

Shaping the Future

Denominational Organizational Cultures Shifting
Towards Multiplication Movements



Prepared by:

James Watson, PhD



Wycliffe College

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research

Study Overview

When considering the future, some denominational organizations are imagining how new congregations can be formed given the religious and cultural shifts taking place in Canada. By asking leaders focused on this direction what actions they have taken, it is possible to identify some of the organizational developmental steps which move towards mobilizing new church development. The intent of this report is to offer perspective from the experience of Canadian leaders to suggest important principles and practices which can offer ways forward.



Key Objectives

1

Identify Organizational Practices Enabling New Congregation Development

2

Distill Core Principles and Practices from Canadian Leaders' Experiences

3

Offer a Framework for Future Denominational Directions

In a 2024 exploratory survey of denominational leaders asking questions about what is offered to support “church planting” in Canada, 46 respondents indicated that they had a plan. These responses in addition to contacts gleaned from a review of Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) congregational registrations and visits to churches started in the last decade allowed for a strategic selection of 25 denominational organizations actively supporting new congregation development. [i] The primary questions asked of the interviewees focused on the timeline of development of these resources, what they considered essential actions taken to support church planting, and why this level of priority was assigned by the organization.

Why Start New Congregations?

Leaders in denominational organizations with a plan for offering support of new congregational development were asked, “Why has this been given this level of priority within your organization?” They responded with theological, demographic, historical, and spiritual discernment reasons. Some stated that they were inspired by the “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:18-20) or Jesus’ commitment to “build my church” (Matthew 16:18) or to prepare the bride of Christ for “the glorious day.”

Quebec leaders noted the minimal influence within the province and argued that we need more contextualized churches to reach the new generations. From a historical perspective one national leader offered that “we live amongst the jagged, the jagged, sharp ruins of Christendom, and God desires, I think for us to have a new missionary encounter with Canada” (Bob). [ii] A few leaders framed this priority as being open to what God is already doing, or that churches were responding after listening to the Spirit of God

“...how we are going to fix the future is through new starts. So, let's put discipleship pathways and DNA, let's put expanding the Kingdom, let's put all those things into you know, into our vision, and, and maybe over time if we plant the right kind of churches that multiply, maybe they'll take over the existing church culture” (Alan).

James Watson has been a church planting coach, trainer, and consultant for two decades across Canada. He has parachurch mission, denominational organization, and local church planting experience in addition to research. Previous research projects have focused on churches’ responses to immigration, intercultural evangelism, congregational flourishing, and tentmakers/multivocational ministers. He earned a PhD in Intercultural Studies from Fuller Theological Seminary and a MDiv from McMaster Divinity College.



Canadian Context



Figure 1: Number of New Registrations of Congregations with Canada Revenue Agency

Exploration of the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) data by the Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research has offered a comprehensive baseline of new congregational development. [iii] Note that one church plant visited in the beginning of 2024 was celebrating the ability to issue charitable tax receipts for the first time in their seven years of existence, so there can be a delay between initial ministry in the community and CRA registration. With more than 200 new registrations per year indicated in Figure 1, the accumulation may be surprising given Canadian media focus on declining religious participation.

“So let's talk a little bit about that: building disciple making networks across Canada” (Neo).

Established and Transitional Denominational Organizations

The interviewees were representatives of 25 organizations (international, national, or regional) with a stated plan for supporting new congregations and/or there was evidence of a track record of supporting new churches in Canada. The polity of these organizations varied from centralized or denominationally directed to congregationally autonomous. Each person was asked to describe the timeline of their organization developing support for new congregations, and each had unique aspects to their history. Some of the leaders indicated that things were currently working very well. They stated how many new congregations are currently in process or compared how many churches they used to have compared to the increased number they now have. When asked about their timeline, maintaining a multiplication direction over a succession of leadership was mentioned by a few leaders who were experiencing success. The development of their church planting culture continued across more than one notable leader's term.

