State of the Bay

Church Planting

A cooperative report by
Bay Area Church Planting Network, Stratum
and Transforming the Bay with Christ

August 2025

Introduction

The San Francisco Bay Area has an outsized impact on the rest of the nation and the world. Throughout history it has served as the seedbed for cultural, educational and technological innovations impacting people far and wide. It is also a place filled with precious image bearers, too many of whom do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Sadly, the average Bay Area inhabitant is three times less likely to identify as an evangelical Christian than in the rest of the country according to research done by the American Bible Society in 2025.

These realities present us with an incredible opportunity. If the Bay Area can be reached with the gospel, the impact will be felt both at home and from afar. Much glory will be given to God and the power of the gospel will be made manifest.

It is for this purpose that the Bay Area Church Planting Network, Stratum and Transforming the Bay with Christ have come together to report on the state of church planting in the Bay Area. Church planting is one of our greatest needs and one of the most effective ways to reach more people with the gospel. These three organizations want to see an increase in healthy planting that will move us towards the realization of the gospel opportunity that is before us.

To that end, we have sought to shed light on the past and current state of planting in the Bay Area with the hope that we will be better equipped to make sound, Spirit-led decisions for next steps in the coming days. In pursuit of that goal, this report includes:

- A Brief History of Church Planting in the Bay Area
- A Review of Current Planting Initiatives
- Perspectives from Current Planters
- A Look at Innovative Strategies
- Vision and Metrics Considerations
- Risk and Mitigation Strategies
- Lessons from Another City

Many pastors today are celebrating what they perceive to be an exceptional season of church unity. It is our sincere prayer that this unity will become the seedbed of a growing church planting movement that will result in many Bay Area dwellers coming into relationship with Jesus Christ.

A Brief History of Church Planting in the Bay Area

> By 1866, there were thirty-one saloons for every place of worship.
>
> - David Talbot, author of *Season of the Witch*

The San Francisco Bay Area is a metropolis whose roots are in the pursuit of wealth and fortune. The early prehistory of the Ohlone peoples and the Catholic mission movement is disconnected from the real engine of Bay Area growth which emerged in the late 1800's. That engine was the legendary discovery of gold and the rowdy "rush" to San Francisco it spawned. In 1846 there were a mere 200 people in what was then called Yerba Buena. Three years later, there were 25,000 people in what was now officially called San Francisco. These were not pilgrims pursuing a promised land. They were opportunists giving chase to gold and glory.

The early themes of the Bay Area origin story shape the history that follows and impact the way we think about planting churches here. Those who have been called to plant here know how strategic a place it is and are familiar with the outsized cultural impact the Bay Area has on the rest of the country and even the world. Just as the Apostle Paul sought to start churches in strategic cities, it is good that we seek to plant in the Bay Area. Like Paul, however, we need Areopagus-level cultural insight to break through to the people of a region that was founded without faith and has never once experienced revival. A short history of the Bay Area and the growth of the church within it will lay a foundation for this work and provide some insight regarding the challenges and opportunities before us.

The First Gold Rush

Between 1846 and 1906 the population of San Francisco grew from 200 to 400,000 and San Francisco was a being talked about as the "Paris of the West." Infrastructure building during this time was intense as mines, homes, businesses, railroads and even a few churches were built. Two prominent ethnic minorities also arrived during this period. Chinese workers came to help with mines and railroad construction and African American workers came to Oakland to work as Pullman porters. Businesses started, including the now familiar Wells Fargo, Levi Strauss and Ghirardelli. The U.S. Mint was established and the transcontinental railroad was completed. Cal Berkeley and Stanford University were launched. Around all these grew up the services and industries required to tend to the needs of the population.

Churches were started too, although at a pace below what was needed. These included the First Baptist (1849), St. Mark's Lutheran (1849), Third Baptist (1852, originally First Colored Baptist), Presbyterian Church in Chinatown (1853, originally called the Presbyterian Chinese Mission), Calvary Presbyterian (1854), Bethel AME (1856) and Episcopal Church of St. John the Evangelist (1857). During this period, mainline denominations started their "First" churches in San Jose, Oakland, Fremont and Berkeley. Tellingly, most of these were initiated by newly arrived residents voluntarily banding together to establish a church of a denomination already familiar to them. Thus, the roots of San Francisco after the mission era are largely absent any large-scale driving religious mission impulse. Church starts were chasing population growth.

The 1906 earthquake and fire halted the rapid development of this period as over 80% of the city was destroyed and more than half the population left homeless. The radical shake-up spawned a new season of growth outside of San Francisco as people left the city and settled in the relatively undeveloped areas adjacent to it. As these new communities bloomed into existence, mainline churches appeared among them.

The Second Gold Rush

From the 1906 earthquake until the Second World War, the Bay Area population grew from 650,000 to 1.7 million and church starts followed the trajectory of this growth. Society at the time was generally much more Christian than it is now. One powerful example is from Easter Sunday 1939, when 10,000 people gathered for a Sunrise service at Cragmont Park in Berkeley. That was 10% of the population of the city at the time - all gathered in one worship service. On San Francisco's Mt. Davidson Easter Sunrise crowds were reported to be as large as 75,000 in 1942. But it was after the Second World War, during what historian Marilynn Johnson calls "The Second Gold Rush," that the population surged and, with the preoccupation of the war over, a wave of churches were planted to keep pace.

During World War II, 1,647,174 military personnel had passed through the region on their way to the Pacific theater. 747 of the ships carrying them were built in the Bay Area. After glimpsing the beauty of the region, many of these soldiers vowed to return and settle here. After the war, they made good on their promise and the overall population of the Bay Area grew rapidly. Places like Daly City, Santa Clara and Walnut Creek quadrupled in size.

