what many others said in a variety of ways, "I relate to the contemporary music. I enjoy it. Organ music is from a bygone era. We live in a contemporary world. The church music should be up to date, using instruments that are up to date, not old-fashioned." Another participant said, "Many people get turned off by churchy sounding hymns. They hear a hymn and they start looking for the door." Clearly, the contemporary style provided, for these people, a more exciting, upbeat feeling about their worship experience. It was music they could relate to and understand.

Quality Ministry. Another important ministry strategy substantiated by the study was Quality Ministry. Question number 14 asked, "Do you feel that The Church at Whitewater Creek is committed to quality?" Nearly all participants responded with an emphatic yes. They pointed to signs of quality in the sermons, music, drama, printed materials, advertisements, and age-level ministries. Quality was very important for 90% of respondents. Among the ways this was expressed was "one hundred percent important," "all important." One participant said, "I wouldn't be there if it wasn't quality." Another participant said he was

impressed by the fact that "Every Sunday was the same level of quality, it was always good." This same person said, "We could tell our children were getting quality teaching just by what they brought home each Sunday." One participant said, "The quality of the service and everything else made me feel like more people would stay. If the quality is not there people will come in and say this church is never going to amount to anything. If the quality is there they will look and say this church is going to be around for a while." Three people said that quality was nice to have, but that it didn't influence them that much. One person said, "Quality is necessary for me, but not sufficient. The church also needs to have a vision and heart for ministry. And this church does."

Empowered Visionary Leadership. One of the most significant findings of the study was how important the leadership of the pastor and staff was to the decision of people to unite with the church. The researcher has identified this ministry strategy as Empowered Visionary Leadership. Of the 20 people interviewed, all 20 said that the leadership of the pastor was very important to their decision to join the church. Some of the expressions included "very important," "one of the most important," "of the utmost importance." A total of 7 participants said in one way or another that they would not have come back if they didn't like the pastor and staff. One participant

said, "If you don't like the guy standing up there, you won't be back. If you (referring to the pastor) had sounded like a preacher one bit I would not have come back."

Several of the participants mentioned getting to know the pastor and staff on a personal level as primary motivations for attending the church. One participant said, "The pastor remembered my name and the associate pastor remembered the names of my teens and they made a significant impact on me." One participant said, "I was at a point that I could take or leave the church. We were real close to dropping out, but then I got to know the pastor and associate pastor through playing softball and that made the difference of us staying or leaving." Finally, one participant said "Without the vision and quality of the leadership, I wouldn't have had a reason to believe that this church could work."

Persistent Philosophy of Ministry. It seems clear that a Persistent Philosophy of Ministry is one of the most important ministry strategies for growing and effective "seeker sensitive" church plants. Question number 8 asked, "Can you explain in one or two sentences what the purpose of this church is?" Of the 20 participants, only three did not in some fashion or another repeat the essence of the church's mission statement. With remarkable consistency, the participants identified the target group of "unchurched" people as the focus of the church's purpose. In various ways they stated the church's purpose as, "church for the

unchurched," "to reach the unchurched," "to help the unchurched become followers of Jesus Christ," "teaching the unchurched or those who have given up on church," "church the unchurched," "reaching the unchurched and encouraging them to Christ-likeness."

Big Church Mentality. Of the six ministry strategies, Big Church Mentality appears to be the least significant strategy, at least from the perspective of the participants. The researcher will have more to say about the importance of this strategy from the perspective of the church planter in Chapter 5.

Several of the participants thought of a "big" church in negative terms. Question number 11 asked, "What advantages are there to attending a big church?" Two of the participants said "none." Of the 20 participants, 9 said the biggest advantage of a big church is "more resources." The most common resources identified were "more money," "more people," and "more programs." Five of the participants said that being "anonymous" or getting "lost in the crowd" was an advantage of the big church.

### Research Question 3.

What ministry strategies besides the six identified by the researcher seemed to emerge as major contributors to the growth and effectiveness of the church plant in Atlanta?

Several of the questions asked in the interviews provided data for answering Research Question 2. Interview

question number 3 asked, "What do you like most about the Church at Whitewater Creek?" Once again, many mentioned the "casual atmosphere" and the "relevance" of the messages, but many other significant findings emerged as well.

Approximately 30% of the participants talked enthusiastically about the qualities and character of the people who attended the church. For them, the friendliness of the people, their "authenticity" and their "warmth" was clearly what they liked most about the church. One participant echoed what many others mentioned briefly when he said, "All the people at the church seem to be looking for the same thing. We all have so much in common, we are all committed to the same things." In a similar statement, one participant said "Many of us are the same age searching for the same thing."

About 20% of the respondents said that a strong sense of "belonging" is what they liked most about the church. One participant said "I just felt like I belonged there." One participant said, "Upon first arriving at the church, I just felt at home. It was not so stuffy. I grew up in a very traditional Southern Baptist church where everybody was expected to wear a suit and tie."

Several of the participants mentioned the church's emphasis on "growing at your own pace" as very appealing to them. More than one participant felt "inadequate" or "intimidated" by church in general. One participant said,

"All the other churches I've been to made me feel inadequate. They always gave me a guilt trip about the way I was living. At this church I feel good and I can grow at my own pace." Another participant said, "This is the first time in my life that I am really learning about God. All of the other times I have had it forced on me. At Whitewater Creek we are learning about God in an encouraging and fun way."