Other denominational organizations were going through a time of transition or redevelopment and identified which current issues were priorities at that stage. This perspective provided insights into the initial requirements for developing systems. Both voices were useful to consider as well-established church planting organizations described functional systems but had already resolved issues important to consider in the early phases of development.

Analysis of Multiplication Culture

Analysis of the interviews was conducted from a systems change perspective to focus on the opportunities available for organizational development towards what some interviewees described as a church multiplication culture. Vision, process, and structure were the categories used to frame overlapping concepts of systems change for organizations. Vision included communicative actions which portray what is positively possible, or negatively, plausible consequences of inaction regarding the future. The concept of process included official and informal activities which are routine practices to accomplish the objectives of the organization. Structure indicated the official policies and forms of organization required for effective functioning. The responses were reviewed using these categories as lenses for focusing on options for intentional change in denominational organizations. [iv]



Figure 2: Denominational Organizational Actions for Multiplication

“So because we are shooting for a culture and the DNA of multiplication, we do believe that church plants might take different models” (The Farmer).

The boxes arranged in the cycle in Figure 2 portray the steps taken by a planting team or sponsoring church in starting a new congregation, in a simplified form. The four bottom boxes are typically the focus of church planting textbooks and explained in detail there, so are not addressed by this research. While some church planting cycles have stopped at the establishment of the new church (Ministry & Discipleship Formation in Figure 2), many of the leaders emphasized that they desired a multiplication culture: the development of churches which foster the development of new congregations. [v] The terms in the centre and along the circle in Figure 2 summarize actions which denominational organizations take to encourage the development of new congregations. They are general statements representing a variety of responses from the interviews which will be explained in more detail.

Vision

Vision Terms	
Projections	Societal/congregational trends
Dreams	Imagined futures
Goals	Future numerical milestones
Statements	Mission/vision/values/strategy

Figure 3: Forms of Vision

For the purposes of this study, vision was understood as actions which portray possible future outcomes. One of the other national leaders claimed that facilitating vision development across the regional offices was part of the role – it both supported the regional efforts and provided opportunities to share vision across the country. Some of the leaders referred to plausible projections of societal or congregational trends. These trends and possible end points promoted reflection on how they as an organization might actively shape the direction of their shared future.

Projection example: “Well truthfully, it's been given this emphasis because of sustainability and future. So, the conversation of ‘future ready’ has had to include this in it, and it hasn't really had to in the past. But when we talked 10 years from now, ... ‘We're just closing churches. What is going on here?’ So that has a sobering, uh, reflection on our ‘current’ and our ‘future’” (Gordon).

Dreaming about the future was offered as an example of an activity facilitated among the leaders. One regional leader (Guillaume) offered, “We are able to say to them, look, it's the local church that's going to be planting. So, have you considered this? Have you prayed about this? Have you thought about sending out some of your people to another part of the city?” In this example, spiritual discernment offered the opportunity to consider new possibilities. There was an invitation to dream together.

While goals can take many forms, some of the interviewees had clearly identified numerical goals on a timeline. One leader, who mentioned not reaching publicized goals in the past, stated their organization was able to refocus and was quite certain that their goals for 2024 new church starts would be exceeded.

Example of a goal: “So our more recent goal is to create 100 new communities of faith. I think it was a three-year timeline that we laid out. So, we're in year, of course, technically still in year one” (Martin Luther).

While vision statements have been popular for many decades, one of the leaders of an aggressively planting movement suggested that there must be constant communication. “I think for that it's simple. Just repeating the vision over and over and over and over again” (Roger). One of their church plants was attended as part of a related research assignment and the vision statement was in fact presented as part of the worship service. Some leaders emphasized that it was essential that individual leaders, even while they are starting a new congregation, be promoting future possibilities. The phrase “multiplication DNA” implied it was not just a matter of organizational culture; it was an essential part of discipleship practice.