Churches located in city centers followed the movement of their people to these fast-growing suburbs, in many cases relocating to campuses with more space in newer areas. They also started new churches in places further out. It was a time of rapid growth that coincided with a national trend towards higher levels of church attendance. In the late 50's, church membership in the U.S. rose to 63.3%, reaching its all-time peak. This growth, however, was largely structural, absent the inner revival dynamics characteristic of a deeper spiritual renewal. That inner renewal would come with the emergence of the countercultural movement of the 60's. Though there was a Christian dimension to the 60's, the spirituality of the era was in large part non-Christian. What Christian renewal did occur tended not to be structural - the Jesus People Movement, the ministry of Ray Stedman and the Peninsula Bible Church, Calvary Chapel - meaning that the number of new church starts fell by the 70's thus ending the post-war period of church planting.

The Third Gold Rush

The seeds of the third gold rush were sown during the Second World War as the U.S. military located key engineering facilities in a farming region of San Jose known as "Valley of Heart's Delight." Under the shepherding of a visionary military engineer and Stanford professor named Fred Terman, a tech-supportive ecosystem began to emerge in the region and by 1971 the Valley of Heart's Delight had become "Silicon Valley."

What Silicon Valley has done to the church in the region is a story that is still unfolding. On the one hand, it has attracted bright, energetic and motivated people from all over the U.S. and the world. Some arrive with their Christian faith already in hand. Some are seeking to escape the Christian context from which they come. A few find faith after arriving in the Bay Area.

The larger story, however, is that success and wealth tend to make it harder to find faith. And the persistently low Christian presence in the Bay Area means that non-Christians are less exposed to the gospel. Thus, the Bay Area has become evidence that it really is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Bay Area church leaders and church planters know this narrative all too well, often battling valiantly not to succumb to the same despairing question Jesus' disciples asked, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus' response to his disciples then and now is hopeful, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Moreover, we often see that ground that lies dormant eventually becomes ready to be seeded again. Something like this may be occurring in the Bay Area, especially with Gen Z, Millennials and, to a lesser extent, Gen Xers. In a recent study conducted by the American Bible Society, John Plake summarizes the findings:

> Though the Bay Area is home to fewer Christians and more atheists than the United States as a whole, it is teeming with opportunity. The majority of people in the younger generations are curious, open, and even wish they read the Bible more.

If this truly is an emergent trend, it aligns with current findings present throughout the US and even the West regarding Christian practice among younger generations. These are hopeful signs.

From Challenge to Opportunity

As we've seen in this brief history, the societal roots of the Bay Area are not connected to the gospel in any meaningful way. From the point it began to grow in the 1840's, the Bay Area did not have any notably strong Christian influence. There has never been a significant revival movement in the Bay Area. The transiency of the "gold rush" mindset and the diversity that characterizes a global, cosmopolitan city make it more challenging to build the kind of community essential to Christian life. Widespread wealth and success can be a spiritual barrier to the gospel. Generations of a thin and spotty Christian presence make it rarer for Bay Area inhabitants to encounter Christ.

In the face of all these challenges, Bay Area church planting has, at best, merely chased after population growth. This is not to diminish the spiritual impact of that work but it is to acknowledge the dream of a church planting movement that exceeds population growth. Such a movement would signify a genuine expansion of Christianity in the Bay Area, a genuine manifestation of kingdom growth and a reaching of many lost souls.

There are encouraging signs of openness towards the gospel in the Bay Area, especially among the younger generations. This ought to embolden and encourage us. There is a growing Bay Area Christian ecosystem and a coming together of Bay Area church planting ministries, which we will explore in the next section. Pastors in the Bay Area widely report that unity among them is at an all time high. New prayer movements such as Pray the Bay have emerged. Lastly, and most hopefully, we still have the words of Jesus, "with God, all things are possible." This then might just be the right time for a renewal of church planting cooperation and energy resulting in a level of church planting never before seen in the Bay Area.

Current Initiatives

Church Planting flourishes best within a larger "gospel ecosystem." This is especially true in reaching large urban centers where societal elements are layered together tightly. In such environments the potential is high for synergistic relationships that multiply the effectiveness of each ministry. Components of a gospel ecosystem include:

- A unified prayer and fasting movement
- Churches that focus on engaging the community evangelistically and making disciples intentionally
- Genuine and visible unity among Christian leaders, churches and denominations
- A robust church planting initiative that supports planters and galvanizes established churches to partner in planting even more churches
- A marketplace movement that mobilizes leaders for kingdom impact
- Justice and mercy ministries that serve people in need
- Schools and initiatives that support families
- Theological training that is local and broadly accessible to Christian leaders

We are encouraged to see many of these components present in the Bay Area already and when it comes to church planting, they are cause for hope. These include:

- Transforming the Bay with Christ
- Foster the Bay
- CityTeam
- Mobilize Love
- Bay Area Rescue Mission
- Pray the Bay
- Faith, Work and Tech
- Bay Area School of Ministry
- Alpha

The presence of these ministries and many others is critical to the work of planting churches. Some precede the work of planting by creating a more favorable perception of the church generally. Some foster evangelism increase the churches' ability to disciple well. Prayer efforts provide an essential undergirding for it all. Any growing planting movement in the Bay Area will need to support and work cooperatively with all of the other elements of the gospel ecosystem.

With respect to church planting, there is also an ecosystem within the ecosystem. Several organizations are currently working towards the goal of planting and supporting new churches. The three primary efforts are:

- The Bay Area Church Planting Network (est. 2013)
- Transforming the Bay with Christ (est. 2013)
- Stratum (est. 2018)

In addition to these, the Bayseed Collective is present and a new effort, called the California Co-Op is coming online. The Bayseed Collective is in a season of transition and will be developing a renewed strategy while the California Co-Op is in its beginning phase.

