



NCLS Occasional Paper 1

The Effectiveness of Church Planting

Some Initial Research Findings

John Bellamy & Keith Castle

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NCLS Research
PO Box A2178 Sydney South
NSW 1235 Australia
P: 02 8267 4394
F: 02 9267 7316
E: info@ncls.org.au
Web: www.ncls.org.au

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Introduction

The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is undertaken in Australia every five years. In 2001 around 435,000 church attenders from over 7000 parishes and congregations in some 19 denominations took part in the NCLS.

The 2001 National Church Life Survey database provides an opportunity to conduct comparative research of church planting and other mission strategies. This report addresses the following issues, through analysis of the NCLS data:

1. How effective are church plants?
2. How do church plants compare with other mission strategies in reaching Australians?

National Church Life Survey

The National Church Life Survey has been developed by ANGLICARE (Diocese of Sydney), Uniting Church in Australia NSW Board of Mission and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The NCLS has been carried out on three occasions in Australia: 1991, 1996 and 2001. Nineteen denominations participated in the 2001 NCLS.

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Executive Summary

Church planting is a major part of the strategy adopted by the Anglican Diocese of Sydney to fulfil its mission goal, which is to see 10% of Sydney-siders involved in Bible-based churches in the next 10 years.

The 2001 National Church Life Survey database provides an opportunity to conduct comparative research of church planting and other mission strategies. This report addresses the following issues, through analysis of the NCLS data:

1. How effective are church plants?
2. How do church plants compare with other mission strategies in reaching Australians?

Church plants tend to have above average levels of vitality, including higher percentages of attenders valuing the outreach emphasis of the church, higher percentages of attenders inviting others to church, and higher levels of belonging and commitment to the vision and directions of the church.

Of importance to the aims of this report, there are also higher percentages of newcomers to church life found among church plants. Some 16% of attenders at church plants are newcomers to church life compared with 12% of attenders at other new congregations and 10% of attenders generally.

Church plants also compare favourably with churches conducting other forms of evangelistic activity, outreach and social service provision. For instance, church plants have higher percentages of newcomers than churches engaged in street evangelism, churches conducting services for the unchurched (eg 'seeker services'), churches conducting mission activities at schools or churches offering social services such as training or support programs.

It should be noted that churches with a special focus on particular interest groups such as artists, divorcees, bikers, and environmentalists, had levels of newcomers that were also above average (15.0%). This suggests that in pursuing the Diocesan strategy, consideration should be given to how diverse churches and fellowships are, in order to reach the diversity of the population.

Of concern, however, is that a small number of Sydney Anglican church plants identified in the NCLS database do not tend to exhibit the same high levels of newcomers as other church plants. This finding is based on a subset of Anglican Sydney church plants, a fuller analysis being impossible due to the absence of some church plants from the survey and coding issues associated with other church plants.

Given the centrality of church planting in the Diocesan mission strategy, further research into the characteristics of effective church plants should be undertaken, making full use of the NCLS database, with a view to informing the Diocesan mission strategy. Survey research among other Sydney Anglican church plants should also be considered to gain the best possible picture of their current effectiveness.

Introduction

Church planting is a major part of the strategy adopted by the Anglican Diocese of Sydney to fulfil its mission goal, which is to see 10% of Sydney-siders involved in Bible-based churches in the next 10 years. The fundamental aim of the Diocesan strategy is to:

multiply Bible-based Christian fellowships, congregations and churches which nurture their members and expand themselves, both in the Diocese and 'in all the world' (Archbishop Jensen's Presidential Address to Synod, 2002)

It is considered that church planting will enable the Diocese to more effectively connect with the myriad layers of interest groups and communities to be found throughout Sydney and Wollongong, in a way that the traditional parish model cannot do. At the same time, adopting a church planting strategy means excluding other possible strategies, such as large crusades or the amalgamation of smaller churches into large regional churches (Archbishop Jensen's Presidential Address to Synod, 2002).

