

Re-visioning Evangelism in the LCA

Dean Eaton, Tania Nelson, and Noel Due

Among other roles, Dean holds the position within the LCA of Church Planting Mentor and Mission Facilitator. Noel serves as Pastor for New and Renewing Churches; Tania serves the LCA as Executive Officer–Local Mission.

This article reviews the Lutheran Church of Australia's (LCA) current context of numerical decline and the Local Mission strategy of church planting, as background for the review of the LCA's church planting goals.

Context: The LCA/NZ is in steady decline numerically

There are 174,014 Lutherans in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), with 22,152 people attending worship on a typical Sunday in 452 LCA congregations. In 2017 we recorded 45,159 baptised members (LAMP, 2017).

According to the *Lutheran Church of Australia Strategic Direction 2013-2018*, 'When we look at raw numbers, they seem to tell a tale.'

	1993	2011	2016
Baptised Members	100,051	67,131	49,683
Attendance at Sunday Services	43,380	28,722	23,472

Table 1: Baptised members and regular Sunday service attendance in the LCA over the past 25 years.

From 1993 to 2011 baptised members decreased on average by 1,829 per annum and the attendance at Sunday worship services decreased by 814 people per annum, or a 34% decrease, in 18 years.¹ In the last five years, from 2011-2016, the LCA LAMP statistics reflect a year on year decrease of people attending Sunday services that averages 1,050 per annum. This is an 18% decrease overall in people attending worship during this period. If we project forward at the same rate over the next 50 years, we observe that by 2068 the LCA will have approximately 3,000 people worshipping on a typical Sunday. However, these declines are not linear. They tend to accelerate as a 'tipping point' is reached where each congregation no longer has a sustainable critical mass.

1 LCA SA/NT statistician Paul Eckermann (Adelaide University) reported an annual decrease of 297 in membership and 69 in attendance between the 2010 and 2011 in the SA/NT District, with the SA/NT data from 1997-2011 recording an average decrease in membership of 702 per year and an average decrease in attendance of 295 per year. Paul commented, 'This agrees with the national figures, considering that SA/NT has slightly less than half of the Lutherans in Australia. So given the information available, I don't think there is any strong evidence that the rate of decline in SA/NT is different to the rest of Australia.'

This sounds like a long term problem until we realise that within 13 years—by 2031—people attending worship on a typical Sunday may be almost *half our current numbers*, down to approximately 13,000 people. And this calculation is based on a steady linear progression, which is optimistic. It is our observation that many LCA members are aware of the decline of our numbers, although some may not fully appreciate how steadily this is occurring.² It is the view of LCA Local Mission that now is the time to turn this decline around. Now is the season for a people-movement of evangelism and church planting.

Strategy: What can positively grow existing congregations?

The New and Renewing Churches Department, a department of LCA Local Mission, wishes to increase the LCA's newcomer rate³ and train, mentor and support congregations to plant new congregations.

What is our strategy for the existing 452 congregations to be renewed in their life and mission?

Renew mission

There are many elements that contribute to renewing a congregation's life and mission. Sound biblical teaching alongside missional leadership development and the availability of appropriate resources all play their part to some degree. In formulating the current LCA New and Renewing Churches strategy, the interim Board for Local Mission discovered that *'there is no greater means of growing a congregation than through increasing the conversion (newcomer) rate and participating in planting new congregations.'*

The LCA's congregational members, district and church-wide personnel have for many decades invested much energy and resourcing into developing Lutheran agencies (like early childhood centres, schools, aged care facilities and community care services), as well as missional approaches such as intergenerational ministry. These have been a mission success, largely in terms of sowing the seed of the Gospel in many lives, and, in strengthening the faith of existing Christians. Despite these worthy missional activities, the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) research and other statistical measurements show that the LCA has:

-
- 2 An ageing LCA demography and the potential that demography creates for a loss of energy adds to the equation. We are getting older, with the median age of the Australian population being 37.2 years (ABS 2016) and the average age of the LCA attender being 60 years (NCLS 2016). People aged 65+ make up 15% of the Australian population (ABS 2016) and people aged 70+ years make up 36% of church attendees (NCLS 2016). On the other hand retirees have the potential to become a growing volunteer work force in Christ's mission.
 - 3 The NCLS provides data on Church attendance under the categories Long Term, Newcomer, Switcher/Transfer and Visitor. The LCA's 'Newcomer' rate is 3% (NCLS 2016) with 82% categorised as Long Term, 13% as Switcher/Transfer and 1% as Visitor.