The church planting ecosystem is also inhabited by denominational church planting initiatives and national church planting networks. These include Send, Association of Related Churches (ARC) and Stadia. Exponential, a training and convening movement for church planters, also has an annual conference in the Bay Area.

There is currently a renewed undertaking to align the efforts of all organizations focused on planting churches in the Bay Area. The purpose of this report and the accompanying survey is in part to facilitate the process of alignment as the leaders of all these organizations gather to develop a comprehensive church planting vision that facilitates their working together.

Church Planter Perspectives

In the Spring of 2025, BACPN, TBC and Stratum partnered to survey Bay Area church planters on their experience planting in the region. The goal was to evaluate how the three ministries have been effective in helping launch churches and where improvement is needed in order to plant more churches, to plant them at a higher rate and to support them better. The strong response from the planters was an encouraging sign that Bay Area planters are eager to help create the kind of ecosystem that will foster a dynamic church planting movement.

Findings

The survey confirmed that good things are taking place with respect to church planting in the Bay Area. Stratum and Echo/BACPN were praised for having effectively supported many church planters by providing community, training and coaching. In addition, the Startup Church Fund has given an amazing $ $8,590,465.47 to finance 45 church plants in the Bay Area. The high participation of the planters in the survey is evidence of the goodwill they have towards these Bay Area church planting ministries and the hope they have for ongoing partnership together.

A good number of sending churches, national networks and denominations have also contributed significantly to the launching of Bay Area plants. Any further development in the collective planting strategy will need to maintain partnership with these contributors and seek to build upon the good will that has already been developed.

The survey also revealed a number of opportunities for growth and improvement. Identifying and evaluating these opportunities will help clarify the way forward as we seek to increase our planting capacity together. What follows is a summary of the survey findings with a focus on tangible and specific opportunities for improvement. A more detailed breakdown of the findings can be found in the appendix.

Training

A number of opportunities for improvement relate to training planters for the work of planting. The planters indicated they would like more help with:

- Navigating societal issues
- Understanding Bay Area culture
- Developing leaders
- Strategic planning
- Organizational development
- Ecclesiology
- Developing a theological vision
- "Nuts and bolts" of planting, including:
    - Logistics
    - Church Governance
    - Evangelism
    - Fundraising and Budgeting
    - Conflict Resolution
    - Hiring and firing
    - Time Management
    - Family Care
    - Spiritual Warfare, Discouragement
    - Building a Core Team

In addition to these, planter feedback indicated it would be helpful for us to:

- Raise up trainers and coaches who understand Bay Area culture
- Provide a comprehensive training pathway that unifies the efforts of the various Bay Area church planting ministries

Beyond asking planters what they need, which can yield incomplete results, a survey of the highly rated church planting training curriculum can also serve to highlight areas of training need that are not yet being addressed within the Bay Area church planting ecosystem. A collaborative review of the top-shelf training curriculum is in planning stages.

Discovery and Development

Identifying planters and shepherding them towards assessment is a critical need for increasing the number of plants in the Bay Area. Some of our most creative thinking will need to be done in this arena since this is an unsolved challenge not only in the Bay Area but throughout the U.S. and beyond. To start, however, current planters told us

how they discovered their calling and this gives us insight into how we might raise up the next wave of planters. It will be helpful to…

- Remind established church pastors that they have a huge role in helping identify and raise up planters (61% of planters were encouraged towards planting by their pastor)
- Encourage planters to bring potential future planters along with them in their planting journey
- Explore ways to widen the second career pathway into planting for those who are gifted and called to plant (19% of those surveyed planted as a second career)
- Consider establishing a residency program to nurture potential future planters
- Encourage youth and college leaders to highlight church planting as a vocational pathway

Assessment

Assessment was highly ranked in its helpfulness but not all planters were assessed. It may be valuable for the Bay Area planting ministries to provide an assessment center. This will be especially important as we scale the number of plants.

Coaching

At a minimum, we can ensure coaching happens via some source, whether it be a denomination, a national network or one of the Bay Area planting ministries. There is a yearning among planters to have coaches who understand Bay Area culture, which is often not the case with a coach who does not live locally and delivers their coaching online.

Geography

There may be planting opportunities in Marin County and Contra Costa County especially. If plants are already happening there, they may need support that they are not currently getting from BACPN, Stratum and TBC.

Funding

There are a number of initiatives afoot to fund Bay Area church plants. TBC/Stratum, California Co-Op and Bayseed Collective are all seeking to provide funding. BACPN provides smaller stipends backed up by larger gifts from Echo Church. Other "pillar" churches in the Bay Area are providing support at a high level and many medium to small churches are involved as well. Denominations and national networks are also chipping in. Lastly, some creative solutions to providing housing for planters in high cost regions are being developed and could become part of the overall funding solution. Among these are *Sycamore Equity* and *Aslan Housing Foundation*.

This diversity of support is to be greatly celebrated and suggests there is a strong desire to see a growing number of plants in the Bay Area. Whatever is done in the future, it will be important to respect, affirm and nurture the contributions of all these parties.

At the same time, it is common knowledge that the Bay Area cost of living is abnormally high and the planters in the survey indicated that there is need for funding more. To increase funding would be to reduce one aspect of stress that planters find extreme at times. The majority of plants begin without having raised even half of the first two years of funding required and many indicate that fundraising is a significant source of stress. Many may not even be considering the longer-term issues of home ownership and retirement, the kinds of concerns that get sidelined amidst the intensity of the launch phase.