Church planting is by no means a new strategy. Many existing congregations have their roots in the church building programs of the mid to late 1800s as the major denominations sought to catch up with the establishment of new settlements across Australia. More recently, population growth in the post-war period has seen Sydney and other metropolitan centres expand greatly, requiring the establishment of new churches on the suburban fringe. Many denominations such as the Assemblies of God, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Salvation Army have pursued church planting as a means of establishing a presence in communities not served by their denominations, of reaching ethnic groupings or of revitalising existing local churches.

Given that there is recent history of church planting in Australia, it is possible to assess the relative effectiveness of existing church plants compared with other forms of ministry and mission. By looking at the experience of the wider Church, it is possible to gather important information to inform the Diocese's own church planting strategy.

Such an assessment of church planting is possible through the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) database. This major survey of churches has been conducted on three occasions in Australia: 1991, 1996 and 2001. Each survey has involved the major Protestant denominations in Australia and included more than 6000 congregations and 300,000 adult church attenders.

Research questions addressed in this report

The NCLS provides an opportunity to conduct comparative research of church planting and other mission strategies, as well as addressing a range of issues that emerge from adopting a church planting strategy. This report addresses the following issues, through analysis of the NCLS data:

1. How effective are church plants?
2. How do church plants compare with other mission strategies in reaching Australians?

In addition the report outlines further research questions about church planting that could be pursued through the National Church Life Survey data.

Researching Church Plants

What is a 'church plant'?

There is a range of possible definitions of a 'church plant'. Church planting can include:

- A new church commenced by the denomination, such as may occur in a new housing area
- A new 'daughter' church planted elsewhere by a 'mother' church
- A new church started independently by an individual or a group
- The formation of a series of small groups or house churches into an independent network or connected to an existing church
- A declining church that has been revitalised through a group of attenders transferring from another church
- A new congregation commenced at an existing church, with a view to serving a particular people group (eg: a Chinese congregation connected to an existing Anglo church).

A simple definition is that church planting is mission carried out by forming faith communities (Hopkins and White, 1995, 3). This definition captures two important concepts:

- that church planting has a mission emphasis
- that it essentially involves the creation of new entities.

New churches are not always established to further mission. Some churches may simply have started through Christians of the same denomination banding together, with no particular emphasis on mission. Other churches may result from the amalgamation of smaller units, perhaps to improve their viability. Still other churches form as the result of church splits, with

part of the church being established elsewhere. In these cases, mission may have provided little or no impetus towards establishing the new church.

Researching church plants through the NCLS

Church leaders participating in the 2001 NCLS were asked to indicate whether, in the last five years, their church was established as a result of church planting by another church or a growth program of their denomination. In addition, the leaders were asked what year their church was first founded or, in the case of churches that had ceased to function at some point, when their church had recommenced. Only those churches indicating they had come about through church planting and had been planted since 1996 form the '*church plant*' category examined in this report.

Those churches that had been commenced since 1996 but did not indicate that they were a church plant form a second category, termed '*other new churches*'. Analysis of these churches is also included in this report in order to discover similarities or differences between church plants and other new churches that had apparently not been commenced through a church planting process.

It can be seen that the kind of church plants that can be studied through the NCLS are mostly new churches rather than new congregations or fellowship groups connected to existing churches. In some cases, new congregations at existing churches have been identified as separate entities in the NCLS database, particularly where these are ethnic congregations meeting at Anglo churches. These congregations may be separate from their host churches in almost every way, except that they share common buildings.

The NCLS data is therefore limited by the extent to which a church plant is seen as a distinct and separate entity from the host or mother church. For instance a new congregation meeting at a school may not be viewed as a separate entity by the mother church. The lifecycle of the process of church planting implies transitional stages moving from conception (a vision for a new church is developed) to ante-natal (a group forms to begin research, outreach and prayer) to birth (a new church is on public display). In the early years following the birth of the new church, it may still be heavily dependent upon the mother church. (Hopkins and White, 1995, p7). At what point in this process the church plant is recognised as a separate entity may vary greatly.

The church plant only appears in the NCLS database as a separate entity at the point at which it is recognised as such by the denomination. In terms of the church planting process described above, this may be at a point well beyond its public display as a new entity. Consequently church plants identified in the NCLS database will tend to be well down the track in the church planting process. It would be expected that many newly formed or semi-autonomous church plants will not appear as separate entities in the NCLS database.