The people came to The Church at Whitewater Creek for a variety of reasons. Question 4 asked, "What needs did you come to the church with?" The number one response to this question was a search for meaning. Eight people said they wanted a clearer understanding about God. One participant simply said, "I wanted to be educated about Christianity." These people were searching for the truth about God, about themselves, and about how it all works out in every day life. One participant expressed her feelings this way, "I hit thirty and I realized I had only been to church five times. I liken it to an eclipse. I was in the dark about religious things. I felt I was getting closer to death and I wanted to know what was on the other side." Another said, "My life needed to turn around. I was digging a deep hole for myself." Four people spoke of wanting to grow "closer to God."

The second most popular answer to this question centered around the family. Six people pointed to the need



to teach their children Christian values, as well as provide them with positive role models, as the biggest need they came to the church with. Three of these said they wanted to "strengthen" their family as a result of going to church.

### Research Question 3

What ministry strategies besides the six identified by the researcher seemed to emerge as major contributors to the growth and effectiveness of the church plant in Atlanta?

The researcher began with the assumption that the six characteristics above would be of utmost importance to the growth and effectiveness of a new "seeker sensitive" church plant. However, there was always the possibility that other unknown characteristics could emerge that were significant to the effectiveness of this church plant.

Perhaps the most significant of these was the emergence of the strategy of an emphasis on casualness. Slightly over 70% of those interviewed said that they were attracted to the casual atmosphere at the church. Many liked the idea that one could "come as you are" to church, referring to the church's informal dress code. The words "relaxed" and "casual" were used several times. A couple of people actually pointed out how much they liked the informal "coffee and donuts" time at the beginning of the service. One person commented that just "seeing the coffee and donuts made him relax and feel welcomed at the service." Of the participants interviewed, 12 of 20 said that the casual

dress code and informal atmosphere was a major attraction for them to unite with the church. There was not a specific category for this characteristic on the Ministry Evaluation Form, therefore there is no data to report from that instrument.

It is significant that 11 out of 20 people interviewed first learned about the church from the direct-mail campaign. Other church records indicate that approximately 60% of the people now attending Whitewater Creek came as a direct result of direct mail.

#### Ministry Evaluation Forms

Ministry Evaluation Forms were passed out on March 10, 1996 following the morning worship service. At the time the surveys were passed out, the church was approximately one year old. All regular attenders were invited to participate, excluding those who were selected for interviews. On this particular Sunday there were approximately 90 adults in the service. Of the 90 adults in the service, 32 people responded to fill out the survey. They were asked to circle the answer on the Ministry Evaluation Form that best represented their thoughts and feelings about the ministry of The Church at Whitewater Creek. They were also encouraged to make remarks on the Ministry Evaluation Forms about any facet of the ministry they cared to comment on. It took approximately 20 minutes for the participants to complete the Ministry Evaluation

Forms.

### Research Question 2

How important to the growth and effectiveness of The Church at Whitewater Creek was the implementation of each of the six ministry strategies identified by the author?

Table 1 compares by percentage the response to all six characteristics. The "N" stands for the total number of responses. For example, under Persistent Philosophy of Ministry on Table 1, 32 participants responded to three different items under this category for a total of 96.

It was discovered that 90% of all responses to the Ministry Evaluation Form were positive. After comparing the six ministry strategies it can be seen that the strongest positive feelings were focused on the characteristic of Quality Ministry. Over 70% of the participants strongly agreed to the statements concerning the quality of ministry at Whitewater Creek. This was followed by 67% for Persistent Philosophy of Ministry and 67% Indigenous Music. The least significant characteristic according to the survey was a Big Church Mentality.

Table 1  
Comparisons of All Six Characteristics

Category	N	S.D	D.	NA/D	A.	S.A	Mean
Persistent Phil. of Min.	96	0%	1%	2%	30%	67%	4.61
Relevant Preach. & Teach.	128	0%	1%	7%	32%	59%	4.48
Big Church Mentality	96	0%	8%	22%	2%	28%	3.77
Quality Ministry	224	0%	0%	6%	23%	71%	4.65
Indigenous Music	64	0%	5%	5%	25%	67%	4.60
Emp. Vis. Leadership	128	0%	0%	7%	32%	61%	4.51

Table 2 below shows by comparison the relative strength of each item under the characteristic Persistent Philosophy of Ministry. The people responded strongest for the item which read, "This church has a clear purpose for its existence." It can be seen below that 88% strongly agreed with this statement.

Table 2  
Persistent Philosophy of Ministry

Category	N	S.D	D.	NA/D	A.	S.A	Mean
Clear purpose	32	0%	0%	0%	12%	88%	4.88
Mission communicated	32	0%	0%	0%	41%	59%	4.59
Program rel.to mission	32	0%	3%	6%	37%	53%	4.37

One participant commented, "I think clearly the message and thrust of the Church's existence, to bring the "unchurched" or "disenchanted" back into the Church and closer to God is reinforced in every facet of the Church's program." Another made a similar comment when he wrote, "This church consistently reinforces its purpose with every program and topic."