Process

Organizational processes supporting church planting have been promoted for decades by various authors and leaders, so it was not surprising that many of the interviewees offered a detailed list from their particular histories. Assessment, credentialing, and covenanting would typically occur as a church planting project is discussed and agreed upon by all the supporters. Assessment of planters (or their team) was mentioned as being made available by several organizations, both denominational and parachurch. Formal forms of assessment such as behavioural interviews and church planter assessment weekend retreats were mentioned.

Some of the organizations incorporated their appraisal of skills for church planting with other leadership assessments or psychological profiles. One of the interviewees stressed the combination of: calling, gifting, people following them (in terms of receiving direction), and a track record of raising up leaders. Both assessment and credentialing seemed tailored to the ethos of the organizations.

Credentialing included denominational expectations for ministerial licensing or ordination but also the organizational leaders could vouch for planters to potential supporters. Whether it was called a covenant or had a different title, some of the denominational organizations required a ministry agreement to clarify the expectations of different partners. Written agreements allowed for review or revision of expectations as the project continued to develop. Shared responsibility for the ministry agreement by the planting team, denominational office, and supporting churches was strongly emphasized by one of the denominational organizations that promoted highly customized support for new ministry dreams arising from their established churches.

Processes	
Assessment	Discern capacity for tasks
Credentialing	Recognition by organization
Covenanting	Ministry partner agreement
Training	Specialized, just-in-time
Coaching	Individualized appointments
Support	Financial/administrative/pastoral
Leadership Development	Creating capacity (for multiplication)
Prospecting	Right person for time/place

Figure 4: Process Terms

Training and coaching were mentioned by many of the interviewees. One leader described the “ABCs” of: assessment, bootcamp, and coaching. “Bootcamp” was a reference to an intensive, retreat-style training with basic information offered for church planters to understand the tasks ahead of them. An essential element for consideration is the just-in-time format of the training as there are specific questions church planting teams ask at the beginning of the journey. Coaching was referenced in a variety of ways but could generally be understood as similar to executive or life coaching, combined with the particular experience of church planting ventures.

Support could take many forms. At times it meant financial support in the form of a grant or loan to support the early years of development of the new congregation. While some denominations offered a set “package” for supplementing the expenses of developing a new church, others customized the grant or loan provision. What was viewed as appropriate financial support varied greatly depending on the approach taken to start a new congregation. “It depends” was one of the answers when asked, “How much does it cost to start a church in Canada?” Some planting models were described where essentially a small group is formed as the kernel of whatever develops further, and others were focused on achieving a critical mass in a worship service of 100-200 to optimize resilience of the new church. Some church planters mentioned as examples had no other employment and others had full time or part time jobs in addition to starting a congregation. [vi]



Some planters were expected to solicit and organize prayer supporters and financial donors as part of their lead up to the launch of a new congregation. The endorsement of the denominational organization could be offered to support these efforts.

Regarding administrative support, providing some advice or initial administrative services while the new church is developing local capacity or applying for charitable status was mentioned. Pastoral support, particularly care for the leaders of the church plant, was described in a number of ways. Specific examples were offered regarding how national or regional leaders had been attentive to individual needs and unique circumstances. It was assumed that the relational connections of denominational staff and sponsoring congregations were viewed as supportive, with the recognition that disconnects in shared vision or relational disagreements required attention.

“The issue has never been money. The issue is finding the right person for the right time and the right place and stand back and watch, watch what the hand of the Lord can do” (Tom Planter).

It is important to note that some of these intentional systems overlapped with support for already existing churches. Recognizing training or personal renewal experiences which could benefit both was mentioned. Leadership development is one of the examples of resourcing where some of the theological and pragmatic ministry training opportunities could be beneficial to both leaders in start up phases of ministry and more established church leaders.

“I'll take a leader that can crank out leaders and he's got 30 people in his home and call that a church and he's cranking out leaders that go...as opposed to having one leader that's got 5000 people and they're not sending” (CP).