However it should be noted that church plants are never excluded from listing on the basis of their size. Provided it is seen by the denomination as a distinct entity, there is no reason why even a very small grouping could not be listed separately in the NCLS database. For instance the Baptist Church recognises separate 'fellowships' as distinct from 'churches' in its internal directories; these are currently listed as separate units in the NCLS database. In the case of the Anglican Church, the NCLS system allows for multiple churches within a parish to be identified as separate units. Many new churches within parishes have been listed separately in the NCLS database and can thus be studied separately to other churches.

Basic statistics about church plants

How many church plants are there?

Using the NCLS definition, some 1.8% of Anglican and Protestant churches responding to the 2001 NCLS identified themselves as *church plants*, having commenced in the previous 5 years and been planted by their denomination or another church. This equates to around 190 churches Australia wide having been established in the previous 5 year period.

Another 2.1% of churches had commenced in the previous 5 years, but did not identify themselves as a church plant. In total then, about 4% of all Anglican and Protestant churches had been established since 1996, around half of which were church plants.

However it is considered that the number of church plants identified through the NCLS is conservative for the following reasons:

- There would be other church plants that have not yet been recognised as separate entities by their respective denominations. As discussed above, this flows through to the church coding system used by the NCLS. Since the number of such commencements may

be increasing in Australia at the present time, estimates of their number by the NCLS would tend to be conservative.

- Ethnic churches are often established with each new wave of immigrants and would thus be more likely than an Anglo church to fall within the 'church plant' category. Given that ethnic churches tend to be under-represented in the NCLS database, due to language and cultural barriers, it would be expected that the number of church plants estimated from the NCLS database would tend to be conservative.

Which denominations plant churches?

Table 1 shows that those denominations most actively involved in church planting are Pentecostal denominations. Although they only account for 12% of all churches in the NCLS database, Pentecostal denominations account for 45% of all church plants and 39% of other new churches.

Other denominations that have engaged in significant levels of church planting since 1996 include the Baptist Church (12% of church plants) and the Presbyterian Church (10% of church plants).

Evangelicalism is present to some extent within all of the denominations shown in Table 1. Among church plants, 34% identify with the Evangelical position. This is equivalent to the proportion of congregations that identify with Evangelicalism in the entire NCLS sample.

The Anglican Church accounts for 7% of all church plants and 15% of new churches, which are substantial proportions. However, it needs to be remembered that the Anglican Church alone accounts for 30% of churches in the NCLS database. This suggests that the rate of church planting among Anglican churches is much lower than in most other denominations.

It is interesting to note that the Uniting Church accounts for 16% of other new churches but only 5% of church plants. This may reflect that the language of church planting is not as commonly used in the Uniting Church as in other denominations. There may be some churches that could be viewed as church plants but have not been identified as such due to differences in descriptions used across denominations.

Table 1: Church plants and other new churches

Percent by Denomination

	Church plants (%)	Other new churches (%)	All NCLS* (%)
Anglican	7	15	30
Baptist	12	6	9
Churches of Christ	3	4	4
Lutheran	3	4	6
Pentecostal	45	39	12
Presbyterian	10	2	7
Salvation Army	4	5	3
Seventh-day Adventist	5	7	5
Uniting	5	16	23
Other denominations**	6	2	1
TOTAL	100	100	100

* ALL NCLS here excludes the Catholic Church

** Excludes independent churches

What are the demographics of church plants?

What does the typical church plant congregation look like compared with other churches?

Table 2 shows that a key characteristic of church plants is that their attenders tend to be younger than churches generally, with more than two-thirds (69%) of adult attenders being aged 15-49 years, compared with only 48% at churches generally. Attenders at church plants also tend to be significantly younger than at other new churches. The greater proportion of young adults is also reflected in slightly higher proportions of men at church plants.

Table 2 also shows that people born in non-English speaking countries are over-represented in the church plant category, though the vast majority of attenders at church plants were born in Australia. The over-representation of people born in non-English speaking countries probably reflects the presence of church plants among new migrant groups; it would be expected that overseas born attenders would be concentrated among a subset of church plants.