Table 3 shows by comparison the relative strength of each item under the characteristic Relevant Preaching and Teaching. The item which read, "The preaching at this church relates to real-life situations" received a strongly agree response 94% of the time. This was the highest positive response to any item on the entire Ministry Evaluation Form. Over half of the participants (56%) strongly agreed that their lifestyle had changed as a result of the preaching ministry of the church. A total of 87% said their lifestyles had changed as a result of the preaching ministry of the church.

Table 3  
Relevant Preaching and Teaching

Category	N	S.D	D.	NA/D	A.	S.A	Mean
Relates to real-life	32	0%	0%	0%	6%	94%	4.94
Message aimed at me	32	0%	0%	22%	53%	28%	4.18
Learning about Christ	32	0%	3%	0%	38%	59%	4.53
Lifestyle has changed	32	3%	0%	6%	31%	56%	4.25

Several of the participants spoke of the sermons existentially, pointing to real, significant changes in their lives as a result of the church's ministry. They described their experiences with words like "My eyes were opened," "Changed my attitude," "My life is so much better," and "My life was saved through God's work in this church." One person commented, "It never ceases to amaze me that nearly every week the sermon or drama or music seems to speak directly to situations or concerns happening in my life!" Another encouraged the staff to, "Keep doing what you're doing, aiming messages on topics relevant to our lives today."

Table 4 shows by comparison the relative strength of each item under the characteristic Big Church Mentality. Of the six characteristics, Big Church Mentality appears to be the least significant to the participants. The lower scores may be due to the ambivalent feelings participants reflected

about big churches. Overall the most positive response came from the item which read, "This church thinks big." This item received a total positive response of 73%.

Table 4  
Big Church Mentality

Category	N	S.D	D.	NA/D	A.	S.A	Mean
Does big church things	32	0%	12%	22%	47%	13%	3.43
Adequate resources	32	0%	7%	26%	47%	20%	3.80
Thinks big	32	0%	7%	20%	30%	43%	4.09

Only 5 out of 32 participants made any further comments under the category Big Church Mentality. One person wrote, "I believe this church is as effective as a large church but, unlike some big churches, it has been able to stay on course with its mission and not get caught up in the bureaucracy of running an organization. That's one of the things I like best about this church." Another wrote, "While our church thinks big, I think it is much more personal than a big church."

Table 5 shows by comparison the relative strength of each item under the characteristic Quality Ministry. As mentioned above, Quality Ministry achieved the highest positive response rate among all six characteristics. None of the items under this category received a positive response lower than 90%. Preaching received the highest rating of those who strongly agreed (79%), followed closely

by music (77%) and the overall performance of the church staff (76%).

Table 5  
Quality Ministry

Category	N	S.D	D.	NA/D	A.	S.A	Mean
Music is high quality	32	0%	0%	3%	20%	77%	4.74
Preaching is high quality	32	0%	0%	4%	17%	79%	4.75
Children's and youth	32	0%	0%	10%	33%	57%	4.47
Written publications	32	0%	0%	0%	33%	67%	4.67
Church staff	32	0%	0%	7%	17%	76%	4.69
Quality as whole	32	0%	0%	0%	27%	73%	4.73
Drama is high quality	32	0%	0%	10%	29%	61%	4.51

Table 6 shows by comparison the relative strength of each item under the characteristic Indigenous Music. The most notable finding is that 87% of the participants favored the contemporary style of music. A large percentage (70%) strongly favored the contemporary style of music.

Table 6  
Indigenous Music

Category	N	S.D	D.	NA/D	A.	S.A	Mean
Style easy to relate to	32	0%	0%	0%	37%	63%	4.63
Prefer contemporary	32	0%	0%	13%	17%	70%	4.57



Out of 32 participants, 8 made comments about the music. The terms used to describe the music most often were "uplifting" and "inspiring." One person wrote, "I think the contemporary style of music is much more likely to inspire people and reach and uplift them." A couple of people commented that they would like to sing some of the older traditional favorites occasionally.

Table 7 shows by comparison the relative strength of each item under the characteristic Empowered Visionary Leadership. The item which read, "The staff at Whitewater Creek encourages a team approach" received the highest rating. A total of 77% strongly agreed with this statement. Another 20% agreed, giving this item a 97% positive rating. Following closely behind was the perception of the pastor as a visionary leader. A total of 73% strongly agreed that the pastor was a visionary leader.

Table 7

## Empowered Visionary Leadership

Category	N	S.D	D.	NA/D	A.	S.A	Mean
Pastor visionary leader	32	0%	0%	3%	23%	73%	4.66
Leaders supported	32	0%	0%	10%	36%	53%	4.39
Lay involvement	32	0%	0%	17%	40%	43%	4.26
Team approach	32	0%	0%	3%	20%	77%	4.74

At the end of the Ministry Evaluation Form 11 of the 32 participants made general comments about the way the church had impacted their lives. One person said, "If it wasn't for this church, I probably wouldn't even be going. I feel more relaxed being around everybody, and don't feel pressured for what things I don't know about God. Thank you very much for everything." Here are a few comments from some others: "I love this church! It is the most family oriented I have ever attended and one of the most friendly and effective at getting through to my family members." "I have a long way to go but I finally feel like I'm on the right track to Christ." "This church is the best thing that has come into my life. I especially enjoy each and every sermon. I was raised in a very traditional Catholic lifestyle and I can say, the six months at The Church at Whitewater Creek have given me more spiritual guidance than a lifetime of church and school in Catholicism."

