



Viral Churches

HELPING CHURCH PLANTERS
BECOME MOVEMENT MAKERS

Foreword by Rick Warren

ED STETZER + WARREN BIRD

Praise for *Viral Churches*

“God has given our church the vision to see one thousand churches planted in the next forty years. This book is the book that tells us how to do it. This book stoked the fires in my heart to see a massive, game-changing church planting movement in North America. I cannot recommend it enough!”

—J.D. Greear, lead pastor, the Summit Church, Durham, N.C.,
<http://www.jdgreear.com>

“Any denominational leader or church involved in or considering new church work will benefit from *Viral Churches*. Warren and Ed nailed it with this one! Too often research is a look in the rear view mirror. *Viral Churches* creates a solid bridge from the past to the future with actionable findings.”

—Todd Wilson, director, Exponential Network,
www.exponentialnetwork.com

“Denominational leaders desiring to understand the blessings and challenges of multiplication strategies need look no further than *Viral Churches*. Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird have created a comprehensive primer. I’m using this book as an indispensable tool to help me make the most of what’s next!”

—Steve Pike, director, Assemblies of God
Church Multiplication Network, www.cmn.ag.org

“Are we on the edge of a second great multiplication of Christian churches in North America? *Viral Churches* offers an assessment of what it will take and points to many hopeful signs. With research results and ministry observations Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird encourage the shift that will make such a movement reality, from a church-planting commitment to a church-multiplication DNA. This book is for every church in America: ‘It takes all types of training resources to recruit all types of planters so that the world can have all types of churches to reach all types of people!’”

—The Most Rev. Robert Duncan, Archbishop of the
Anglican Church in North America



Viral Churches

**Helping Church Planters Become
Movement Makers**

Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird

A LEADERSHIP ✘ NETWORK PUBLICATION

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ABOUT LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Leadership Network, an initiative of OneHundredX, exists to honor God and serve others by investing in innovative church leaders who impact the Kingdom immeasurably.

Since 1984, Leadership Network has brought together exceptional leaders, who are focused on similar ministry initiatives, to accelerate their impact. The ensuing collaboration—often across denominational lines—provides a strong base from which individual leaders can better analyze and refine their individual strategies. Creating an environment for collaborative discovery, dialogue, and sharing encourages leaders to extend their own innovations and ideas. Leadership Network further enhances this process through the development and distribution of highly targeted ministry tools and resources—including video, podcasts, concept papers, special research reports, e-publications, and books like this one.

With Leadership Network’s assistance, today’s Christian leaders are energized, equipped, inspired—and better able to multiply their own dynamic Kingdom-building initiatives.

In 1996 Leadership Network partnered with Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, to develop a series of creative books that would provide thought leadership to innovators in church ministry. Leadership Network Publications present thoroughly researched and innovative concepts from leading thinkers, practitioners, and pioneering churches. The series collectively draws from a wide range of disciplines, with individual titles providing perspective on one or more of five primary areas:

- Enabling effective leadership
- Encouraging life-changing service
- Building authentic community

- Creating Kingdom-centered impact
- Engaging cultural and demographic realities

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FOREWORD BY RICK WARREN

The single most effective method for fulfilling the Great Commission that Jesus gave us is to plant new churches! Two thousand years of Christian history have proven that new churches grow faster, and reach more people, than established churches. The growth on any plant is always on the newest branches.

This is why this book by Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, my dear friends and longtime partners in ministry, is so vitally important. *Vital Churches* casts a clear and compelling vision that calls for every local congregation, regardless of size or age, to make church multiplication a fundamental component of their evangelism strategy.

There is simply no better way to reach, teach, train, and send disciples out into the world than through churches that are planted with the intention of planting others. And for churches, or denominations, that have plateaued or are declining, church planting is an indispensable ingredient for renewal and revitalization. It is the fastest way to infuse new life and new people into atrophied fellowships.