Table 2: Church plants and other new churches

Demographic characteristics

	Church plants (%)	Other new churches (%)	NCLS average* (%)
Attendees aged 15-49 years	69	55	48
Male attendees	45	41	40
Attendees born in a non-English speaking country	18	8	9

* NCLS average here excludes the Catholic Church

The effectiveness of church plants

Do church plants tend to be more effective than other churches?

There are many ways in which a question such as this one could be considered. For some, the question is answered in terms of church growth - it is assumed that if a church is growing then there must be good things happening in the life of that church. For others, the question is answered more in terms of church health or church vitality; under this approach it would be possible for otherwise healthy churches to be declining in size.

NCLS Research has developed a series of 12 sets of indicators of church vitality beyond measuring church growth. These 12 sets of indicators are discussed in the NCLS publication *Core Qualities to Foster in Your Church* (2002). While such a list cannot be comprehensive, the qualities included in this list have been found to be inter-related and to be a reliable series of measures of the extent to which churches are involved in mission to the wider community.

Table 3 presents one measure only from each of the 12 sets of indicators developed by the NCLS. This is far from a full analysis of the vitality of church plants, but gives some idea of how church plants perform on each of the 12 core qualities, compared with other churches. A fuller and more rigorous analysis should be undertaken as part of further research into church plants.

Table 3 shows that across these 12 indicators, church plants tend to have above average levels of vitality. Only in one area - an involvement in community care groups - do attendees at church plants tend to have lower levels of involvement. This is likely to be a function of the denominational mix and younger average age of attendees at church plants.

When compared with other new churches, church plants also have higher levels of vitality in certain areas. These areas include higher percentages of attenders valuing the outreach emphasis of the church, higher percentages of attenders inviting others to church and higher percentages of attenders seeing the minister as an inspiring leader.

Of particular interest are the higher levels of newcomers to church life to be found among church plants. Some 16% of attenders at church plants are newcomers to church life compared with 12% of attenders at other new congregations and 10% of attenders generally. '*Newcomers*' are defined in the NCLS as people who have been attending their current church for no longer than five years and who previously were not attending any church.

If the Diocesan mission goal is to be achieved, it is important that churches effectively attract and retain newcomers. Previous NCLS research has examined in detail the factors that appear to lead to greater levels of newcomers in churches. These factors include many of the 12 core qualities outlined above in Table 3. Thus the higher levels of vitality present in church plants are consistent with the higher levels of newcomers observed at church plants.

Table 3: Indicators of vitality among attenders at church plants and other new congregations

Indicators of vitality among church attenders	Church plants (%)	Other new churches (%)	NCLS average* (%)
Have experienced much growth in faith in past year	53	50	48
Have grown in understanding of God through the church services	78	71	73
Have a growing sense of belonging	64	59	55
Always/mostly involved in welcoming visitors to church	45	43	39
Are satisfied with the ministry to children here	82	79	79
Highly value this church's focus on reaching the unchurched	29	20	18
Are involved in wider community care activities	22	26	30
Invited others to church in past year	56	46	45
Newcomers to church life	16	12	10
Are strongly committed to the vision of this church	47	46	39
Agree that this church is always ready to try something new	71	70	63
Consider that the senior minister inspires people to take action	59	51	53

* ALL NCLS here excludes the Catholic Church

Do Evangelical church plants have more newcomers than other Evangelical churches?

It might be thought that the higher level of newcomers present in church plants is largely a function of the Pentecostal or Evangelical outlook of most church plants. This is a reasonable assumption given the high proportion of church plants that are either Pentecostal or Evangelical. If this is the case, rather than comparing church plants with the NCLS average, it would be safer to compare the level of newcomers in Evangelical church plants against the average for Evangelical churches, and the average level of newcomers in Pentecostal church plants against the average for Pentecostal churches.

Table 4 shows just such a comparison. The table shows that within the different theological orientations, the average level of newcomers at church plants remains above the average for that theological tradition. In the case of Evangelical churches, church plants (17%) have nearly twice the average level of newcomers than among Evangelical churches generally (9%).