## CHAPTER 5

## Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate and interpret the findings of this study, to reflect theologically on its significance, to evaluate what has been learned in the field over against what has been written, and finally, to discuss the study's limitations along with its practical applications for church planting.

Summary of Major Findings

Perhaps the most significant finding in this study is the fact that it adds to the existing body evidence that church planting remains the single most highly effective means of reaching the unchurched with the life transforming message of Jesus Christ. Although conversions are difficult to define, particularly with regard to the actual point of time when the person receives the Holy Spirit and is made a true believer, The Church at Whitewater Creek witnessed 15 "genuine" conversions in its first year. Many of these reflected dramatic changes in the lives of the members, including freedom from drug and alcohol addictions, reconciled marriages, and emotional healings.

The interviews revealed what the participants were looking for in a church, what they were most attracted to, and why they came back. The researcher discovered that the main reason people came to the new church was to seek answers to their questions about the meaning of life, to

find God, and to strengthen their life with meaningful others, which for most, meant their immediate family. This is one reason why the majority of the participants pointed to the relevance of the message or sermon to be the most important factor in their search for meaning, as well as their search for a church. They felt that Whitewater Creek was different enough that it could possibly speak to their point of need.

Interestingly, these participants did not separate the message from the messengers. They spoke often about the personal qualities of the pastor and staff, their sincerity, honesty, integrity, likability and approachability. The presence of these qualities significantly influenced the way they perceived the validity, relevance, and applicability of the message.

One of the primary aims of the study was to determine the importance of the six characteristics of Persistent Philosophy of Ministry, Relevant Preaching and Teaching, Quality Ministry, Indigenous Music, Big Church Mentality, and Empowered Visionary Leadership, to the growth and effectiveness of this new church. The fact that each characteristic, except Big Church Mentality, received a positive response rate above 90%, shows that these six areas proved to be vital to the growth and effectiveness of this church.

Looking at the percentages, 71% strongly agreed that the ministry at Whitewater Creek was high quality, 67% strongly agreed that it had a persistent philosophy of Ministry, 59% strongly agreed that its preaching and teaching was relevant, and 67% strongly agreed that the church was led by Empowered Visionary Leadership.

#### Evaluation and Interpretation of the Data

The six characteristics focused on in this study may not explain fully the growth at Whitewater Creek, but they are a good place to begin evaluating what Whitewater Creek did intentionally to cause growth and vitality. So then, we begin by asking the question, "What is going on here?" and "Why is it significant?"

When the new church project began, the church planter emphasized the six characteristics in the design and implementation of ministry priorities. For instance, from the beginning the church planter and core leaders formulated a Persistent Philosophy of Ministry, one of the six characteristics. First, we articulated what we believed about ministry: our values, our beliefs, our preferred style, and our vision of our preferred future. Second, we established how ministry would be accomplished in our church: our strategy, our program priorities, and the allocation of our resources. And thirdly, we discussed why we believed what we believed. Out of this we developed our Mission Statement which reads, "The Church at Whitewater

Creek is a contemporary ministry called to encourage seekers to become fully committed followers of Jesus Christ." Along with the Mission Statement we also developed statements of beliefs, values, and ministry strategy. The Mission Statement is what God is calling us to do. It is the task at hand. The other statements reflect our vision for the church. If the mission is what God is calling us to do, the vision is what God is calling us to become—a biblically functioning community.

Based on the data from this study, one of the strengths of Whitewater Creek is a clearly defined mission of where the church is headed and a vision of what God is calling it to become. As mentioned above, 18 of 20 people interviewed were able to sum up the mission of the church in one sentence or less. They not only were able to identify the general mission of making disciples for Christ, but they consistently identified the target audience as the "unchurched." Although there were times during the first year when small groups of people in the church challenged our mission and values, the core leadership did not deviate from our philosophy of ministry.

The significance of the participants being able to restate the Mission Statement should not be underestimated. When one of the persons interviewed was asked, "Why do you think this church is growing?" he replied, "Because it is meeting the needs of the people it was meant to reach. This

church has a focused idea of whom to reach and how to reach them."

One of the saddest features of many dying and ineffective churches is their lack of a unified mission and understanding of what God is calling the church to do (mission) and become (vision). Scores of churches do not know the basic reason for their existence. They are like a basketball team playing all over the court, but never running the offense as a team toward the goal. They mistake activities, social interaction, organization structures, programs and even "worship" for God's mission to transform individuals in society through the redemptive power of faith in Jesus Christ. This author could not agree more with Dr. Hunter's argument in his book, How to Reach Secular People, that our greatest priority should be to raise up thousands of intentional missionary congregations, not content to "merely nurture and counsel the diminishing ranks of the faithful" (35). According to Hunter, these would be new churches "intentionally" planted to reach and speak to the needs of secular people.