- A low newcomer (conversion) rate compared to other Australian Christian denominations (Powell and Pepper, 2017, 7)⁴
- The lowest retention level of baptised members (Christian Research Association, 2010)⁵

Conversion and retention rates are two indicators of mission health. Clearly, there is a need for a serious review of the missional health of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand.

The evidence suggests that our current priorities, though essential in terms of planting the seeds of the Gospel and growing in the Gospel have not resulted in increases in our newcomer rates or our retention rates. The decline of the church has continued unabated. The evidence points to the need to participate with God as he brings people to Christ in a new mission setting.

New mission

Church planting is mission carried out by forming faith communities (Hopkins and White, 1995, 3). By revisiting the broader research and through engaging in reflective dialogue with many LCA leaders and members who have gained lived experience in local mission, it is clear that the fundamental assumption of our current LCA *New and Renewing Churches* strategy still holds true.

The best investment in local mission that LCA congregations can make towards reaping the harvest is to give birth to a new congregation. The evidence presented here is that church planting grows both the Kingdom of God and the churches that participate in church planting—growing both the sending and the partner congregations. It all starts with the people in existing LCA congregations.

The impacts of church planting on congregation growth

There is a growing body of evidence that the key strategy for denominations and congregations to be renewed in their missional capacity is to engage in giving birth to a new congregation. Stetzer and Im (2017, 71) contend that churches that give birth to new congregations grow more and are healthier than those that do not. Evidence for this is seen in the comparison rates of new converts being realised in new church plants compared to existing congregations in the western world, namely up to 33% in

4 The LCA Newcomer rate is 3%. Newcomers were a higher proportion of all attenders in Salvation Army (11%), Pentecostal (10%), Churches of Christ (9%), Vineyard (8%) and Anglican churches (8%) than in other denominations.

5 Large proportions of people from most denominations, apart from the Orthodox and Pentecostals, have 'lost their religion.' More than 40% of those who grew up in the Anglican and Lutheran churches now describe themselves as having 'no religion,' as do 36% of those who grew up as Uniting and 28% who grew up as Catholics.

new congregations in Australia (Stetzer, 2016)⁶ and up to 60% in England (Lings, 2016, 10).⁷ This is a significant contrast to the 3% conversion rate in the LCA. The average new church gains one-third to two-thirds of its new members from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshiping body, while churches over ten to fifteen years of age gain 80-90% of new members by transfer from other congregations (Stetzer and Im, 2017).⁸ The average new congregation sees six to eight times the rate of conversions of an older congregation of the same size (Keller, 2016).

Not only is giving birth to new congregations a vital way to participate in Christ's mission, church planting benefits the planting church and its partners. Evidence for this is provided by the research of Farmer (2007), as discussed by Stetzer and Im (2017):

He studied seventy-five churches of different sizes that were planting churches and compared them with seventy-five that were not. Comparing churches of similar sizes and backgrounds, he found churches that were planting churches were healthier than those that did not.

Furthermore, in a recent report conducted by LifeWay Research (2015), we discovered that:

... [C]hurches who planted a daughter church within their first three to five years actually experienced a higher average worship attendance, year over year, than those who did not. The same goes for churches who financially contributed to other church plants, and churches whose leaders invested in other leaders of new churches. Each of these multiplication oriented activities correlated with higher worship attendance in the planting mother church year over year.

The following figures are based on data taken from the same report.

6 In 2016, new congregations (church plants) of Australian mainline traditional denominations (e.g. Anglican, Presbyterian) reported that they have seen the newcomer rate rise to 33%.

7 In England, the Church of England church plant newcomer rate is now up to 60%. The fxC [Fresh Expressions of Church] are made up of 40% Christians, 27% de-churched and 33% non-churched.

8 Why is this so? As a congregation ages, powerful internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of its resources and energy toward the concerns of its members and constituents rather than toward those outside its walls.

