



THRIVING IN NEW ENGLAND

A Report of Interviews with New England Pastors and Evangelical Leaders by The Cecil B. Day Foundation

March 2018

Rationale for the Survey

The purpose of this project was to investigate a sampling of thriving New England churches known for their effective evangelism and discipleship strategies. This initiative grew out of the 2017 Barna Study, *“The Spiritual Landscape of New England”*, which highlighted evangelism as a weakness in New England, particularly among well-established churches. It also discovered that **more recent church plants are growing and flourishing with measurable evangelistic results to show for their efforts.**

The Cecil B. Day Foundation has observed an increasing number of thriving churches and ministries having what appear to be **very effective strategies for evangelism and follow-up discipleship.** Since effectiveness can be subjective, we wanted to look beyond merely weekly attendance figures, since anecdotal evidence seemed to suggest many churches were growing at the expense of smaller, and often weaker churches. As conversions and baptisms seem to be the better indicator of true Kingdom increase, we asked for more concrete statistics wherever they were available. Not surprisingly, most of the thriving churches have solid metrics for these as well as other measurable activities.

The churches surveyed represent newer church plants, established churches, and ethnic churches. We sought out both denominational and non-denominational churches, some having elaborate facilities, and others renting space from schools, businesses, and theaters. Although facilities vary widely, there is little or no connection between facility type and evangelistic effectiveness. Styles of worship vary from more traditional to contemporary. Some have multiple services with different styles at each. Others have blended worship combining elements of the traditional and contemporary. **Worship style is not a key factor in determining if a church is thriving. Most appear comfortable in their own style.**

In gathering our research, we asked questions pertaining to the characteristics of these churches and leaders that might be **contagious, transferrable, or otherwise shared with churches that may be stagnant or in decline.** With the assistance of the research department of the Emmanuel Gospel Center in Boston, a questionnaire was developed (see Appendix A) to capture information across some observable key organizational areas. These included **church demographics; governance; leadership characteristics; focused mission and vision; contagious evangelistic approaches; prayer; and other unique dynamics.** In all, **thirty-two thriving churches** were surveyed in 60-90-minute sessions, in most cases with the lead pastor and key staff. Additionally, **nine key leaders from evangelical organizations** were also surveyed and their thoughts captured.

Following is a summary of these meetings organized by the topics mentioned above:

Church Demographics

Of the 32 churches surveyed, the sizes ranged from 100-4000 weekly attendees. This breaks down as follows:

100-249	3
250-499	7
500-749	5
750-999	5
1000-1499	5
1500-1999	2
2000-2999	4
3000-4000	<u>1</u>
Total	32

Most of the churches are in urban and suburban areas with a few in more rural settings, but still within a suburban context. None of these would be considered purely rural churches. **One-third of the churches surveyed are uniquely diverse** - two churches are African-American, three are Hispanic, one is Chinese, and four are intentionally multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. The rest are predominantly Anglo.

All the churches are multi-generational, yet this presented a problem in the ethnic immigrant churches, as the second generation is not as interested in hearing non-English language preaching. In these cases, the churches have investigated having English only alternatives to encourage second-generation attendees who would like to invite their friends to church.

Among these congregations, **larger numbers of Generation X and Millennials attend**, giving rise to healthy youth and children's ministries. These are major focus areas, and significant resources are allocated to keep these ministries operating at high levels of excellence.

Also, along with multi-generational congregations is a stronger desire to embrace diversity in ministry methods, worship and music styles, and even building architecture.

Governance

No common style of church governance prevails within these churches. Some operate with a traditional biblical structure of Elders, Deacons, and Boards. Others have a Board of Directors who oversee the staff, make policy and assist with strategic planning. In these churches, the employed staff, including the pastor, make the day-to-day decisions. A few churches have congregational rule where major decisions are approved by the congregation, but most decisions are made by the staff. Others operate with no membership and no congregational voting. The staff directs nearly everything under the oversight of the Board.

What is common to most thriving churches is the absence of a standing committee structure. Leaders of these churches operate using the gifts and abilities of their people in less structured “task forces” or “action groups” having specific tasks to accomplish over defined periods of time. This is a particularly effective strategy enabling them to adjust quickly to changing environments.

All the churches are careful about financial matters and follow best accounting practices with budgets and monthly reports. However, enough flexibility exists so that **the church is not constrained by budgets from doing its Gospel work.** Pastors are quick to speak with their congregations about unexpected needs, changes in vision and when additional funds must be raised.