Increasing funding to planters needs to be done carefully. Some measure of discomfort seems to be a necessary part of the planting process as it calls forth faith and action from the planter. Some planting organizations in the Bay Area and elsewhere have felt they have "over-funded" planters in some cases. Fundraising is a catalyst for building a network of support that may extend far beyond finances and include prayer, people, non-cash gifts, coaching and more. A critical need will be to develop a funding pathway that appreciates the delicate nature of the fundraising process and the potential it has as a mechanism through which God can work in manifold ways.

Establishing

A missing element in the current Bay Area church planting ecosystem is a pathway for helping plants cross over from "church plant" status to "established church" status. There is an absence of language and process around becoming an established church that was evident in the survey and in conversations with planting leaders and planters. The benefit of creating a pathway towards becoming an established church is manifold. 1) It helps to focus the energy of the planter into developing the elements of the church

that will lead to lasting and fruitful ministry. 2) It gives direction to the training, coaching, funding and other planter support processes so that resources can be deployed in the most effective ways. 3) It provides an opportunity for celebrating church plants and church planters beyond the initial launch phase and after they have served faithfully in the work of planting.

Networking and Mobilization

The survey focused on church planters but a key aspect of increasing capacity is networking and mobilizing the established churches of the Bay Area around the goal of planting more churches. A survey of established churches is planned for the future and already a number of initiatives are being discussed for harnessing and focusing the resources and giftedness present in the churches of the Bay Area for planting.

Innovative Strategies

> Preserve the core, stimulate progress.
>
> -Jim Collins in *Built to Last*

The gospel message is the same everywhere, all the time. It encounters people, however, who are steeped in lifestyles and thought patterns unique to their time and place. We don't innovate the gospel but we can innovate the way we engage society with the gospel. Throughout history, faithful Christians have developed innovative engagement practices and have seen great fruitfulness as a result.

In the 14th century, John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English making it accessible to the average person. Martin Luther produced a German translation of the Bible in 1522. Many other translations followed with their widespread dissemination being facilitated by the emergence of the printing press. These innovations made it possible for more people to access the unchanging gospel.

In 1904-1905, Evan Roberts realized he could stand outside the Welsh coal mines and preach to the miners as they came and went. What followed is known as the Welsh Revival.

The Bay Area is ripe for innovation for a number of reasons. First, Bay Area culture is genuinely unique. Ministry leaders in the Bay Area often discover that what works in other places does not work here. Second, the Bay Area is itself innovative and deeply values innovation. Innovation is part of the fabric of Bay Area culture. Third, the Bay Area's push towards new technologies is actually leading to the emergence of new philosophical perspectives that have implications for all of life. As artificial intelligence muscles in, the number of philosophical questions it raises will only increase. What gospel openings do these questions introduce? Fourth, the Bay Area is uniquely liberal, transient, diverse, secular and expensive. These realities challenge many of the standard approaches to Christian expansion because they are not common to many areas where Christianity is flourishing. At the same time, we have to believe each of these challenges comes with gospel opportunities as well - the gospel pertains to all of life. Innovation is the act of finding those gospel openings.

The point of these musings is to convey the importance of innovation in the work of church planting in the Bay Area. One of the key Bay Area assets is the abundance of sharp and creative minds. Unleashing those minds to help develop innovative approaches to church planting - and the evangelistic work it stands on - must be an

ingredient in the work of reaching Bay Area people with the gospel. As Tim Keller tweeted in 2023,

> In 2000 years, we've never learned how to do mission in a place that was post-Christian rather than pre-Christian. If you're in ministry, it's going to take all of your life to help the church figure out how to do this.

This is truer in no place more than the Bay Area.

With all this in mind, we have sought to identify innovative approaches to church planting and evangelism currently present in the Bay Area. We realize God could be doing things we are as yet unaware of and we hope they will become known to us so that we can celebrate them and learn from them.

Here are some of the approaches we are seeing to be effective. Some are innovative and some have been around long enough to be called merely effective. The thinness of the list suggests this remains an area of great opportunity.

- Alpha. Many church plants have embraced Alpha as a key way to reach people far from God. The presence of an Alpha ministry in a church makes explicit the church's focus on evangelism and gives congregants a clear pathway for evangelistic activity.

- CityTeam. A promising initiative within CityTeam is to marry the expansive reach of its food pantries and other mercy ministries with discipleship efforts and ultimately church planting. The food pantries generate a pool of spiritually curious people who, once discipled, have the potential to become the core group of a new church. The current difficulty in this initiative is discovering and preparing planters to shepherd these groups.

- Proxima. This new initiative takes a missions approach to evangelism in the Bay Area. The Proxima missionaries explore what is entailed in reaching those seemingly furthest from God. They focus on evangelistic and pre-evangelistic work and, as missionaries, can give this work full attention. They serve as practitioners and coaches for others seeking to do the same.

- Kingdom Clubs. San Francisco High School students have mobilized to "share the Good News in every school" under the banner of "Kingdom Clubs." They gather for discipleship, leadership development and community building. Instagram reports are that over 1500 students have participated.

In the book of Acts, God uses all kinds of serendipitous events as the catalyst for new churches. Demon possessions, earthquakes, riverside prayer meetings, lecture halls - all these become implements of the Spirit to facilitate faith awakenings. We look forward to what God will do in the Bay Area to accomplish the same.

Vision and Metrics

Measuring church planting effectiveness is notoriously complicated. Spiritual outcomes defy quantification as the inner workings of an individual and a church add up to so much more than numbers. As a result, many churches and movements have given up on attempting to keep metrics on their progress. While understandable, there is a loss associated with this since metrics form an important part of structuring activity, monitoring effectiveness and communicating with stakeholders.