In this report, prospecting means: “finding the right person for the right time and the right place” (Tom Planter). Connections with individuals could be made through congregations recognizing potential planters or through theological colleges or events sponsored by denominational organizations. The relational networks of leaders among the denominational churches offered possible introductions to people interested in starting a new church. [vii] Identification of locations for planting varied in the interviews. Stories about a church sponsoring a plant in a nearby community and satellite planting where the sponsoring church maintains a leadership relationship with the new congregation were geographically bounded examples. A few interviewees mentioned the discernment involved in a family moving to a new place to start a church, which did involve conversation with the denominational leader.

Structure

While structure was understood to indicate the official policies and forms of organization required for effective functioning, there were interesting responses that nuanced what was considered effective. The priority of relationships and relationship building was frequently expressed throughout the interviews. Shared practice was implied by some but emphatically explained by a few. Clarifying polity was only mentioned by a few leaders, but it was addressing very specific issues. Resource development included not only fundraising, but also the activities that made up the processes which were just reviewed.

Structure	
Relationship Building	Establishing functional relations across organization
Shared Practice	Promoting collaboration across the organizational levels
Clarifying Polity	Editing policy for outcomes
Resource Development	Fund and process management

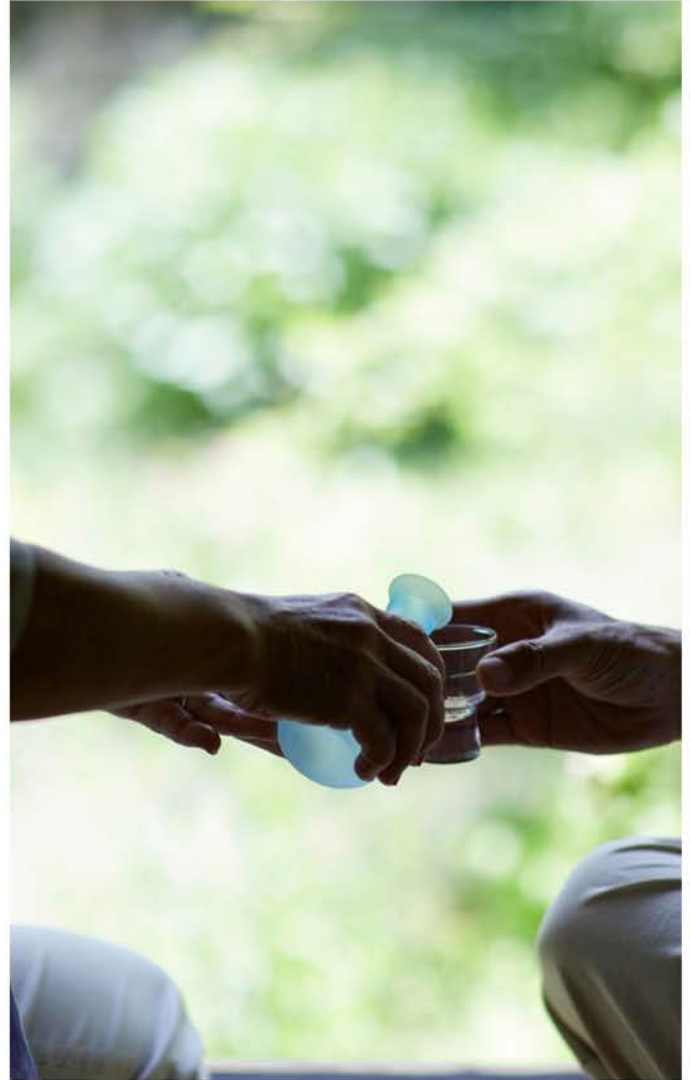
Figure 5: Structure Terms

Relationships were considered to be of ultimate importance for “how” the denominational organizations functioned according to much of the discussion about supporting church plants. “I think we have seen ‘relationships trump organizational,’ but it doesn’t mean there isn’t ‘organizational’ there” (Cid). While this seemed pervasive in how leaders have connected with planters, the stated organizational structures including supervisors, mentors, apprenticeship opportunities, and coaches also implied the centrality of relationship. A few of the interviewees used the language of “family” to emphasize the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

This is one of the intentional directions recognized by multiple leaders as a shift in culture away from a more directive or administrative *modus operandi*. This included new congregations realizing their voice within the family: “The question now is, can we help to help them to develop [to] the point where they, they recognize that they are full member churches, and they speak like they are full member churches?” (William Wallace). It should be noted that many of the interviewees self-described as being second or third tier leaders in their organization, most were not the executive directors/ministers, presidents, superintendents, or bishops. [viii] Relationship building vertically through the organization and horizontally across the regions and congregations were both necessary.