Leadership Characteristics

In nearly every case, the key evangelistic driver in thriving churches is the lead pastor. Each pastor surveyed exhibited a passion for the lost and a desire to see people won for Christ. **Most are effective team builders,** and the members of the team share the pastor’s zeal for evangelism. In describing their management style, most are highly intentional about operating within their strength profiles and finding other gifted leaders to fill in where they have weaknesses. Standardized testing is often employed, especially by the church planting organizations, to assess and qualify candidates as planter-pastors. **Each pastor is a strong communicator** and effective preacher. Most are expository preachers, but not exclusively. Topical messages and relevant sermon series based upon the Scriptures may be more common than working through whole books of the Bible.

The pastors are highly relational and collaborative. Most participate in and often lead pastors’ fellowship groups and have a genuine concern for health within the Kingdom of

God. They will often meet with pastors of other denominations and are not at all “siloes” in their view of evangelicalism.

Most are **effective time managers** and understand the importance of family and rest. In many cases, their spouses participate with them in the ministry, and in some cases a co-pastor relationship exists with husband and wife both leading certain aspects of the ministry. All appear to be high energy, high capacity individuals with a clear understanding of intentional progressive leadership versus simply passive management.

All have a **multiplication mindset and want to see their churches reproduce**. This has taken the form of multi-site operations, new church plants, multiple services, multiple types of venues for services, and other creative ways of doing ministry across wider geographic areas. The driving motive for this mindset is evangelism, and most will do extensive research in preparation for launching a new location.

Although most of these leaders have pastor’s hearts, the larger churches have set up systems for other leaders to handle the shepherding aspects of the ministry. This is a common practice for churches above 200-300 congregants as so much time is required for the lead pastor to work directly with the staff on more corporate matters. As effective team builders, **they recognize the pastor’s role is not to do everything**.

Focused Vision and Mission

Each of the leaders surveyed has a **clear vision for the church accompanied by a mission for accomplishing the vision**. Many have this in the form of a published mission, vision, and values document along with various supplemental materials – cards, posters, placards, handouts, etc., designed for distribution to the congregation. In many cases, the mission is displayed throughout the church facility in common areas and in ways easy to maximize exposure. Various slogans and acronyms are shared to make the vision easy to remember and meaningful for the congregation.

These leaders are all **effective at keeping the church’s vision in the forefront of all activities**. The vision is typically cast at the beginning of the church’s year, and calendars are created around the vision. In most cases, if an event or activity is proposed that will not further the vision, it won’t happen. In operating this way, the leaders can create a culture for the church that anticipates effective evangelistic strategies that result in continued growth. One church describes a “zero-based” approach to calendar planning where each September, the calendar is blanked out, and every ministry needs to justify its activities to make sure there is good alignment with the overall mission of the church before it can reserve a date on the calendar.

Strategic planning is common among these churches, and the pastors are nearly all gifted strategists. Most have an executive team to help carry out the strategies and keep the church on task. Planning is often extended out 3-5 years as a response to the leader's vision for the church. This may be the key characteristic for keeping the church moving forward.

Getting and keeping the vision and mission before the congregation is a high priority for these churches, so it is incorporated into the earliest discipleship activities, often through the visitor/new member orientation process. Many churches will have a "Growth Track" style orientation for newcomers that acquaints them with mission, vision, and values of the church. This is beneficial on many levels, but especially for maintaining a culture of taking the "next steps" in the journey of discipleship.

Contagious Evangelistic Approaches

Common among all the churches in this study is their **innovative, creative, and effective evangelistic strategies.** In most cases, we found **evangelism to be a highly relational activity** that is encouraged to flow forth from a healthy, abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. Some of the churches talked about training for evangelism, but this was more often in the well-established churches. **Many newer churches already have developed a culture of evangelism that stresses who disciples of Jesus are, rather than evangelism as a skill they learn to employ.** Evangelism is a core value in these churches.

The interviews produced many discussions about the church's philosophy of evangelism and how to maintain an outward rather than inward focus for the church. The best discussions concluded that **evangelism is never an "either/or" approach, but rather a "both/and" philosophy.** It looks like this: Evangelism is described as an activity that should occur outside the church among all believers. This is *the church scattered*. The *church gathered* becomes the venue where believers and interested seekers can hear more information, experience Christian worship, and get their questions answered. The cycle continues when the seekers come to Christ and then begin their own evangelistic activities among their friends and relatives. This scenario was described in a variety of ways by most of the pastors we interviewed.

The scattered church still has significant times when they come together for the sake of getting the Gospel into the community. Churches have become very creative in their methods and approaches. Many are engaged in sports programs within municipal recreation departments. Some are offering a variety of recovery and support groups. Becoming more common are the collaborative approaches among churches to

accomplish something larger in the community such as a major renovation project, grounds beautification for city parks and playgrounds, and offering community meals. Still others are developing community centers where activities are provided for a variety of training purposes, for food and clothing distribution, and establishing communities for new parents. In more urban areas, ESL and immigrant services are being offered along with housing assistance and household goods provision. Contrary to simply offering the social gospel, such as was seen in the last century, these services are part of a more intentional evangelistic strategy introducing unbelievers to others who love God and love them.