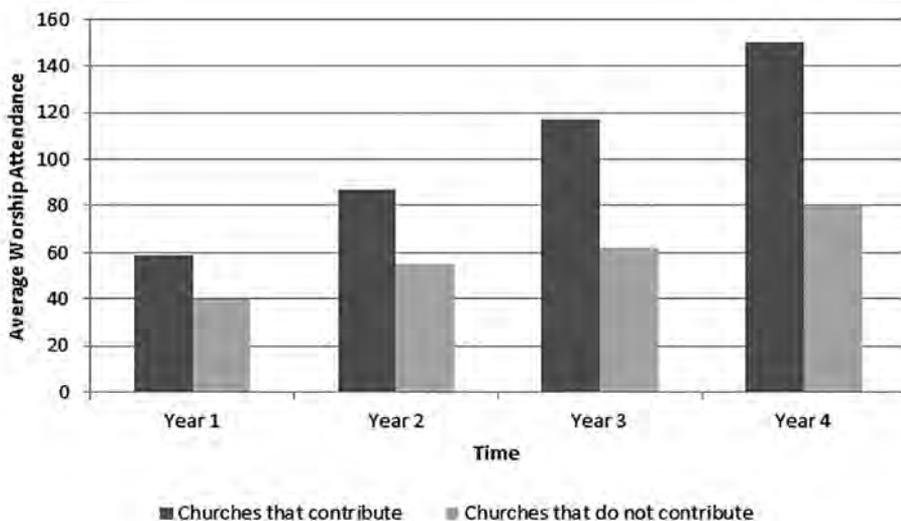


Figure 1: Average worship attendance over time for churches who financially contribute to church plants, as compared with those that do not.

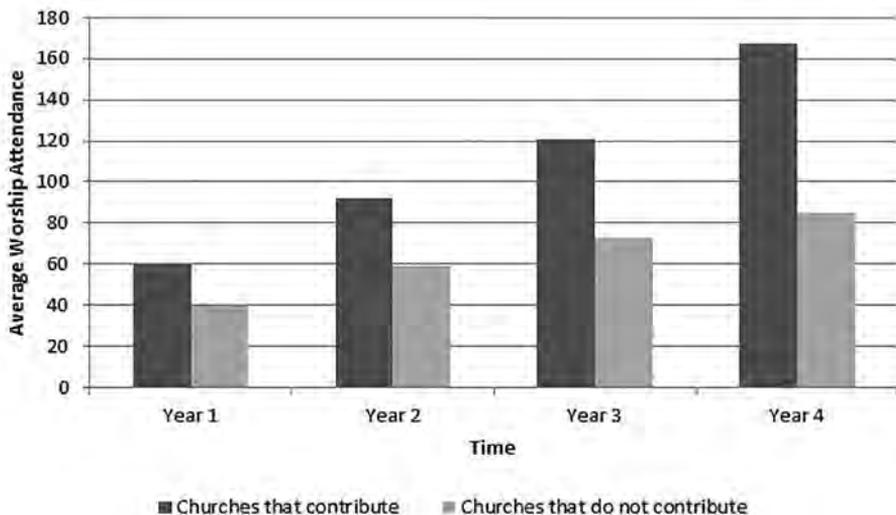


Figure 2: Average worship attendance over time for churches whose leaders regularly (at least quarterly) invest in or provide mentorship to leaders of church plants or new churches, compared with those that do not.

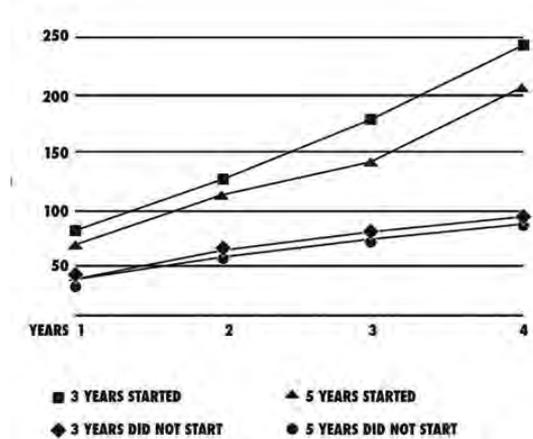


Figure 3: Average worship attendance for churches that start at least one daughter church within their first three or five years, compared to churches that do not.