No single congregation can possibly reach every type of person in its community. It takes new churches to reach new generations and new groups of people. And, as I first stated in 1980 when I planted Saddleback, “It’s far easier to have babies than to raise the dead!”

It is also more fun.

My friends, Ed and Warren, make it clear that church multiplication is not some new-fangled strategy of the twenty-first century. It is our oldest strategy—a return to the way the first century church did evangelism, by starting new congregations everywhere the Good News was shared. This is why “Plant Churches” is the first letter of our network’s global P.E.A.C.E. strategy.

All pastors want their churches to grow up, not just grow larger. We want to see a mature, healthy church that balances all five of God’s purposes given to us in the Great Commandment and Great Commission: Worship (“Love God with all your heart”), Ministry (“Love your neighbor

as yourself”), Evangelism (“Go and make disciples”), Edification (“Teach them *to do* everything I’ve commanded you”), and Fellowship (“Baptize them” into the Body of Christ).

But how do you know when a church is spiritually mature? When it begins to reproduce itself! Physical maturity (after puberty) is evidenced by the ability to have babies. In the same way, a church is not spiritually mature until it starts having spiritual babies—reproducing new churches.

There really is no excuse for not planting churches. Your church doesn’t have to be large, wealthy, or established to plant a church.

When I planted Saddleback Church, we made a commitment to plant at least one new church a year, so at the end of our first year, when our attendance was around 130, we planted our first daughter church. We’ve started at least one new church a year for the past thirty years, and have started as many as seventeen in a single year out of our church.

You’d be surprised at how effective new believers and fledgling members can be at church planting. I recently met with the original small group of people who helped me plant Saddleback thirty years ago.

Most of them were saved at Saddleback during the first year. I asked them “How many of you ever thought you could be a church planter when we began Saddleback?” Not one of them raised their hand. Then I asked, “How many of you would say today that starting Saddleback Church is the greatest thing you’ve ever done with your life?” Every single one of them raised their hand! The congregation we planted will outlast all of us.

As a pastor who has personally supervised the planting of hundreds of churches, and having trained tens of thousands of church planters across 162 countries over the past thirty years, I know what works and what doesn’t work when it comes to church multiplication. So believe me when I tell you that this book by my partners is pure gold.

I invite you to join us in the grand adventure!

P.E.A.C.E. Coalition
Twitter @RickWarren

Dr. Rick Warren
Saddleback Church

INTRODUCTION

Leadership Network Numbers¹

- **It's no longer true that the total number of churches is declining**

An important shift happened in recent years. After decades of net decline, more U.S. churches are being started each year (approximately 4,000) than are being closed each year (approximately 3,500).²

- **The greatest increase of new churches is on the "network" level**

There is a growing involvement in churches planting churches and a moderately growing involvement in denominations planting churches, but the greatest motion is through networks planting churches, which are increasing at a *rapid* level.³

Do you see anything unusual in the following vision statement taken from a new church's Web site?

OUR VISION

Imagine Fellowship* plans to reach and grow thousands for Christ in San Antonio, Texas. Imagine Fellowship will also train a new generation of leaders who have the heart and drive to start churches over the entire United States. We will plant a church in every city that has 100,000 or more (there are roughly 262 cities). These churches will also train church planters so that every city has a church that is engaging the next generation for Christ.

Scripture

God can do anything—you know, far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! (Ephesians 3:20, The Message)

Ten years ago, you would have had to look far and wide to find a church with such vision. Today churches like Imagine Fellowship with a vision for multiplication are springing up everywhere; so many, in fact, that we were inspired to write this book. We believe that we are on the edge of seeing an exponential multiplication movement in the United States, and that these churches are leading the way.

What's so different about Imagine Fellowship's vision?