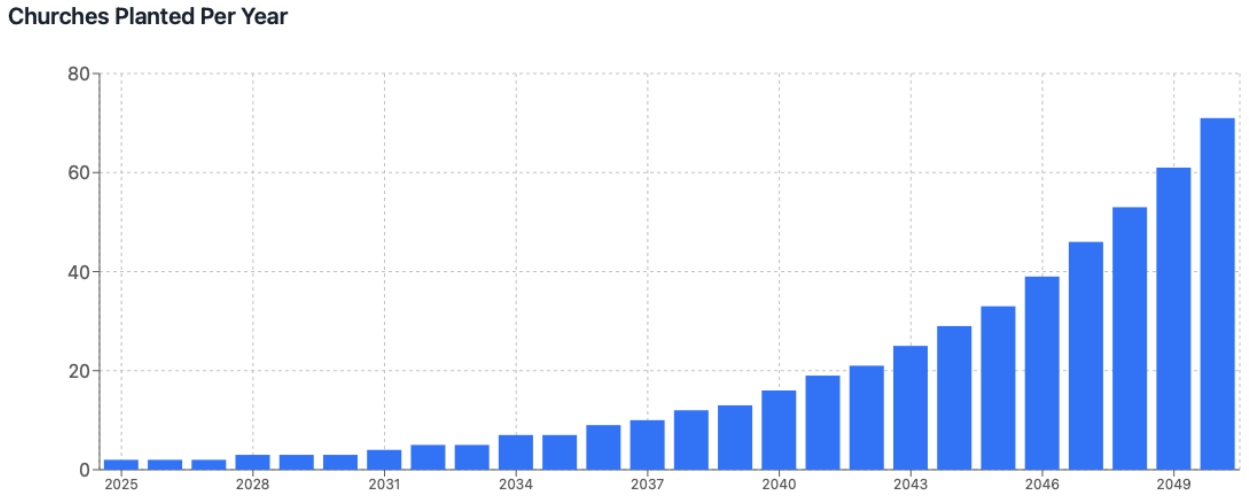
In the church context, a helpful distinction is to separate metrics into two categories: "faithfulness" and "fruitfulness." Faithfulness metrics measure our consistency in doing the things that lead to effective planting: discovering and developing planters, assessing, training, coaching, etc. Fruitfulness metrics measure the impact of those efforts: conversions, new church starts, baptisms, etc. The value of the faithfulness/fruitfulness distinction is the way it loosely differentiates between what we can primarily "control" and what only God can do. We can be faithful to do certain things. God brings the fruit. At the deepest level, of course, even what we seemingly control is dependent upon God but the differentiation is helpful at the execution level.

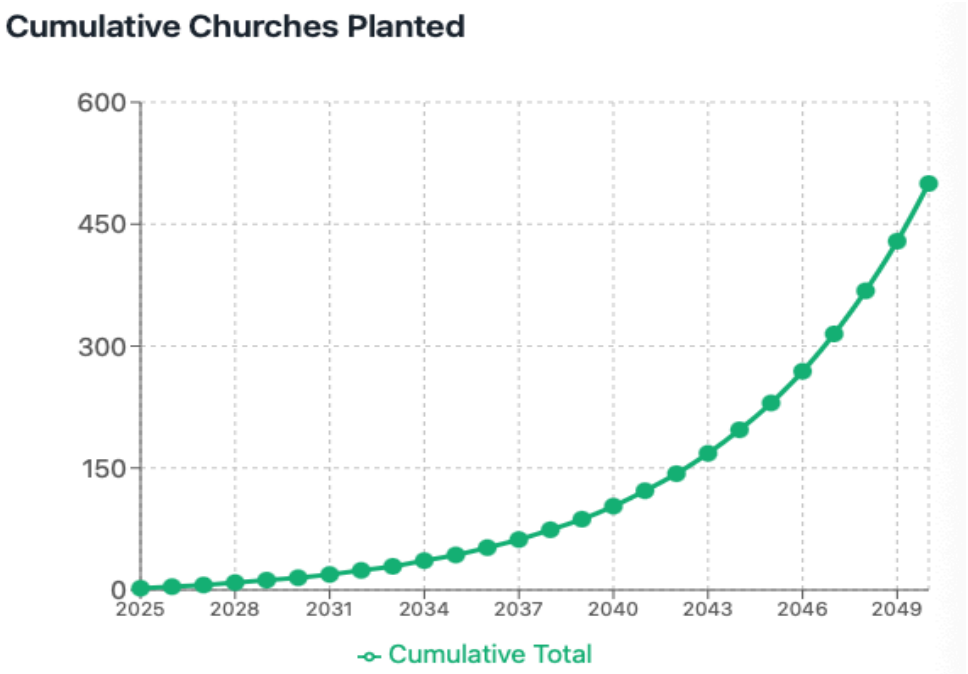
With the faithfulness/fruitfulness distinction in mind, the collective church planting leadership in the Bay Area can determine what it hopes to do as a set of activities and what it prayerfully asks that the Lord might accomplish in the Bay Area. Having these targets and measuring progress towards them helps in several ways. It serves to align collective efforts around specific tasks that are knowable by all parties. It makes clear what systems need to be developed and by when in order to support the level of ministry we hope to accomplish. For example, if we hope to plant 500 churches by 2050 and we assume the growth will be exponential, we will need to have the systems in place to support 9 plants per year by the year 2036. This information helps us decide when to form what systems and how much capacity they need to have.

Consistent metrics also help us communicate well to our stakeholders. Unlike in a church setting where people are physically gathered on a regular basis, it can be difficult for network partners to get a sense of what God is doing through the ministry. Faithfulness and fruitfulness metrics help provide a snapshot of what is happening. Lastly, consistent metrics provide perspective and insight for church planting leaders so that course corrections can be made earlier rather than later. If, for example, we are not discovering enough planters to meet our goals, we know this is an area where extra attention and creativity is needed and we can allocate resources accordingly.