These **churches are finding more favor with municipalities** than they have in a long time. Many churches are meeting in schools and are building relationships with community leaders in school departments, among the police and fire departments, and among business groups such as chambers of commerce and the Rotary.

Within the walls of the church, evangelism is still a major theme among these churches. **Pastors are keeping the mission at the forefront of their preaching and will often give invitations for salvation during the message.** Respondents are often encouraged to meet with the pastor or some designated person(s) for more engagement and understanding. Baptisms are frequent in these churches, and we've seen statistics for annual baptism rates that are astounding. Some churches post the names and dates of new converts on walls for all to see and become motivated to see more. **Celebrations are common** when churches accomplish fruit producing evangelistic activities.

Most of the churches take advantage of holidays to build significant evangelistic thrust. Easter and Christmas are the greatest opportunities, and we heard about some noteworthy activities such as Easter egg hunts, semi-professional theatrical presentations, and large live-nativity events. **Churches are also collaborating** in town fairs, neighborhood block parties, holiday parades, and many other large-scale activities all designed to both impact as well as involve the unchurched. This more public show of cooperation between churches is giving the community a good impression about Christianity and its representatives.

A major shift coming to light over the years has been the number of unbelievers, who, if invited, will come to a church service or activity. They'll often get involved in the activities of the church as they're processing the Gospel message and observing the Christians, often looking for authenticity and genuineness. This shift is still not understood by churches that are stagnant or in decline. However, the thriving churches understand this culture and will make every opportunity for an unbeliever to hear the Gospel through a variety of means.

Another observation worthy of mention is that **thriving churches will seldom, if ever, repeat an activity if the results were ineffective.** Traditional methods for outreach, if not fruitful, will be discontinued and replaced by newer ideas with stronger likelihood of effectiveness.

Prayer

Prayer undergirds most of these ministries. In our interviews, we encountered churches in the middle of extended periods of prayer and fasting for evangelism and revival. This was, in part, due to our visits being in Jan through March when churches are intentionally prayerful about the New Year, as well as the start of the Lenten season. Prayer ministries are thriving, once again, and leaders have told us that collaborative prayer gatherings are well-attended and becoming more frequent. Some New England-wide prayer movements have seen increased interest with intercessors coming as teams from many of the thriving churches.

Pastor's prayer gatherings have been an oasis for many pastors and churches. Here, pastors can bring their concerns to a trusted body of colleagues who will intercede for them as well as provide counsel and guidance.

Formal weekly prayer meetings within the churches are less common. **Small group meetings are often the venue for prayer** as these are where deeper relationships are achieved. We did, however, meet with several pastors who described prayer in their churches as thriving and attended by a majority of the congregation. These are most often African-American or ethnic congregations where prayer has been a prominent part of their DNA. Also, among congregations that may lean more charismatic, gathered intercessory prayer plays a prominent role.

Other Unique Dynamics

Many of the pastors surveyed display a genuine concern for the churches they know of that are slowly dying. **No pastors are pleased to have their growth being the result of another church's decline,** however, sometimes this is the case. The pastors are nearly always willing to help where they can and to aid struggling churches through shared ministry, facilities, and resources. Some are sending staff to fill empty pulpits and teams to assist with revitalizations efforts. Overall, pastors of thriving churches are willing to engage in collaborative efforts for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Discipleship is a key component in strongly evangelistic churches. Most operate some form of “small group” ministry under a variety of different labels. These groups are most often relationship based with some sort of guided curriculum for the leaders to use. The emphasis for nearly every discipleship program is “next steps” helping to move believers along in their Christian journey. Pastors describe discipleship in their churches as a process of moving from one step to the next as various aspects of sanctification are understood and applied. **The goal is always to make disciples who will reproduce.** Strong mentoring and coaching are common as disciples move into leadership roles. A wide variety of effective discipleship tools have been created and used in these churches. Some use materials from more recognized national ministries, others have staff that have tailored materials to their specific use. **All appear to be effective when used consistently.**

Comments from Key Organizational Leaders

Each of the organizational leaders interviewed has a strong passion and desire to see the expansion of Christ’s Kingdom in New England. Some are involved in education, others in church planting and revitalization, and others still in denominational work. They all agree that something powerful and different is happening right now in New England based upon numerous evidences.

When asked about the most effective strategies for evangelism and discipleship, all agree leadership is the critical factor in any church structure. From the highest level, **church leaders must not only be well-equipped in Bible and theology, but must possess the characteristics of strong vision, strategic sensibility, love for people, effective communication skills, and good leadership ability.** A passion for seeing souls saved and disciples multiplied is critical to the qualifications of prospective leaders.