1. The church wants to plant other churches, but not just one or two or even five or ten. They've set their sights on *more than two hundred of them!*
2. The church is up front about this vision from day one. Other churches tend to wait for some feeling of stability or

*All churches and church networks named in this book are listed in the Appendix, including their Web sites. Our reference to a diversity of churches and denominations doesn't mean we endorse all of their beliefs and practices.

preparedness before they consider planting other churches. Imagine Fellowship is different—they're not waiting to become well established before thinking about multiplication. Instead they're building it into their DNA. In fact, Imagine's vision statement has more words in it about replication than on the initial ministry in San Antonio!

3. The “owner” of the vision is the local church. This isn't just the pastor's new missions campaign, and it's not something being handed down from a denomination or adopted from a network. This call to multiplication is a churchwide thing, and today it's local churches like this that are setting the pace for their denominations or associations.
4. Imagine went to work on this initiative immediately. It held its first meeting as a new church in November 2008 and within months began training its first church planter. It has taken on two more since that time.
5. The church has been influenced by its relationship with another church, one with a similar vision of reaching those who do not know Christ. In this case, Imagine Fellowship's Pastor Kevin Joyce previously served on staff with what they call their “parent church”—Bay Area Fellowship in Corpus Christi, Texas. As the “About Us” section of their Web site says, “Pastor Kevin worked under Pastor Bil Cornelius for two years and is now going to bring a unique experience to San Antonio, Texas.”

Church planting is good. A vision for a church multiplication movement is better.

Many of you will not be content with a one-off church plant that serves only to replace a dying church. You share Imagine Fellowship's vision for massive church multiplication. *Viral Churches* is our effort to fan that flame of your passion and give you some new insights as to how it can be accomplished.

National Awakening

Imagine Fellowship is not alone. We know this because of a huge research project commissioned by Leadership Network (where

The Leadership Network research project was arguably the most comprehensive study ever done to review the methods, trends, and outcomes of church planting organizations across the United States.

Warren directs the research division), conducted by Ed Stetzer and LifeWay Research (which Ed leads). The data collection and analysis took place in 2007 with relevant information updated in the fall of 2009 for this book. This was arguably the most compre-

hensive study ever done to review the methods, trends, and outcomes of church planting organizations across the United States. It involved a team of twenty-one people who contacted, surveyed, summarized, and evaluated leaders including

- 200-plus church planting churches
- 100-plus leaders from forty denominations
- 45 church planting networks
- 84 organic church leaders
- 12 nationally known experts
- 53 colleges and seminaries
- 54 doctoral dissertations
- 41 journal articles
- 100-plus church planting books and manuals

The original findings were condensed into four free “State of Church Planting USA” reports at Leadership Network’s Web site, www.leadnet.org/churchplantingresources. Report titles are

- *Church Planting Overview*
- *Funding New Churches*

- *Improving the Health and Survivability of New Churches*
- *Who Starts New Churches*

This book takes findings from the original project and reframes it to inform, guide, and even catalyze today's many church planting leaders, especially those heading, forming, or considering a church planting net-

work. Our hope is to inspire and help you develop a church multiplication movement—an exponential birth of new churches that engage lost people and that replicate themselves through even more new churches. A church multiplication movement is a rapid reproduction of churches planting churches, measured by a reproduction rate of

Our hope is to inspire and help you develop a church multiplication movement—an exponential birth of new churches that engage lost people and that replicate themselves through even more new churches—measured by a reproduction rate of 50 percent through the third generation of churches, with new churches having 50 percent new converts.

50 percent through the third generation of churches, with new churches having 50 percent new converts. To achieve such momentum, churches would need to plant, on average, a new church every two years with each church reaching at least half of its attendees from the unchurched community. We believe this rapid reproduction of churches needs to happen among hundreds of niche population groups—from SUV-driving young families in fast-growing suburbs to urban hipster environmentalists to unchurched rural country music lovers.

These days it seems that many people are talking about church planting movements, but we want to move beyond theory to actual doing. This book is to be a practical guide for orchestrating a movement. It will address the idea of what to do next in your church planting strategies, in light of research on what's actually

working best and within a context of kingdom-minded, Scripture-based theology.