Table 4: Percentage of newcomers

At Evangelical and Pentecostal churches

	Church plants (%)	Other new churches (%)	Average (%)
ALL CHURCHES*	16	12	10
Evangelical churches only	17	14	9
Pentecostal churches only	16	12	13

* Excluding the Catholic Church

While this doesn't rule out theological orientation as a factor that contributes to the proportion of newcomers in church plants, it does rule it out as an over-riding factor. Clearly there are other factors at work that contribute to the higher-than-average levels of newcomers found in church plants. More importantly this means that any findings about church plants based on the NCLS data are likely to apply across denominations, even where church planting is still at too small a scale for research.

How effective are Sydney Anglican church plants in attracting newcomers?

Two kinds of Sydney Anglican church plants have been identified in NCLS data:

- ethnic congregations
- congregations established in schools, clubs, community centres or at other church centres.

Around 30 ethnic congregations and fellowships have commenced during and since the 1990s, the majority catering for people of Chinese language background. Some have become provisional parishes (eg Kirribilli, Cabramatta, Regents Park). Most share facilities with Anglo congregations.

Of the second kind of church plant, it is estimated that at least 25 congregations have been established since the mid-1990s in schools, clubs, community centres or at other church centres, 11 of these in the 5 years prior to the 2001 NCLS. In terms of NCLS coding, most of these remain hidden within the mother or host church's code or did not take part in the survey. However it

has been possible to extract attender data for several of these congregations established in the period 1996 to 2001.

Regarding this latter grouping, some 10% of attenders at these church plants are newcomers to church life, compared with an average of 12% for Anglican Sydney churches. It should be noted that this difference is not statistically significant. However the 10% of newcomers found in these Sydney Anglican church plants is less than that generally observed among church plants across the entire NCLS sample (16%), a difference that is statistically significant.

The lower percentage of newcomers found among Sydney Anglican church plants is consistent with other research. Using NCLS 2001 data, Foster (2003) found higher-than-average levels of newcomers among Sydney Anglican churches that conducted outreach services or ran drop-in centres, but did not find higher levels of newcomers among church plants. Foster concluded that based on the evidence among existing Sydney Anglican churches, his research 'supports a multi-faceted approach to outreach' rather than a reliance upon church planting.

The research carried out here raises similar concerns. While it has been demonstrated that church plants generally have higher-than-average levels of newcomers, this has not been found to be the case among the small number of Sydney Anglican church plants (excluding ethnic congregations) that have been identified in the NCLS data. This suggests that given the centrality of church planting in the Diocesan mission strategy, further research into the characteristics of effective church plants should be undertaken, making full use of the NCLS database, with a view to informing the mission strategy. Survey research among other Sydney Anglican church plants should also be considered to gain the best possible picture of their current effectiveness. These are important issues to pursue given the commitment of the Diocese to this strategy and the lower levels of newcomers detected among the few Sydney Anglican church plants available for study.

Do church plants attract more newcomers than other forms of mission?

The strong focus of the Diocesan mission strategy on church planting means that in the future there may be a lesser focus on other forms of mission and outreach. An important question this raises is: how well do church plants compare with other mission strategies in reaching Australians?

The following analysis is based on the whole NCLS sample (excluding the Catholic Church). As with church plants, it is possible through the NCLS to establish what proportion of newcomers

are to be found in churches that undertake many different forms of mission and ministry, including evangelistic and outreach activities, social service activities, and the provision of educational and other facilities. Leaders completing the NCLS were asked to identify whether their churches had undertaken such activities at any stage over the previous 12 months.

It needs to be borne in mind that most of the questions used here only identify whether a church has been involved in a particular activity over the past 12 months. There is no information here to establish a longer history of involvement in such activities or how frequently or how extensive such activities have been. Perhaps most importantly, it is not possible to establish whether the activity has been conducted by only one congregation in the church, whereas by definition a church plant involves a whole church.