Whitewater Creek, as Hunter suggests, is a "church on a mission" and that is one strong reason for its success. Its pastor and leaders have clearly and consistently communicated the church's mission and vision through every facet of its ministry. This is evidenced by the fact that so many people in the church could articulate it themselves

when asked to do so.

Of all the ministry strategies, none were more important to the participants than Relevant Preaching and Teaching. When participants were asked to respond to the statement, "The preaching at this church often relates to real-life situations," an astounding 94% strongly agreed. This statement of the relevance of the preaching received the highest rating of any category on the Ministry Evaluation Form. The second highest positive response was to the statement, "The preaching at this church is high quality." The data shows that 79% of the people strongly agreed with this statement.

The interviews were just as conclusive about the importance of quality preaching aimed at people's real-life situations. The most frequent comment focused on the fact that the weekly messages dealt with issues and subjects people were dealing with in everyday life.

The messages at Whitewater Creek are topical in design, beginning with the felt needs of the people. The language is simple, practical, contemporary, and heavy on personal application. The church feels that if it can meet secular people at their point of felt need, it can lead them to hear the Gospel as it speaks to other more significant needs such as salvation and sanctification. The truth is, the discerning preacher recognizes that many of the deeper core themes of the Gospel such as salvation, sanctification,



holiness, consecration, forgiveness, and worship intersect and inform the issues of family relationships, raising kids, jobs, and the search for meaning and purpose that people are dealing with every day. From the perspective of the researcher, the approach of meeting felt needs first is consistent with Jesus's own style of ministry. As Wright points out, Jesus often "used the people's needs and their questions as a starting point for his sermons" (Wright 101). As long as the topics chosen are topics God speaks to in the Bible, and as long as the meaning of the message is thoroughly biblical, there is no reason not to preach topically in the areas of felt need. In any event, it is difficult to argue with the fact that this style of preaching has led to scores of "genuine" conversions and lifestyle changes in the lives of the hearers. The fruit of the Holy Spirit present in new believers is all the evidence required to show that God is using Whitewater Creek's style of communicating the Gospel to expand His kingdom.

From a purely church growth standpoint, this study concludes, with many Church Growth authors, that the single most effective way of increasing growth is through improving the quality of the preaching. As a part of improving the preaching, the pastor should make relevance and application the number one criterion of effective preaching. Lyle E. Schaller, in his book, 44 Steps Up Off the Plateau, draws a similar conclusion. He writes:

When asked why they returned the following Sunday, most first time visitors give a response that can be placed in one of two categories. The younger the visitors, the more likely they will emphasize how that first experience spoke to their religious needs. As they elaborate on this theme, they usually begin with the sermon. Overlapping this set of explanations is a second group of responses that can be summarized under the umbrella of high quality. Again, the quality of the preaching, if that reflects reality, usually is placed at the top of the list of reasons for coming back a second or third time. (49)

Closely related to the significance of quality preaching is the overall leadership role of the church planter. The researcher has referred to this leadership under the ministry strategy of Empowered Visionary Leadership. The list of Church Growth authors who identify the leadership of the church planter as the single most important factor determining its success is extensive. Schaller, Wagner, Compton and Sallee form just a partial list of experts in the field who write about this important characteristic. Much of the data from this study bears out their contention that the church planter plays the key role concerning the success of the new church. The data shows that 73% strongly agreed with the statement, "The pastor is a visionary leader." A total of 96% of the participants responded positively to this statement. Several participants said, "they would not have returned" or would not continue to associate with the church if they did not "relate" to or have "confidence" in the church planter. People look for and respond to initiating leadership. In

the case of Whitewater Creek, they affirmed the leadership of the church planter, as well as other staff. They consistently pointed out the staff's personal and professional qualities, their caring, approachability, like-mindedness, sensitivity, honesty, integrity, and their team approach to ministry as reasons for their attraction to the church.

The data also showed the importance of the ministry strategy of Indigenous Music for reaching secular people with the timeless message of Christianity. There was a strong preference for a contemporary style of music among the participants. In no way should it be construed that this study is making a value statement on the use of traditional versus contemporary music in the church. What it does show, however, is that there are substantial numbers of secular people who possess no memory of traditional hymnology or styles and therefore do not value it in the same way a person who grew up in the church singing the "old favorites" do. The data in this study showed again and again that secular people prefer a style of music similar to the one they listen to every day on the radio. In the case of Whitewater Creek the preferred style was "light rock."

The majority of the people at Whitewater Creek who came out of a secular background consistently associated "organ music" and "church hymns" as "old fashioned," "depressing," "boring," and "out of date." On the other hand, they could

"relate" to the band which included key-boards, drums, guitars, and saxophones. This is an oversimplification, but this study concludes that traditional church music tends to reach traditional church people; contemporary music tends to reach secular people who have had limited experience in the church.

Of the six ministry strategies, Big Church Mentality appeared to be the least important from the standpoint of the participants. The researcher believes that part of this was due to the fact that many were unclear about the meaning of the phrase Big Church Mentality. Clearly, the participants conveyed mixed feelings about the advantages of attending a large church. Some believed that big churches tend to be cold and impersonal. Others liked the benefits of larger staffs, more people, and more programs to minister to the diverse needs of their families. The researcher, however, maintains that it is critical for the church planter and staff to maintain a big church mentality if their desire is to establish a growing congregation. What the researcher means by this is that even from the beginning, church leaders think, plan, and perform their ministries like a large church.