Re-visioning our strategy

'When you think of church planting, don't think of another option in a shopping mall food court, think of a new farm in a starving country.'

- Anonymous

The current LCA *New and Renewing Churches* strategy is not a 'located' resource-focused (buildings, goods and services) approach. Rather the strategy assumes a biblical definition of church as people (1 Pet. 2:4-6). Ultimately, the church and church planting is about people saved by grace - matters such as buildings are secondary considerations.

As Australian Anglican evangelist Philip Jensen (2009) contends:

... [I]f our church building holds 200 and we pack it three times a Sunday, it is tempting to think that we are doing quite well. We are filling the building after all. However, in most areas, 600 people would still be a tiny proportion of the population—in the average suburb of 30,000 it is 2%. We would need five churches, each of 600, just to be getting towards 10%. We must not let "church" as "building" affect our consciousness of the task before us.

Sending and partner congregations

The LCA *New and Renewing Churches* local mission strategy aims to change the default position of LCA congregations, from understanding their narrative as being a part of a declining church, to being 'in the game' again. This may be achieved by asking congregations to sign up to work in the harvest field (Lk. 10:1-12) by being either a sending or partner congregation. Congregations can decide upon their own

classification as either a sending church or a partner church as they prayerfully reflect on their circumstances and the Spirit's leading; each plays a vital role and both together are necessary. Indeed this seems best to reflect the New Testament pattern of church planting as a shared exercise.

In *Viral Churches*, Stetzer and Bird (2010) share research that shows that only 3% of Protestant churches in the United States took direct responsibility for a church plant, acting as a mother or sending church. We believe, however, that becoming a sending church can be learned behaviour. This article aims to improve communication around sending and partner churches and why being a sending or partner church should become the 'new normal' in the LCA.

It has sometimes been said that what currently mitigates the LCA gaining missional momentum is the lack of clarity about how to define mission.⁹ This may be true. We believe, however, that the core issue is our lack of clarity on why we exist. If our mandate from God is to participate in his work of bringing people to faith in Christ, we may need to refocus on *being a local church on mission with God*.

Our present goal

Our current goal is to plant 30 new churches in a decade. Our original roll-out was projected as follows:

Year	Number of church plants launched
2015	0
2016	1
2017	2
2018	3
2019	3
2020	3
2021	4
2022	4
2023	5
2024	5
2025	Total = 30

Table 2: Projected church plantings under current growth model, 2015-2025.

9 Biblically we define 'mission' as describing the fulfilment of the (so called) Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:16-19; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:19-23, and Acts 1:8). Evangelism is the preaching of the *evangel*, the good news, the gospel in word and deed. Primarily, however, the results of the mission are people coming to faith in Jesus (as described in Jesus' commission to Paul in Acts 26:16-18). The work of New and Renewing Churches is built on the definition of mission formulated by the interim Board for Local Mission: 'When we use the word "mission" we mean that just as God sent Jesus to bring forgiveness of sin, and salvation to our world, so he sends us to bring this good news to people everywhere.'

This goal assumed that (only) ten sending congregations will plant a new church, the first ones being launched within three years and then planting another every five years after that. Due to a predicted 35% attrition rate¹⁰ it is anticipated that the ten-year goal of 30 new churches may become a net result of 20 established churches. The need to revive awareness and develop an incremental growth strategy is assumed, however, in this church planting goal.

To date, our goal is yet to be realised, with three new church plants launched (Pakenham, Arise, Beyond) and three more (Albury, Woden, Epping) getting ready to launch soon. However, Lyle Schaller's research contends that:

... [E]ach year any association of churches should plant new congregations at the rate of 1% of their total; otherwise, that association is in maintenance and decline. If an association wants to grow 50% plus (in a generation), it must plant 2-3% per year. (Keller, 2016, 361)

More recently, Stetzer (2017) reviewed Schaller's research and found that:

Church planting is essential for survival. For any Christian movement to thrive, it has to plant churches. Statistically speaking, if a denomination or network just wants to "break even," it has to plant at least at a three percent level; a denomination of one hundred churches has to plant three to stay even considering attrition. A 5% increase is needed to grow. Ten percent is needed to thrive. (Stetzer and Im, 2017)

Prolific author and ministry consultant Bill Easum concurs with Stetzer, stating, 'Studies show that if a denomination wishes to reach more people, the number of new churches it begins each year must equal at least 3% of the denomination's existing churches' (Stetzer and Im, 2017, 3).