The average proportion of newcomers present in churches was 9.6%. Table 5 shows that churches undertaking almost any form of outreach or evangelism tended to have higher proportions of newcomers than the average. For instance, churches engaged in street evangelism (11.6%), providing church services for the unchurched such as 'seeker services' (11.0%), running mission teams within Australia or overseas (10.9%) or mission activities at schools (10.3%) had above average levels of newcomers.

Churches offering particular forms of social services such as training or support programs (eg for migrants, youth or the unemployed) also had higher levels of newcomers (11.4%). Similarly churches offering counselling services (10.4%) or community development programs (10.5%) had higher levels of newcomers.

However, table 5 shows that churches that participated in church planting appear have some of the highest proportions of newcomers to church life of any form of mission examined here. The proportion of newcomers among attenders at church plants is a relatively high 16.5%, compared with 11.9% among other new churches. Churches that said they were involved in the planting of other congregations in the past 5 years also had relatively high proportions of newcomers (11.2%).

It should be noted that churches with a 'niche' or special focus on particular interest groups such as artists, divorcees, bikers, and environmentalists, had levels of newcomers that were well above average (15.0%). Churches with a special focus on an ethnic group (11.6%) also had high levels of newcomers. This suggests that in pursuing the Diocesan strategy, consideration should be given to the actual diversity of churches and fellowships, in order to reach the diversity of

the population. Specially focussed groups may assist the church to reach segments of the community that would otherwise remain unreached by conventional congregational structures.

Table 5: Percentage of newcomers in churches

According to mission activities carried out

	Newcomers (%)
NCLS AVERAGE*	9.6
Church plants and new churches (past 5 years)	
Congregation is a church plant	16.5
Other new congregations	11.9
Planted a new church (mother church)	11.2
Churches providing welfare and other social services (past 12 months)	
Accommodation	9.3
Aged care services	9.1
Other visiting (eg prison)	9.7
Counselling services	10.4
Training or support programs	11.2
Emergency relief	9.6
Political/social justice activities	9.0
Community development/ resident action	10.5
Animal welfare/environmental activities	8.4
Other welfare or community service	9.8
Churches providing educational facilities or services (past 12 months)	
Playgroup	9.8
Infants/primary school	8.6
Secondary school	9.2
Religious education classes	9.5
Mission activities at schools (not r.e.)	10.3
Churches providing recreational activities (past 12 months)	
Sport	9.8
Art/cultural	9.9
Hobby or craft	9.6
Other	9.5
Churches undertaking evangelistic activities (past 12 months)	
Evangelistic church services/events	10.5
Evangelistic Bible studies	10.1
Street evangelism/shopping centres	11.6
Doorknock programs	10.7
Drop-in centre	10.6
Mission teams (in Aust or overseas)	10.9
Other	10.4

Table 5: Percentage of newcomers in churches (*continued*)

According to mission activities carried out

	Newcomers (%)
Churches undertaking community outreach activities (past 12 months)	
Newspaper ad	9.6
Radio or TV ad	10.1
Contact new residents	9.3
Mailout to local residents	9.7
Mailout to visitors to the congregation	10.4
Personal follow-up of visitors to the cong.	10.2
Social activity to meet residents	9.9
Social activity to which attenders invite friends	10.2
Established a church website	10.4
Integration of new members (past 12 months)	
A group or course for new Christians	11.7
Church services (current and in last 5 years)	
Worship services that are very contemporary	11.3
Started new services for target groups	10.1
Church services for the unchurched (eg seeker services)	11.0
Church services are held in a school, warehouse, community centre, theatre or shopfront	12.3
Churches with a specific mission focus (current)	
Mission focus on a life cycle group	9.4
Mission focus on an ethnic group	11.6
Mission focus on an interest group (eg bikers, artists, divorcees)	15.0
Mission focus on a socio-economic group	11.0
Experimental churches (current)	
Churches providing experimental forms of church (eg café church)	10.4
Churches undertaking experimental forms of mission/outreach	11.0

* NCLS AVERAGE here excludes the Catholic Church

Conclusion

Church plants appear to be an attractive mission strategy for a number of reasons:

- church plants have greater average levels of vitality than other churches
- church plants have greater average levels of newcomers to church life than other churches
- church plants have greater average levels of newcomers than churches undertaking other mission strategies

These findings confirm and expand upon previous NCLS findings about church planting. Previous NCLS research compared church plants with a small range of possible mission initiatives that churches could undertake, including amalgamating churches and starting new services or groups to cater for sub-cultural groups or the 'un-churched'. It was found that new congregations, particularly those formed as a result of church planting, showed the strongest signs of vitality and had the highest levels of newcomers (Kaldor *et al*, 1999, pp83-85).