One of the most effective ways to get a church beyond the "single cell" is to never allow it to be a single cell in the first place. Many church planters make the mistake of rushing the start of the first service. They begin with

20 or 30 people, hoping to grow and multiply. When new people do visit the church, they get the impression that this is a small church, and many will not return for that reason. A better strategy would be for the planter to spend six to eight months developing the core, planning a top-rate service, training ministry team leaders, and developing an excellent marketing campaign. The church does not begin to officially "worship" until it can reasonably expect to draw 200 or more people on the first service. This way the church never has an opportunity to see itself as a small church hoping to get larger. The idea is to "start big" if you want to be a big church.

One of the unexpected findings the researcher observed was the participants' strong attraction to the church's emphasis on "casualness." In fact, the response to this feature of the church was so strong, the researcher would make it the "seventh" ministry strategy of growing and effective seeker sensitive church plants.

The trend in American society, particularly the corporate culture, toward casual dress may partly explain why people seem to be so attracted to this feature in the church. One current example is the new casual dress code implemented at Ford Motor Company as part of their 2000 Revitalization program. Ford employees in white collar offices at their corporate center in Dearborn Michigan were recently given permission to not wear "coat and ties" during

the regular work week. This seems to be a trend in other places in the market-place as well. Reacting, perhaps, to the indulgences of the 1980's, people seem to be yearning for more "authentic" and less "pretentious" relationships at work, at home, and now even at church. Further studies on this trend in society and the church could inform our understanding on how to best reach secular people.

The people seemed to identify the "come as you are" dress code with the church's willingness to accept them "just as they are." When asked, "If you invited a friend to The Church at Whitewater Creek, why would you tell him or her to come?" many said because the church would "welcome" their visitors, or they would allow them to "move at their own pace," or they would not "embarrass" them. One participant liked the fact that he could "come to church and remain anonymous and not be attacked by glad hand happy faces!" Clearly, the sense that the church intentionally created a relaxing, low pressure environment "inviting" to people turned off to more pretentious churches was a strong factor in their willingness to invite their unchurched friends. In the interviews, participants often followed statements about the casual dress code with descriptive words about the church such as: "authentic," "from the heart," and "down to earth." For them, the casual dress code, and the informal atmosphere, punctuated by the coffee and donuts before the service, made an important statement

about the church's friendliness and openness to outsiders.

If an Emphasis on Casualness has emerged as the "seventh ministry strategy" of growing "seeker sensitive" church plants, then an Effective Marketing Plan would be included by the researcher as the "eighth" essential ministry strategy. The results of the marketing plan at Whitewater Creek were enormous. The fact is over half of the 200 people who now attend the church first attended as a direct result of the direct mail campaign. The reason the Grand Opening was hugely successful (250 in attendance) can largely be attributed to the mail campaign. Three consecutive mailings were sent to over 15,000 residents introducing the unique features of the church, describing how the new church could uniquely fulfill their needs, and inviting people to attend. In the Fall of the first year we repeated the direct mail campaign at our Fall Opening with similar results. The average attendance for the summer was 100. For the Fall Opening, as a result of the mail campaign, we had 200 in attendance. The average worship attendance for the Fall jumped up to 145. The fact is our attendance would not be half of what it is today without an effective marketing plan.

Other writers point to the importance of marketing for churches. George Barna, in his book, Marketing the Church, boldly stated "The evangelical church in America is losing the battle to effectively bring Jesus Christ into the lives

of the unsaved population" (21). He backs this claim up with hard data. The fact is that since 1980 there has been no growth in the proportion of the adult population that can be classified as "born again" Christians (23). Barna goes on to offer an analysis of the problem. He writes:

My contention, based on careful study of data and the activities of American churches, is that the major problem plaguing the Church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become a marketing-driven environment. (23)

Based on the positive outcomes of Whitewater Creek's marketing plan, it would be wise for the church planter not to rely solely on "word of mouth" to get the word out about a church, especially a new church. This seems to be saying the obvious, but many people in the church, including pastors shy away from the use of an aggressive, intelligent, quality driven marketing plan. They think of it as "unspiritual" or "of the world," focusing on the bottom line of numerical success. But as Barna has correctly pointed out, the quality of ministry and quantity of ministry are often interrelated (17). This author agrees with Barna that God wants quantity and quality. Second Peter 3:8 says, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." If a church is in a growing community and there are hundreds and even thousands of unbelievers in that community not attending church, the church ought to get busy thinking about ways to grow



numerically, getting the Gospel out to as many people as possible. This is primarily what Barna means by a marketing orientation. He writes:

For now, think of marketing as the activities that allow you, as a church, to identify and understand people's needs, to identify your resources and capabilities, and to engage in a course of action that will enable you to use your resources and capabilities to satisfy the needs of the people to whom you wish to minister. Marketing is the process by which you seek to apply your product to the desires of the target population. (23)

On the other hand Barna says, "Any church growth strategy that is geared to increasing the number of people without emphasizing the necessity of commitment to Jesus Christ is working in opposition to scriptural command" (17).