We're not just going to describe those church planting movements that we believe God has sparked in certain parts of the world. We're prescribing them as the much-needed alternative to inward-focused or addition-based church planting. Though this book is research based, we also take an advocacy perspective. *Viral Churches* will contain enough stories for participants in church planting at every level to find inspiration and specific help. But most of all, it will speak to a new breed of people who want to populate this country (and beyond), saturating it with a viral movement of multiplying churches.

A virus doesn't re-create itself from scratch. Instead, it infects existing cells to spread a disease. Viral marketing leverages existing social networks to spread ideas. In the same way, we believe that the kingdom of God can spread virally by "infecting" every tribe, group, club, neighborhood, community, and family. For that to happen, more people have to shift from church planting to church multiplication movements. If we were writing to an audience that loves math, we could have titled the book *Multiply Everything: From Church Planting to Movement Making*. Or perhaps *New Math Church: You Can Move from Planting to Multiplying Churches*. But it's not just math; it's relational as well, hence the term *Viral*.

According to the research, a church multiplication movement could happen, but it hasn't yet. We want to show you what the pioneers are learning, cheer the amazing things God is doing through them, encourage you to become one of the pioneers, and show how you too can be part of a multiplication movement.

Who Needs to Know

We think everyone ought to care about church planting and we're a little surprised when they don't. The church is called the Bride

of Christ (among other great names), and who wouldn't want the bride to flourish? However, too many Christians love Jesus but not his church and its mission. We're naive enough to believe that you can't love Jesus and neglect his wife.

Thus our primary audience is people who love the church and care especially about its multiplication, particularly leaders involved in church planting across the English-speaking world. If you consider yourself a church planter (or would like to), this book is for you. Whether your endeavor started intentionally or spontaneously, this book is for you. If you're the head of an agency, coalition, parachurch organization, partnership or denomination, this book is for you. Whether you're bi-vocational, fully funded, or unfunded, this book is for you. If you're a seminary professor, Bible student, pastoral intern, volunteer, professional, or an innocent bystander, this book is for you.

Some of you are church planters who have seen multiple plants spring up through your leadership. Maybe you're planting a church but have a desire for multiple plants to follow through your leadership. Some of you could lead networks and movements of new churches—you just don't know it yet. Some of you *will* lead the next movements of new churches. When you see the big picture of what God is doing, we believe your vision will expand for how your church can be part of a replicating movement.

Some of you could lead networks and movements of new churches—you just don't know it yet.

Some of you are just exploring the idea of multiplication. If you've figured out that multiplying is better than adding, and if you're intrigued by what happens when you birth multiple churches, all of which in turn plant other churches, this book is for you.

You may be surprised to learn that you are not alone. Many people who are initiating networks have not yet met or heard of

each other. We hope you will be encouraged to read the stories and strategies of others. Each chapter will introduce you to at least one network, coalition, or denomination that is placing a major emphasis on church planting, and the Appendix lists all the entities that have been described.

Although most examples are from North America, you do not have to live here to apply the ideas of this book. You might be a church planter or missionary in another country. Some countries beyond North America are way ahead of us, as we discuss later, but we can all learn from what God is doing among us.

Our prayer is that many more followers of Jesus in the next generation will become church planters. We recall the command of Jesus: “The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (Matthew 9:37–38).

Our Approach

Each chapter begins with a research finding called “Leadership Network Numbers,” mostly taken from our major research project. The chapter itself then focuses on a related practical idea that we believe is essential to the success of church multiplication networks. Together the chapters all suggest both a perspective and strategy for the day when “churches planting churches that in turn plant churches” becomes as common and normal as churches with multiple services or churches that send service teams after disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami or Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Each chapter makes a different point:

- Church planting is the new evangelism (Chapter Two)
- Church planting may be mainstream, but church multiplication is not (Chapter Three)
- Aggressive local churches and church planting networks are leading the way where denominations once did (Chapter Four)