“So what we did is we shifted from an administrative culture to really more relational culture, so that nobody feels alone in ministry” (Stephen).

The importance of relationships across the different levels of the organizational structure was emphasized repeatedly. A few of the leaders stressed that it was important not only to have colleagues with a common vision or cause, but also to develop shared practice. Shared practice referred to learning together what is helpful or effective and having consistent approaches to accrediting and training people for church planting. For those interviewees who emphasized the shared approach it allowed them to serve each other’s constituents, across what could have been organizational or geographical boundaries.



Shared outcomes also required clarity of metrics; they needed a common understanding of how to evaluate progress. One of the leaders provided detailed description of steps for anyone to bring forward a ministry dream for discernment and inferred that these steps were developed across all Canadian regions. As a more general example, when interviewees were asked about prayer several of them mentioned developing prayer practices not only among their staff but across levels of the organization. Some church planters were expected to organize prayer support as part of their start up process, with the blessing and support of their denominational leaders.

"First of all, let me say this: I believe that God is doing something significant. So figuring out what that looks like in every context requires time, requires communication. It requires sitting with people: praying together, thinking together, imagining together (Cal).

Polity and policies did not receive extensive attention however a couple of the organizations which self-identified as being in transition stated that clarity was required to move forward. Examples of functional clarity included changing an organization's definition of "church" to allow new expressions of congregational life to have greater recognition and engagement within their denominational organization.

Resource development was more inferred as the actual activities were described. Fundraising for the financial grants and loans was not described in detail, the varied amounts seemed to typically be linked to established denominational budgets. While the specifics of assessment, training, and coaching resources have already been addressed, it is important to note that leaders within the organization take responsibility for their development and management.

Shaping the future

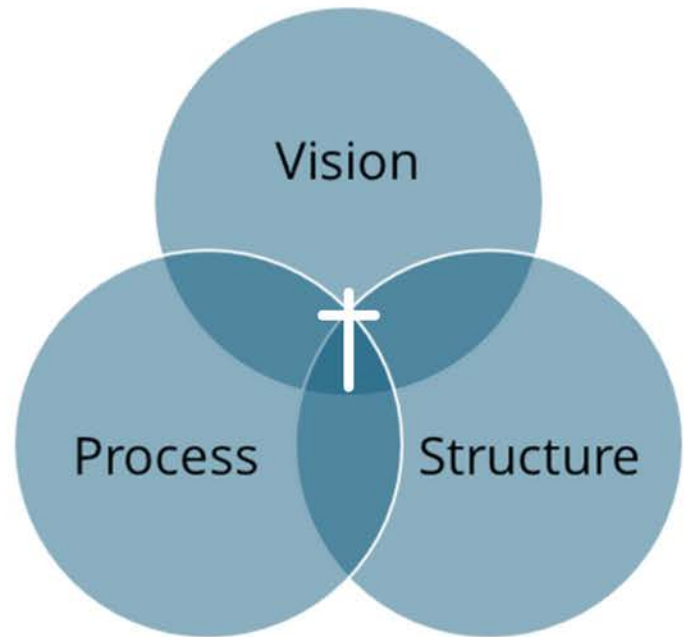


Figure 6: Organizational Change Paradigm

While this report has been written as a summary of responses from 25 different organizations, each one had differences in their description of support for new congregations. At times during the interviews, it was clear that the descriptions of vision, process, and structure were influenced by the particular theological traditions and histories of their organizations. As depicted in Figure 6, this analysis focused on the overlapping actions which can be taken by leaders to develop their organizational environment. The tradition-specific language has been set aside both to safeguard the anonymity of the respondents but also to generalize the actions so they can be considered by any denominational organization. The common agenda amongst each of them was a shared concern for the future of the church within Canada.