The Church at Whitewater Creek has taken what the author calls a "twin towers" approach to marketing. We encourage our people to "build bridges" with their unchurched friends, family members, neighbors, and co-workers, and invite them to our seeker service to hear the Gospel. They are truly the best marketers of the Church at Whitewater Creek. But we also rely heavily on direct mail to communicate to the community as a whole that The Church at Whitewater Creek understands their needs, questions, and sensitivities and want to respond positively to them in God's love and grace.

Beyond these six vital ministry strategies, there is a broader concept, which like a thread running through a string of beads, holds the six strategies together in a

comprehensive whole. It is out of this broader concept that these six strategies are born and are continually given shape. This concept, the author believes, is the hidden, driving force behind the effectiveness and growth of "seeker sensitive" church plants. I am speaking of the concept of paradigm shifts.

The buzz word in the marketplace today is paradigm shift. A paradigm is "a grid of values and rules through which we interpret and understand our life" (Arn and Arn 1). It is the lens through which we understand and operate our lives. Paradigms, according to Win and Charles Arn, "are why we do things and how we believe things should be done." Time magazine (Jan. 14, 1991) at the start of this decade ran an essay on paradigms and observed:

The world, with a surreal, decisive crispness, has been sorting itself into categories of old paradigms and new paradigms. The 1990's have become a transforming boundary between one age and another, between a scheme of things that is disintegrating and another that is taking shape. A millennium is coming, a cosmic divide. The 20th century is an almost extinct volcano; the 21st is an embryo. (Arn and Arn 1)

What makes "seeker sensitive" church plants like The Church at Whitewater Creek effective and growing is their openness to new paradigms for interpreting Christian life and living out that life in a new day. As Win Arn and Charles Arn have said, "While new paradigms may not automatically cause the church to become effective, most effective churches today are functioning on the basis of new

paradigms for a new day" (Arn and Arn 9).

Whitewater Creek is letting go of old paradigms and adopting new ones to make the church relevant to people in the 90's and beyond. For them, the truths in the Bible never change, but the way in which those truths are learned, celebrated, passed on to friends and family, and applied to life must change with the times, otherwise the message, though always relevant, becomes stale and outdated.

#### Limitations of the Study

This study has followed the research methodology of a single case study. The primary goal has been to describe what would happen if the six characteristics, derived primarily from the "seeker sensitive" movement, were implemented in a church plant in suburban Atlanta. In addition, the researcher hoped to discover other emerging characteristics that contributed to the effectiveness of this new church.

In one sense the data from this study is "skewed" toward a positive response. The people would simply not return to the church if they didn't like the emphasis and priorities of the church's leadership. The fact that they did return and continue to find the church meaningful predisposes them to a favorable view of the church. This fact, however, tells us among other things, that there is a sizable group of people in society that will respond to these emphasizes and priorities. In this light, the data,

though limited, legitimizes the value of the study for churches intent on reaching out to this population.

The findings of the study are not meant to be generalized to other new church plants. There are multiple "contextual" factors and other variables that influence the effectiveness and growth of new churches outside the scope of this study. However, it can still be maintained that the discoveries from this study can add immensely to the existing knowledge of why we should start new churches, and how these new churches can effectively reach the unchurched for Jesus Christ.

#### Practical Applications of the Study

One possible application of this study would be to use the six characteristics, and possibly a couple more, as the strategic framework for starting a new "seeker sensitive" church. The church planter could formulate and implement ministry and program initiatives around these six or eight characteristics, adapting them to the particular context of his or her target area. These six or eight characteristics could then be used as a "checklist" for establishing and evaluating ministry priorities, decisions, plans, allocation of resources, and organizational structures. To the degree that the planter was successful in duplicating each of these characteristics in his or her own context, there could be a reasonable expectation of effectiveness and growth.

Each of the six characteristics must be adapted to the

particular and often unique contexts of other churches. Not every church will want to run out and exchange their old organ for a new set of drums and a saxophone, but every church should be looking for ways to make music an indigenous mouthpiece for the Gospel. Not every church will have a visionary pastor, but every church can work hard at developing the leaders they do have. Peter Drucker, the management expert, has said: "there will always be a shortage of great leaders, the challenge is for the organization to achieve great things with the leaders that they have" (Hunter Class Notes).

#### Conclusion

Churches that want to grow can learn much from the principles espoused and practiced in the "seeker sensitive" movement. The six characteristics in this study are largely derived from this movement. The data shows that in the case of The Church at Whitewater Creek they are significant contributors to the church's growth and effectiveness. The implication is that these six characteristics touch secular people in areas where they have strong feelings and preferences. Because of the documented effectiveness and growth of this new church, it can be reasonably assumed that the implementation of these six characteristics, as well as a couple of others mentioned by the researcher, can directly contribute to the success of other new church plants.

The alternative is a church that continues to appeal to

and satisfy the desires and expectations of the "status quo." If the church continues on this well worn path, the real losers are millions of secular people who will continue to feel shut out by a church that refuses to speak their language, play their music, deal with issues that are important to them, and accept them as they are in all their imperfections.