Such research findings lend weight to the inclusion of church planting within an overall mission strategy. This is important for churches in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney at the present time, as consideration is given towards the allocation of resources for mission and for planning at the local level. An expectation in the light of these findings would be that the successful implementation of a church planting strategy would increase the level of newcomers in churches in the Diocese.

However research among a small number of Anglican church plants within the Diocese of Sydney does not carry this same promise. Coding issues in the data, the absence of some church plants from the survey and the limited number of churches planted in the Diocese at the time of the survey means that data from only a small number of Anglican Sydney church plants is available for examination. Of concern is that among those church plants that have been examined, there are lower-than-average levels of newcomers than for church plants more generally.

Therefore an important focus of future research in this area will be to:

- carry out research into Sydney Anglican church plants, and
- using the NCLS database, investigate why church plants tend to have higher levels of newcomers than other churches.

There is a range of possible reasons as to why church plants have higher levels of newcomers. One possible reason that emerges from the analysis in this report is that church plants also tend to have higher levels of vitality. Previous analysis of NCLS data, outlined in the major publication *Shaping a Future* (1997) shows those factors in church life that explain why some churches have higher levels of newcomers than others. Some of these factors include a greater willingness among church attenders to share the faith with others and to invite people to church, a strong sense of commitment to the vision and directions of the church, a strong sense of belonging among attenders, the presence of inspirational leadership and the presence of contemporary worship.

Other possible reasons to be explored include:

- church plants are not as bound to previous conventions of congregational life and are in a better position to experiment;
- church planting would often involve the break-up of existing networks of relationships among attenders, making it easier for newcomers to be included;

Keeping track of church planting initiatives within the Diocese

An issue that has been highlighted by analysis of the NCLS data is that a central register is needed to keep track of church plants. At present it is not possible to distinguish most church plants from their parent bodies. The parochial listings in the Diocesan yearbook do not include such details; this lack of detail then flows into major surveys such as the National Church Life Survey.

Given the centrality of church plants to the Diocesan mission strategy such a register is important to allow both ongoing research into the effectiveness of church plants and to identify the number of commencements. Definitional issues surrounding church plants would need to be resolved.

Future Research into Church Planting

This report is an initial look at the data on church planting present in the NCLS database. There is a range of further questions that could be explored within the existing data including the following:

1. What are the characteristics of church plants that are doing well in attracting newcomers compared with those church plants that are not? If it can be established that church plants are subject to the same principles of vitality as other churches, then denominations will not only need to consider the planting of new churches but also ensuring they have certain qualities.

2. What are the growth paths of church plants? The Diocesan mission strategy has a 10 year horizon. How likely is it that church plants will make a substantial contribution to achieving the mission goal within this timeframe? This is important in evaluating their effectiveness compared with other approaches.

3. Why do some church plants fail? It would be possible to identify church plants from the 1996 NCLS survey that no longer exist. What were their characteristics compared with the ones that continued?

4. *Where do church plants mostly occur?* Are church plants to be found more in some kinds of areas than in others?

5. *Beyond what size do churches tend to undertake church planting?* This is an important issue to consider in relation to responsibility for church planting. If it tends to be big congregations that plant churches, are there parts of the Diocese where there will be a lack of church planting due to an absence of big churches? Should the Diocese itself seek to plant churches in such areas?

6. *What are the growth paths of churches that do church planting?* It has been said that such churches 'fill up' again and quickly return to previous size levels. Is this true in Australia?

7. *Are leaders who plant churches subject to higher levels of 'burnout'?* There is some anecdotal evidence that this is so. This is an important issue for the Diocese to consider, particularly where church planting is to be done on a large scale. What support structures are needed to safeguard the well-being of church planters?

References

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