"...church planting has to be both part of an ecosystem and it needs to have its own ecosystem" (Bob).



When considering vision, leaders can consider both how the phrasing will shape the future but also the means or context of communication. The interviewees who spoke about multiplication DNA emphasized that the new churches where discipling people to understand church planting as “what we do.” The denominational organizations who described church planting as “what we do” or normal ministry practice also mentioned more than one leader who championed the value of new congregations to reach their current ethos. The emphasis was sustained over the tenure of more than one leader; there was consistent direction over decades.

“Well, I think change has to be top down and bottom up” (Thomas).

Process described the activities developed to prepare church planting teams to form sustainable congregational life within their respective communities. As seen in some responses regarding the importance of relationship, how the processes were enacted may matter as much as the content. The experiences of being seen, heard, and cared about by the denominational family was understood to reinforce a sense of belonging and shared mission.

Structure has identified not only the importance of relationships throughout the organizational structure, but also how the vision and process is supported and enacted. This may be one of the more difficult areas of organizational change to articulate, but it was portrayed as being central by many of the leaders. Again, relationship building throughout the organization influenced how vision was shared and the experience of the resources that were developed.

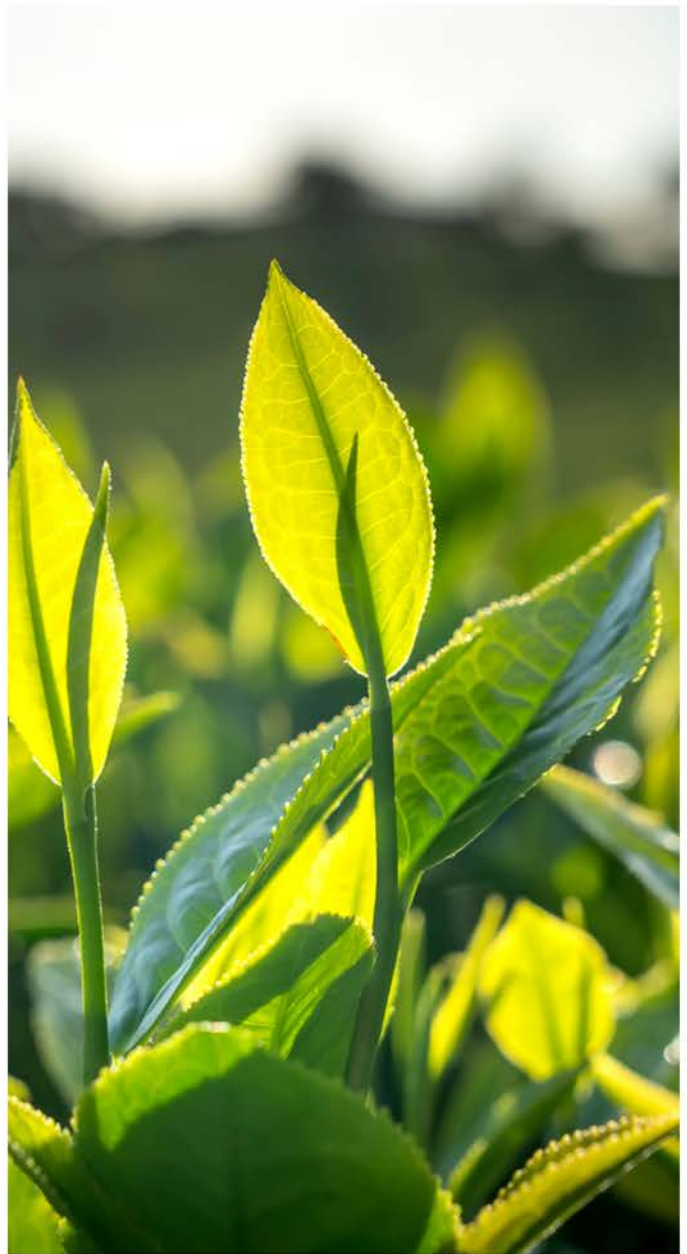
One possible use for this information is to assess areas of strength and weakness. Reflection on the organizational capacity can suggest leadership actions to promote vision, develop process, and clarify structure or build relational collaboration. As new churches take years to develop, this may require monitoring process as well as outcomes. The areas of overlap are also important in the Venn diagram (Figure 6).