Considering the multiplication needed to grow a denomination our best efforts at present will only ensure that the LCA's numerical demise will be slowed down rather than arrested. In 2018 the LCA has 452 congregations. Therefore our multiplication figures could be as follows:

10 According to Stetzer and Bird (2010), US research conducted over twelve denominations and networks taking in more than 1000 churches reveals that 99% of new church plants survived the first year, 92% the second, 81% the third and 68% the fourth. Therefore attrition rate could be considered as 32%. These figures, however, are for church plants that were well set up with initial church planter evaluation, team training, mentoring, and ongoing pastoral care. Similar Australian statistics are hard to find; however, Bellamy, Kemp and Compton (2015, 16-17) show that 63% of churches planted between 2007-2011 are still open, meaning that the attrition rate is 37%. This research also demonstrates the strength of the Sending Church (Mother-Church) approach in contrast to other forms such as 'pioneer' or 'repotting'. For the purpose of this article we have used an attrition rate of 35%.

Current goal per annum	Break-Even – 3%	Growth – 5%	Thriving – 10%
3	14	23	45

Table 3: Projected number of new congregations required to meet and exceed present attrition rates.

Can we do better?

It is our recommendation that LCA Local Mission revise its church planting goals to aspire for kingdom growth—to increase its present goal from three church plants per year to 23 church plants per year.

The roll-out of reaching the goal of 23 church plants per year or 230 in ten years (2019-2029) would need to be graduated:

Year	Number of church plants launched
2019	4
2020	5
2021	6
2022	10
2023	15
2024	20
2025	35
2026	40
2027	45
2028	50
2029	Total = 230

Table 4: Projected church plantings under our proposed growth model, 2019-2029.

This modelling assumes that sending congregations will plant a new church, the first being launched within three to five years and then plant another every five years after that. Further, that these new churches will in turn plant a new church within five years of their launch. Due to a predicted 35% attrition rate the ten-year goal of 230 new congregations may become a net result of 150 established congregations.

Church planting and the leadership of the Holy Spirit

Is a 5% growth aim achievable for established denominations in Western countries today? Is there at least a recent precedent in the western church for such a bold initiative?

The answer to the questions above is ‘yes.’ Converge Worldwide (formerly the Baptist General Conference) is the leading US midsize denomination in church planting, with 6.4% growth in new churches in 2014. They report an 89% church plant success rate! An additional example can be found in the Pentecostal Holiness Church, which planted close to 20% of their existing churches between 2004 and 2008 (Stetzer and Im, 2017).

It goes without saying that ‘unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain’ (Ps. 127:1). This is not a work that can be accomplished simply by implementing a plan—it needs the renewing work of the Spirit. However planning and work of the Spirit are not opposites. We can learn from the collective wisdom of the church and at the same time trust the Lord to raise up labourers for the harvest. We don’t live in a closed system. The statistical decline may be a part of the Lord’s dealing with us—he may be humbling us; testing us to see where our trust really lies.

Improving training delivery

Aiming for 5% growth of LCA congregations requires a significant adjustment to the delivery of training and support provided.

If each sending church multiplies into three over the next decade, it will take 77 successful sending churches planting a church within the next five years. However, not all congregations that undertake the three-phase (three-year) sending church journey will ultimately produce plants. Nevertheless, the members will have been built up in missional leadership and more fully equipped to be an active partner congregation of others that do plant. We predict a 35% attrition rate of the sending churches training based upon what we have thus far observed, largely due to the low base level from which our congregations begin this journey. Taking into account the existing sending churches and counting the church plants which are likely to multiply, the LCA needs to sign up at least 90 new sending churches as soon as possible.

Ramping up the LCA’s delivery of training is one means that may lead to missional growth. What other means are available to us to ‘strengthen a missional culture where individuals, families and communities are inspired, passionate and active in sharing the gospel?’¹¹

Utilising the sending church delivery method

The current growth model depends upon the concept of having a lean (paid) national team of resource developers and trainers who could effectively mentor trainers.