Most of the organizations involved in planting churches possess extensive vetting processes followed by mandatory training programs. Internships are becoming the norm with some lasting a year or more. Mentoring is now becoming a requirement for church planters with strong relationships formed between planters and mentors often lasting for years. The coaching that takes place during this time has proven invaluable to the planters and has helped avoid the pitfalls frequently experienced in the early months and years of the plant.

Sufficient resources are also needed for both church plants and revitalizing churches to achieve sustainability, and in some cases, survival. Church planters who are qualified in every way as evangelists, strategists, and trainers still need adequate financial resources to assure a successful launch and a sustainable future. To this end, several

organizations provide funding for their churches for the initial years until the church can support itself. Increasingly common is for several organizations to partner together to help resource new churches for the first few years. In the jargon of church planting, this has become known as the “Nascar” method due to the multiple sponsors for a single church.

In the cases of revitalization, finances may or may not be an issue, but where strong collaboration exists, **a healthy thriving church can often provide both in-kind as well as financial support** until the struggling church becomes self-sustaining again. Much of the financial information necessary for planters and revitalizers is now being taught at the seminary level as well as within the orientation training given by re-planting organizations.

Survey Summary

It’s apparent thriving churches have leaders who possess **a passion and zeal for evangelism evident at the highest levels**. This assures it will not likely slip to a lower priority or become eclipsed by competing programs and strategies for church growth. Thriving church pastors are strong communicators of vision and mission.

They are able leaders who will **staff to their weakness** with a penchant toward effective team-building. High energy and a capacity for learning are key leadership characteristics, and they build a culture in the church that is concerned about keeping the leadership pipeline full.

A multiplication strategy assures that these churches will continue to grow and expand to new sites. They are deeply dependent upon the Holy Spirit for guidance and will labor in prayer before large decisions are made.

Outreach beyond the walls of the church is stressed continually and strategies are in place to assure the church gathered can become the church scattered at appropriate times. They stress **relational evangelism as a lifestyle** among their congregants, but they’re not reluctant about making Gospel invitations a regular component of their preaching.

Metrics are important, and these pastors can produce vital statistics as evidence of the effectiveness of their strategies. When metrics show something isn’t working, they quickly assess and adjust as necessary.

Collaboration with pastors, churches, and other Christian denominations is normal for these leaders, and they will continue to strengthen the Body of Christ as they accomplish shared tasks with other brethren.

Finally, **accompanying effective evangelism is effective discipleship**. These pastors and leaders understand the necessity for Christians to reproduce themselves as disciples who make disciples. They see these as two sides to the same coin and vitally necessary to fulfill the Great Commission.

The Cecil B. Day Foundation offers this report with the hope that churches and ministries throughout New England will see that thriving is a matter of understanding the culture and making changes where needed to bring the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to that culture.

New England has become a mission field, and effective missional strategies must be understood and employed. Churches failing to engage their local community and its unique challenges will continue to suffer decline. However, those willing to investigate and adapt the evangelism and discipleship strategies outlined in this report have a much greater chance of not only surviving but thriving in the coming years. May God grace and power be the preeminent forces for accomplishing His will for His Church!

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Name _____ Date _____

Ministry _____ Size _____

1. Church Demographics

- a. How many people were baptized in 2017 _____ 2016 _____?
- b. Do you have demographics breakdowns of members, congregants?

2. Governance

- a. What is your staff structure? Lay leader structure? (prompt: elders? council? ministry leaders?)
- b. How are decisions made?
- c. How do you develop your leaders? Formal process? Informal emphasis?

3. Leadership Characteristics

- a. What do you believe are your strongest leadership characteristics?
- b. What leadership characteristics do you look for in your staff and lay leadership?
- c. Are there any leadership qualities or characteristics that you are currently working to improve?

4. Focused Mission & Vision

- a. What are the 3 things you emphasize most from the pulpit?
- b. What are the churches top ministry priorities?
- c. What is your mission/vision?
- d. How much emphasis do you place on congregants' understanding the mission/vision?

5. Contagious Evangelistic Approaches

- a. Are there any evangelism or discipleship models that you have incorporated into your work?
- b. What books or articles have particularly inspired your discipleship or evangelism approach?

6. Prayer

- a. What prayer networks are you or your leaders involved in?
- b. Outside of Sunday service and small groups, are there other corporate prayer gathering or opportunities for congregants?
- c. What is your main prayer right now for your city?
- d. What is your main prayer right now for your church?

7. Other

- a. What is the greatest challenge you are currently facing as a leader?
- b. What is the greatest challenge for your church right now?
- c. How might the Day Foundation support you in your ministry?
- d. What didn't I ask today that I should have?
- e. How can we pray for you today?