“Culture is a long game” (Alan).

How can more than one objective be achieved? One interviewee who acknowledged their organization had not recently been engaged in church planting mentioned that setting aside a budget for faith community formation was part of the visioning process for their denominational office. Then as these new communities of faith started to take shape, a change in the definition of “church” was required to recognize the different approaches being taken, which facilitated their credentialing or authorizing of these new expressions of congregational life.

A regional leader who was reshaping vision statements for their highly engaged church planting agenda was considering how the vision is expressed in all their training agendas so that multiplication is reinforced as a value for the new churches even before they are planted.

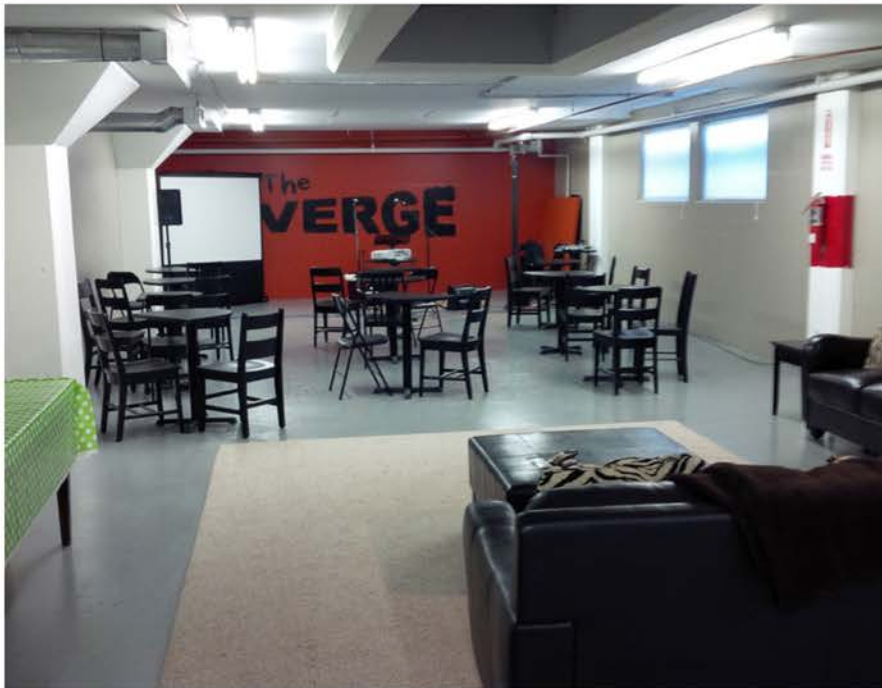
Another experienced leader in an organization experiencing a remarkable growth in church plants described providing access to relevant planter training events for established church pastors. This was intentionally a relationship building exercise and engaged more churches in the vision. The way in which something is done can nudge forward organizational change for more than one priority. Leadership is more art than science and discernment is needed to recognize these opportunities.



Spiritual discernment of next steps could make use of the findings of this report. The cycle depicted in Figure 2 can prompt evaluation of the organizational capacity for each of the points regarding vision, process, and structure.

Welcome to the Future

We acknowledge that God holds the future; we are simply invited to participate in how God is at work. With that acknowledgement the combined experiences of the interviewed leaders offer some possible steps forward. Prayerfully discerning which steps will allow for an organization committed to fostering a multiplication environment to move into the future remains a responsibility of leadership. That being stated, everyone from the local congregations to the national offices can share the vision, engage in some of the processes, and support the structures which allow a multiplication culture to develop and flourish.