Visionary Goals

There are numerous ways to set a church planting goal. The Bay Area Church Planting Network has set the goal of reaching 1% of the Bay Area by planting 250 churches that will plant 250 churches by 2050. Assumptions are that the average size and conversion growth rate of these plants will result in the goal of reaching around 75,000 people, which is 1% of the Bay Area population. This was initially publicized at the 2024 summer "In-the-Trenches" gathering. If growth occurs exponentially, the yearly path to 500 by 2050 looks like this:





Year-by-Year Breakdown

Year	Churches Planted	Cumulative Total
2025	2	2
2026	2	4
2027	2	6
2028	3	9
2029	3	12
2030	3	15
2031	4	19
2032	5	24
2033	5	29
2034	7	36
2035	7	43
2036	9	52
2037	10	62
2038	12	74
2039	13	87
2040	16	103
2041	19	122
2042	21	143
2043	25	168
2044	29	197
2045	33	230
2046	39	269
2047	46	315
2048	53	368
2049	61	429
2050	71	500

The 500 by 2050 goal is intended to foster reaching an additional 1% of the Bay Area population with the gospel by that date. Currently 2-7% of Bay Area residents identify as evangelical Christian - depending on how we define "active evangelical" - so this is a significant leap forward.

There are other ways to look at the need and the goal. A common church planting metric is the rate of multiplication. If there are 2000 evangelical churches in the Bay Area, reaching a rate of 71 new churches per year is a growth rate of almost 3% per year. A 3% per year growth rate is high for the secular west at this time but still short of the ideal, which is probably in the neighborhood of 5-10%.

Another metric is "church per residents." The Lausanne Movement sets the ideal goal for any community at one church per 1000 residents. The Bay Area is currently at one church per 3500 residents. Adding 500 churches would put the Bay Area at one church per 3000, not counting closures. Thus even with this remarkable effort of planting 500 churches the Bay Area count of churches per 1000 would still be on the low side.

It is also common to measure how many people identify as Christian or how many attend church in a particular region. The Pew Research Center has measured that 46% of people in the Bay Area identify as Christian (2023-2024). While this seems high, it is among the top three least Christian metro areas in the U.S. The challenge with "identity" as a metric is that many people who don't actually have a relationship with Jesus identify culturally as Christian while at the same time they have zero participation in a church. Attendance is also problematic because of variations in the frequency of attendance. A person who attends once a year is not the same as a person who attends 2-3 times per month.

It is helpful to be aware of historic trends of population growth in the Bay Area. From 1975-1995, the population grew by 30%. From 1995-2010, the growth rate was 13%. The peak population of the Bay Area was in 2020 and it is down 1% since then, though it has recently started to grow again. To date, church planting growth has largely followed population growth. This pattern will need to be reversed if the planting goals are to be reached.

Risks and Mitigation

Many great projects fall by the wayside because the risks associated with them have not been properly understood and solutions have not been adequately explored. Church culture may be more susceptible to this phenomena because it tends to be idealistic, under-resourced, faith-driven and addressing issues that are difficult to quantify. The scope of church ministry is so broad that it can feel impractical to take the time to evaluate projects from a risk stand point. It is true that many things cannot be anticipated (unknown unknowns), but many things can be (known unknowns). With those risks that are knowable, it is worth seeking to solve or mitigate them before they arise. In conversations with the key church planting ministries in the Bay Area and pastors more generally, it is clear that several types of risks exist and could threaten the work. What follows is an effort to articulate those risks and suggest possible ways to mitigate them. This will enable decision-makers and stakeholders to more easily address them. As additional risks emerge - and we know they will - a similar approach can be taken.

Skepticism About Church Planting

A still common criticism of church planting voiced by pastors, Christian leaders and congregants is some version of the question, "Why do we need more churches, why can't we just make existing churches bigger?" In a 2002 article entitled, *Why Plant Churches*, Tim Keller addresses this question suggesting three answers.

- We plant churches because we want to be true to the biblical mandate.
- We plant churches because we want to be true to the great commission.
- We plant churches because we want to continually renew the whole body of Christ.

More recently, the 2018 report by the Pinetops Foundation entitled The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050 concludes that "Church planting is the single most effective strategy we know for reaching the lost and the previously affiliated." To these can be added many other voices and many additional reasons. There is, ultimately, a strong rationale for planting churches but this rationale has not been fully communicated and absorbed by the larger Christian community. There is likely no way to win over everyone to the value of planting but a helpful mitigation

strategy will include a communication effort that makes the case for planting in a biblical, winsome and compelling way. There will be other misconceptions about planting that will need to be similarly addressed.

Theological Disagreement

Theological disagreements also threaten to impede the work of planting churches together. The problem is generally not that there are disagreements. Every believer, every church and every Christian organization must be free to interpret the Bible. The challenge is in determining how we hold those differences while remaining in partnership and when those differences are significant enough to make planting churches together untenable. A church planting movement that seeks to unify and mobilize across denominational lines will do well to ground its understanding of biblical faithfulness both in what it affirms as non-negotiable and in what it classifies as negotiable.