- Church planters are cooperating by learning together at unprecedented levels (Chapter Five)
- The way church planters are recruited, assessed, and deployed offer strong predictors of their success (Chapter Six)
- New church survivability has increased dramatically (Chapter Seven)
- House churches evangelize and replicate effectively—sometimes! (Chapter Eight)
- Multisite strategy is a growing trend among reproducing churches (Chapter Nine)
- Some churches grow fast, but that’s not the same as reproduction (Chapter Ten)
- In funding new churches, partnerships matter (Chapter Eleven)
- Missional replication still faces several obstacles (Chapter Twelve)
- A church multiplication movement requires a new scorecard (Chapter Thirteen)
- Several serious challenges still lay ahead (Chapter Fourteen)

You can read the material in any order, so feel free to start with whatever chapter intrigues you most. There is, however, a sense of flow. Step by step, we advocate what has happened and what still must happen for a true church multiplication movement to be birthed.

Wherever you begin, our hope is that each chapter will give you new information (or confirmation of what you had already experienced). But we also want to lead you to a greater vision and dream of what God has begun to do, and might do even more powerfully as you connect the dots for your potential role.

The Authors

Church planters are a cocky lot. They don't want to read books on church planting from armchair experts who met a church planter once. So, to establish our legitimacy, we need to tell you about our church planting background.

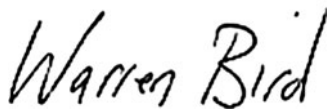
Although we are both now involved in full-time church research, we are also pastors who have led church plants, studied church plants and coached church planters. Each of us has three or more academic degrees in theology plus a research-based doctorate (Warren is impressed that Ed has *two* earned doctorates!). We've both authored or coauthored a number of books. Web sites with more details about us, including contact information, are listed at the end of the book (see pages 12–15 and 233–235). You will also find out that neither of us is shy about sharing our thoughts on all things church, doctrine, and the Gospel.

Most of all, we're both passionate that the United States is a receptive mission field and we believe that God could use this very generation to change both the face and the fruitfulness of today's church—but only if certain changes happen.

To find out the good things that are happening, and what we hope is ahead in the world of church planting, please turn the page.



Ed Stetzer
Nashville, TN



Warren Bird
Suffern, NY

CHURCH PLANTING

The New Evangelism

Leadership Network Numbers

- **Some Models Yield Higher Conversions Than Others**

Our research indicates that the current best practices, in terms of producing more evangelistic conversions, are seeker approaches, purpose-driven approaches, and ethnic church planting.¹

- **Churches Among Ethnic Groups Find Strong Responsiveness**

The noticeable increase in ethnic church planting is most obvious among immigrants. The largest recent groups of newcomers to this country, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, are (in order) from Mexico, China, Philippines, India, El Salvador, Vietnam, Korea, and Cuba.²

We are writing this book because we are absolutely convinced that a huge influx of new churches is required in this country, an influx that will not happen unless present patterns change. We believe church planting is the best way to take the church to the people it needs to serve. We believe new churches are the best platform for followers of Jesus to live as salt, light, and doers of good deeds in our communities (Matthew 5:13–16), to demonstrate love in practical ways (Matthew 22:34–40; John 13:35), and to intentionally make more disciples of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19–20).

We are encouraged by the recently increased interest in church planting. It's unfortunate, though, that the trend focuses largely

This book is about laying the foundation for an out-of-control replication of new churches, a movement of God that will literally change the landscape of North America.

on addition rather than multiplication. We want to lay the foundation for an out-of-control replication of new churches, a movement of God that will literally change the landscape of North America.

It will not be neat. It will not be orderly. But when spontaneous movements authored by God occur, there is a tendency to shake up the status quo. We think it can't happen soon enough!

If such a movement happens, many more people will find peace with God, purpose in life, and an eternal destiny in heaven. This is the sort of kingdom work that we as Christians need to be about.

We Confess: We Began with Addition

If only we had known then what we know now. The vision we inherited was shortsightedly fixed on addition. For both of us,