Check back with the Institute for more research and resources on congregations in Canada, as we continue to deepen our understanding of church life and its role in shaping Canadian society.

Endnotes

[i] Different terms were used rather than denomination: association, conference, convention, denomination, district, division, fellowship, network, or regional/national church. The denominational organizations had stated a focus on all of Canada or their particular Canadian region. Regional organizations were represented from the east coast to the west coast. While demographic information was not requested, accounts of church plants from the denominational organizational leaders suggested that many church plants were multicultural or engaged with recent immigrants. Thanks to all the interviewees who offered their insight and time.

Thanks to Church Planting Canada for communication support of the survey and reviewers of the draft. Thanks to churches started in last decade which were visited as a regional assessment. For more information: Watson, James W. "New Congregations in the Canadian Kaleidoscope." Wycliffe College, University of Toronto: Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research, 2024.

[ii] Interviewees were offered the opportunity to select a pseudonym for anonymity.

[iii] The dates listed in Figure 1 are not "start dates" but the year of initial registration. In Figure 1 the number of new registrants since 1991, which had not stopped filing by 2021, are shown. As autonomous churches develop to the point when they register as charities, their yearly reports signal their sustained engagement as a church.

[iv] Janzen, Rich, Mark D. Chapman, and James W. Watson. "Integrating Immigrants into the Life of Canadian Urban Christian Congregations: Findings from a National Survey." *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 4 (January 1, 2012): 441–70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-011-0025-2>.

[v] The boxes represent very general categories which can include a variety of activities in the church planting process. Discernment could include community assessment, partners may include forming a core team – the exact actions and timing will vary with each new congregation. The accounts of new churches from the interviewees were diverse ranging from: online churches to neighborhood discussion groups to microchurches to satellite congregations to multi-congregational/multi-lingual churches to single congregational churches.

[vi] For more information: Watson, James W., and Narry F. Santos, eds. *Tentmakers: Multivocational Ministry in Western Society*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022.

[vii] While relational networks at times were the already existing churches, other forms of connection were higher education institutions for students and countries or origin for recent immigrants. For more information: Chapman, Mark, and James W. Watson. "Common Actions: Participatory Action Research as a Practice for Promoting Positive Social Action among and between New Canadian Church Planters and Denominational Leaders." *Ecclesial Practices* 4 (2017): 63–86. <https://doi.org/doi.10.1163/22144471-00401003>.

[viii] Second-tier leadership roles included assistant to the director/superintendent or mission minister and third-tier roles included church planting director.

About This Study

Interviews were conducted with leaders of Canadian denominational organizations with a plan or track record for starting new congregations. Size of organizations ranged from less than a dozen associated churches to more than 1000 and their length of operation varied from a decade to over a century. Three primary questions were asked regarding past timeline of development and implementation of resources for new churches, essential actions accomplished by the organization, and why these efforts were given this level of priority. Essential actions are described from a systems change lens to encourage reflection on future directions of denominational organizations.

Methodology

For this applied research project, selection of candidates for the interviews was triangulated via three assessments:

- An exploratory survey of leaders in denominational organizations found that out of 68 respondents, 46 indicated that they had a plan for starting new congregations.
- New congregational charity registrations with Canada Revenue Agency were reviewed for the period of 1991-2021 to identify denominational organizations with new registrations of churches.
- Public event (worship service of new congregations in last decade) visitation identified organizations engaged in starting new congregations within a region.

Potential interviewees were identified from these points of contact who had direct responsibility within their denominational organization for the support of new churches. There were 30 respondents (6 females and 24 males) representing 25 denominational organizations with two respondents offering email summaries rather than interviews and one withdrawal. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a systems change framework.

About the Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research

The Canadian Institute for Empirical Church Research, an initiative of Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, is committed to supporting those who serve in and research the Canadian Church through data-informed research, tools, encounters, and insights.