The clarity process begins with the adoption of a statement of faith, the purpose of which is to delineate the organization's non-negotiable beliefs. Many denominations have sound faith statements but none would be appropriate for a multi-denominational movement. The same could be said about the faith statements of national church planting networks. Traditional faith statements like the Apostle's and the Nicene Creed have undeniable lasting power and are universally accepted but neither of these is detailed enough for the requirements of a church planting movement, especially as relates to the theology of the Bible. Modern ecumenical faith statements are largely more "liberal" than the collective beliefs of those individuals, churches and organizations at the heart of the current Bay Area planting movement. Thus, apart from creating a new faith statement, there seems only to be one viable candidate and that is the Lausanne Movement statement of faith. The Lausanne Movement faith statement is evangelical and widely accepted. It is not a perfect statement - nowhere does it mention hell - but it is likely the strongest candidate. We note that the Houston Church Planting Network has embraced it as well.

The strengths of the Lausanne Movement statement of faith are many. It is detailed but not unwieldy. It speaks not only to doctrine but also to posture, especially as relates to repentance, mission and evangelism. It is laser focused on the mission of God, especially evangelism, which is appropriate for a movement of church planters. It highlights the importance of biblical unity, cooperation and partnership - a key element of any church planting movement that seeks to unite across denominational lines. Settling on a statement of faith, whether the Lausanne Movement's or another will be an essential part of mitigating risk.

Theological disagreements also typically involve secondary and tertiary theological beliefs and these aren't often addressed in broader faith statements. For planting purposes, many of these secondary and tertiary beliefs can be left as negotiables, open to the interpretation of the individual, church or organization involved in the partnership. In conversations with the current planting ministries, there are two that it is felt need to be addressed.

Sexual ethics. All parties in the church planting ecosystem agree that failing to define a biblical sexual ethic will leave the movement open to conflict and disagreement that will likely be destructive. This may not mean that a written or publicized statement needs to be made but that at the core of the movement there is to be agreement on what a biblical sexual ethic entails.

Church Leadership and Gender. In conversations with Bay Area planting leaders and in reviewing the history of the movement, it is likely that this topic will need to be handled with care. Like with all beliefs, beliefs on this topic are deeply held and unity will be aided when there is recognition of this reality within a context of robust relationship. The current precedent is that those holding differing views on the subject are willing to prioritize unity and partnership over separation. There may be some who would lean towards separation over this issue, which may not be entirely avoidable. What appears to be the best way forward for the sake of the larger mission of God in reaching people and planting churches is to foster an environment where differing views on this subject can continue to exist in respect, unity and partnership. There may be other approaches, yet to be discussed. Whatever the case, Bay Area planting efforts will be protected by developing some way to address the divergence in beliefs around church leadership and gender.

Failure to Collaborate

One of the great longings among current church planting stakeholders in the Bay Area is for an environment of collaboration. From both a biblical and historical perspective, there is a keen awareness of how essential healthy ministry partnerships are in the pursuit of lasting fruitfulness and there is a deep understanding of how fragile partnerships can be. Several postures contribute to the development and maintenance of unity among co-laborers.

Every leader lives in the tension between stewarding the larger goal of advancing the kingdom and caring for the needs of his or her organization. With proper alignment among the partnering organizations, it is possible to create a scenario where the organization's wins are also wins for the larger kingdom cause. Nevertheless, there will be times when leaders are called upon to sacrifice perceived needs of their organization

for the larger kingdom cause. In a healthy partnering environment where trust is built and clear alignment is sought, this kind of sacrifice will be a regular occurrence.

The kingdom-mindedness of the planting leadership also has a deep impact on participation of church planters and established pastors. When they see the cooperation among the organization in the planting ecosystem, their trust grows and their willingness to participate increases. When the church planting leadership of various organizations has cooperated to create a systematic and coordinated planter support pathway, the planters get what they most need and they get it in a delivery sequence that is realistic and humane.

Ongoing Risk Mitigation

While the above risks emerged during our research as the top threats to a collective church planting effort, we know that there are potentially more present already or coming in the future. Finances, persecution, social crises and more have the potential to impede the work. The enemy is hard at work to prevent the planting of more churches. Yet, the Lord has given us the means to resist attack, anticipate challenges and trust him for solutions. Key among them are a robust undergirding of scripture-informed prayer, a deep well of relational trust cultivated among partners, a regular and honest assessment of obstacles that makes use of healthy metrics practices and a persevering posture that remembers the timeless promises of God. “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” says the Lord (Matthew 16:18).

Insights from Another Context

The Houston Church Planting Network has been widely recognized as one of most effective city networks in the U.S. At a 2022 Church Plant Leadership Forum, HCPN Executive Director Chad Clarkson and several team members outlined the key elements of the ministry. Any church planting movement in the Bay Area would do well to consider the following hallmarks of their approach.

Prayer. The HCPN was built on a 30-year movement of prayer in the city of Houston. The current leadership has sought to nurture and expand this prayer foundation. "Prayer and Fasting" was talked about more than nearly any other subject during the presentation. "Holy Spirit movements run on prayer," explained Jeremiah Morris of Seven Mile Road Church.

Saturation. HCPN "[values] the saturation of gospel-centered churches because in order to impact the city we must intentionally plant the gospel in every neighborhood and with every people group." Saturation is practiced at the most granular level, block by block.

Collaboration. After prayer, collaboration was the most underscored value. The importance of collaboration is felt *internally* as the various partners work together to plant a growing number of churches and *externally* as the community of Houston sees the powerful way in which the church is working together. This oneness becomes the greatest apologetic for the gospel, from the HCPN perspective. Additionally, when relationship is high, theological differences recede to the background. To facilitate this, HCPN looks for humble leaders who "walk with a limp." They quote A.W. Tozer who believed "God can only bless a man whom he has hurt deeply." They focus on shared relationship and shared mission and allow these emphases to reorder lesser concerns. Clarkson talked about getting beyond "who gets credit."