Paradigm shifts are occurring more rapidly today than ever before. It is a new day. The 21st century is on the door steps of our lives. Tried and true methods in industry, politics, and social institutions no longer hold their appeal.

The church, of all institutions, should be on the cutting edge of what people are thinking, how they prefer to get things done, and where they are searching for meaning and truth. Her message is always about change, new life, and optimism for the future. Instead we are known for clinging to old sanctified forms of thinking and doing. As documented earlier in this study, the fallout from this type of attitude is that many of our churches are not growing, and several denominations are in serious decline.

If the message of God in Christ is for all people in all times and in all places then we must prove it by making it available to them in ways they can understand it, and apply it to their daily lives. If Jesus showed anything by coming to earth as a man, he showed that God wants to relate

to people in their own world through their own grid of values and understanding. His model of incarnational ministry should serve as the model for the church as we seek to continue to make concrete His mission in the world. This is the mission He left to the church. This is the mission that the people of Whitewater Creek are fulfilling gladly with great joy and that is why they are effective at reaching secular people and expanding the Kingdom of God!

**APPENDIX A**

**Systematic Interviews**

Interviewer's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Person Interviewed \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Questions

1. How did you first hear about The Church at Whitewater Creek?
  
2. What was it that first attracted you to this church?
  
3. What do you like the most about the Church at Whitewater Creek?
  
4. What needs did you come to the church with?
  
5. What program or ministry in the church specifically addressed your needs or the needs of your family?



6. Why do you think this church is growing?
  
7. How important was the leadership of the staff to your decision to join this church?
  
8. Can you explain in one or two sentences what the purpose of this church is?
  
9. What visible signs are there that the staff and other church leaders are working together toward a common purpose?
  
10. In what ways does this church demonstrate a big church mentality?
  
11. What advantages are there to attending a big church?
  
12. If you invited a friend to The Church At Whitewater Creek, why would you tell him or her to come?

13. What suggestions do you have for how others like yourself could be reached by The Church At Whitewater Creek?
  
14. Do you feel that The Church at Whitewater Creek is committed to quality? What have you noticed at Whitewater Creek that shows we're committed to quality?
  
15. How important was quality ministry and programs in your decision to join Whitewater Creek?
  
16. How did the music influence your decision to join the church?
  
17. Do you think the contemporary style of music attracts people to this church? Why?
  
18. What one thing would you suggest The Church At Whitewater Creek do to improve its ministry to the community?

19. How did advertising influence your involvement with the church?
  
20. What one or two words best describes the preaching at The Church at Whitewater Creek?
  
21. Does it meet the every day needs of people like yourself? In what ways?
  
22. What one or two words do you think best describes the teaching ministries of the church like Discovery classes and small groups?
  
23. Does the teaching ministry meet the every day needs of people like yourself? In what ways?
  
24. Do you think the people of the church support the leadership of the pastor, staff, and ministry team leaders? How are they supported?

**APPENDIX B**

**Ministry Evaluation Form**

Attender's name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions: Circle the appropriate number to answer each question listed below. Please include suggestions/remarks in the space provided whenever possible.

Evaluation

**1. Persistent Philosophy of Ministry**

a. This church has a clear purpose for its existence.

Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree Or Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>
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b. The church's mission has been clearly and consistently communicated to the congregation.

Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree Or Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>
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c. Each program in the church is related to the larger mission as its reason for existence.

Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree Or Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>
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Suggestions/Remarks

## 2. Relevant Preaching and Teaching

a. The preaching at this church often relates to real-life situations.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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b. I often feel the message is aimed at me directly.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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c. I am learning about Christ and His claims on my life.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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d. Parts of my lifestyle have changed as a result of the teaching ministry of this church.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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Suggestions/Remarks

## 3. Big Church Mentality

a. This church does many of the things a big church would do.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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b. There are adequate resources at this church.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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c. This church thinks big.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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Suggestions/Remarks

#### 4. Quality Ministry

a. The music at this church is high quality.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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b. The preaching at this church is high quality.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
---------------------------	---------------	-----------------------------------	------------	------------------------

c. The children and youth ministry at this church is high quality.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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d. The written publications such as letters from staff, newspaper advertisements, and church brochures are high quality.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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e. The overall performance of the church staff is excellent.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neither Agree Or Disagree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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f. As a whole, this church is committed to quality ministry at every level.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

g. The drama ministry at this church is high quality.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Suggestions/Remarks

**5. Indigenous Music**

a. The style of music at Whitewater Creek is easy to relate to.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

b. The contemporary style of music is preferable to the more traditional style.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Suggestions/Remarks

**6. Empowered Visionary Leadership**

a. The pastor is a visionary leader.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

b. The pastor, staff and ministry leaders at Whitewater Creek are supported by the congregation.

Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree Or Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>
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c. Lay people are encouraged to get involved in doing ministry in the church.

Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree Or Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>
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d. The staff at Whitewater Creek encourage a team approach.

Strongly Disagree <b>1</b>	Disagree <b>2</b>	Neither Agree Or Disagree <b>3</b>	Agree <b>4</b>	Strongly Agree <b>5</b>
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Suggestions/Remarks



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