Formation. A major component of the HCPN way is "soul care." "We spend 50% of our time on soul care," says Clarkson. In order to accomplish their formation goals, HCPN provides a residency program that is intended to precede church planting assessment. Thus, before it is even certain if an individual is approved for planting, that person goes through a residency program that emphasizes character development ("Foundational" phase). After assessment, there is a "Finishing" phase during which planting training and coaching occur. The Finishing phase goes up to the launch of the church. After launch, a "Fortifying" phase begins to help establish the planter in the long term work of ministry. In all phases, HCPN makes abundant use of cohorts.

Summary Findings

The purpose of this report has been to position Bay Area church planting stakeholders to make informed decisions for future church planting effectiveness. Here are the key findings:

The Bay Area is historically challenged with respect to Christian presence and witness. Bay Area church planting has tended to chase population growth, often not even keeping up with it. There are signs - increased openness amongst the younger generations and unprecedented desire for collaboration across planting organizations - that we may be entering a season of opportunity in which Bay Area church planting could move beyond the past to see genuine kingdom expansion.

Effective church planting work has been taking place and is to be celebrated. At the same time, there is more that can be done and Bay Area church planters have given us insight into what that is.

Innovation is an important part of the way forward as we seek to address the unique challenges of the Bay Area. We need to foster a church planting culture that affirms innovation, seeks it out and is quick to learn from it.

Setting goals and measuring progress can be done in a God-honoring way. Making use of metrics will help us make steady progress towards increasing the number of church plants in the Bay Area and reaching the 1% with the gospel.

Risk is an inherent part of any effort to invigorate a church planting movement. The enemy is dead set against the establishing of new churches. Several risks have already been identified and strategies for mitigating them are in the works. With God's help, we can continue to identify risks and allow God to overcome them through us.

Others have gone before us in the work of citywide planting efforts. Most prominent is the Houston Church Planting Network. Key lessons from their journey ought to inform our approach. We would do well to seek out others from whom we can learn.

Above all, we need to focus on prayer, networking to build relational trust, partnering in shared mission and trusting that Jesus will build his church.

Appendix

Church Planter Survey Summary

When do planters become aware of the possibility of planting?

- Youth ministry (13%)
- College ministry (10%)
- Seminary (36%)

What encouraged planters towards planting?

- Participating in a plant (39%)
- Receiving encouragement from a pastor/mentor (61%)

When did planters plant?

- Mostly in 30's
- Some in 40's
- After 5 years in pastorate (58%) mostly in associate roles
- Second career (19%)

Where did planters plant?

- 80% were spread evenly across three counties: SF, Alameda and Santa Clara
- 20% were in Solano, Santa Cruz and San Mateo
- Marin and Contra Costa had no plants in the survey

With whom did planters partner?

- The Southern Baptists are the only denomination with multiple plants during this period
- No network stood out as particularly focused or effective in the Bay Area
- Many networks were represented

Of the 74% who received pre-launch training, who provided it?

- Denominations (5)
- National networks (7)

- Local networks (9)
- Sending Church (5 total)

What helps planters succeed?

- A wide range of resources were considered helpful
    - This could be normal
    - This could mean training offering is scant or unfocused and planters are left to find what they can
    - This could mean that planters need a variety of types of support
- Assessment was very helpful (average rank 7.5 out of 10)
- Pre-launch training is very helpful (average rank 8.27 out of 10)

What did planters miss in their training?

- Navigating societal issues
- Developing leaders
- Strategic planning
- Organizational development
- Ecclesiology
- Developing a theological vision
- "Nuts and bolts" of planting, including:
    - Logistics
    - Church Governance
    - Evangelism
    - Fundraising and Budgeting
    - Conflict Resolution
    - Hiring and firing
    - Time Management
    - Family Care
    - Spiritual Warfare, Discouragement
    - Building a Core Team

In addition to these, planter feedback indicated it would be helpful for us to:

- Raise up trainers and coaches who understand Bay Area culture
- Provide a comprehensive training pathway that unifies the efforts of the various Bay Area church planting ministries

Were planters coached?

- 77% were consistently coached
- Coaching was viewed as helpful (average rank 8.2 out of 10)
- Coaching sources mirrored the training sources in diversity

Funding and Finances

- 60% of plants had raised less than half of their two-year budget at time of launch
- 40% had raised more than half of their two-year budget at time of launch
- Where did funding come from?
    - Sending Church: This was the largest source of funding for 5 planters.
    - Multiple Churches: This was the largest source of funding for 4 planters.
    - Local Church Planting Ministry: This was the largest source of funding for 2 planters.
    - National Church Planting Ministry: This was the largest source of funding for 1 planter.
    - Denomination: This was the largest source of funding for 1 planter.
    - Personal Fundraising: This was the largest source of funding for 1 planter.

Other takeaways

- 2025 is a banner year for planting in the Bay Area with 7 launches
- Planters are using a variety of models with Traditional, Missional/Incarnational and Launch Big most highly represented
- Pre-launch window is between 7 months and 5 years
- Planters faced many challenges but these were frequently mentioned: finances, pandemic, team dynamics, conflict and transience.
- Stratum was consistently ranked as a "helpful resource" by planters (7x)
- Planters identified the following things they wish they'd have done differently
    - Seek more supportive relationships
    - Raise up strong and godly key leaders
    - Raise more money
    - Focused more on strategic planning

Follow-Up Questions

- Are planters finding it difficult to cross over into "established church" status (however defined)?
- Other…

Actions Points (In Progress)

- Keep doing what we are doing
- Add a more comprehensive, multi-year training plan from pre-launch to established church
- Include more "nuts and bolts" in training
- Remind pastors/mentors that they have a huge role in raising up planters
- Encourage planters to bring potential planters along their journey

- Talk about church planting in youth and college ministries
- Develop and implement strategies for identifying and developing planters
- Engage more local sending churches