Our re-visioned model relies upon an as-yet unachieved goal: the creation of a cohort of leaders with lived experience in being sending church pastors, who could then train and develop others. Our model assumed that we would create training resources and conduct intensive training workshops for the equipping of this volunteer workforce.

We therefore propose that two sending church leadership training intakes be conducted – one at the start of 2019, and another in mid-2019. These intakes should require only three days of training each (potentially conducted over three successive weekends). The use of digital webinar technology would greatly assist in reaching remote communities that find travel to a central location prohibitive.

11 2018 Book of Reports, General Convention of Synod, ‘*Our Direction 2018-2024*.’

After these initial intakes, the *New and Renewing Churches* team could supplement this training with regular (possibly annual) gatherings of sending church pastors and lay leaders, an annual *New Horizons* leaders' seminar, a Sent Conference, suggested reading and engagement with mentors.

As a church that prioritises mission, together we will need to consider how to resource our mission endeavours.

Nurturing church planters

We desire to equip 230 church planting leaders (preferably couples) to plant 230 new congregations over the next decade.

In 2009, General Convention of Synod endorsed the change of name of 'Pastors with Alternative Training' to 'Specific Ministry Pastors' and asked the College of Presidents (now College of Bishops) to advance the development of a uniform framework of preparation of SMPs in conjunction with Australian Lutheran College. The provision of the SMP framework is ideally suited to the training and development of church planters and is one means of appropriately acknowledging the ministry of church planters.¹²

The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. (AC 7)

It is our desire to support and equip church planters and to ensure that they are appropriately acknowledged and called to church planting and provided with supportive oversight. Clearly initiatives such as this require a good deal of adjustment to existing models. However there are already good initiatives being undertaken, not least in conjunction with ALC, which we hope will develop into clear pathways for mission focussed leadership training.

¹² The Seventeenth General Synod (2013) stated that 'the needs of the Church will, from time to time and in specific ministry situations of emergency and mission opportunity call for Specific Ministry Pastors to be prepared and called for ministry.' We believe that there is no greater mission opportunity than the present.

Closing remarks

We suggest that the LCA is in a new era.

To quote J. D. Payne (2009, 387), a church planter and church planting researcher based in the US:

Just as wearing glasses with blue-coloured lenses will make everything appear to be blue, the Church in the West generally examines the Scriptures through pastoral lenses. Such a hermeneutic causes us to fail to properly interpret the New Testament in its historical contexts. All of Paul's letters to churches were written to newly planted churches. Though we refer to the writings to Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles these three letters were not written to permanent pastors.

The era in which we now live is that more closely aligned to the apostolic church planting world of Paul, rather than the settled-parish model of pastoral ministry pioneered by our forefathers. That world is gone and it won't be coming back. The statistics presented above don't determine our fate; but our response to them may well do so. We suggest that they cannot be ignored. Rather, we urge that in them we read what 'the Spirit is saying to the churches' and heed the inherent call to seek God's face in humble repentance as we participate in his mission, because the harvest is still plentiful and the workers are still few.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2016. *Census of population and housing*. Canberra, ACT.
- Bellamy, J., B. Kemp and B. Compton. 2015. Study into effective church planting in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. Sydney, NSW: Anglican Diocese of Sydney Social Policy and Research Unit.
- Christian Research Association. *Christian Research Bulletin* 20, No. 2-3 (June 2010). Nunawading, VIC.
- Farmer, J. 2007. 'Church planting sponsorship: a statistical analysis of sponsoring a church plant as a means of revitalization of the sponsor church.' PhD dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.
- Hopkins, B., and R. White. 1995. *Enabling church planting*. Coventry, UK: Pastoral Aid Society.
- Keller, T. 2016. *Centre church: Doing balanced, Gospel-centred ministry in your city*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Jensen, P. 2009. 'I will build my church (the challenge of church planting)'. *TWM Ministry Resource*. Accessed 4 June 2018. <https://phillipjensen.com/i-will-build-my-church-the-challenge-of-church-planting/>.
- LifeWay Research. 2015. *The state of church planting in the US*. Nashville, TN.
- Lings, G. 2016. *The day of small things: An analysis of fresh expressions of church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England*. Sheffield, UK: Church Army.
- Lutheran Church of Australia. 2018. *Book of reports: General Convention of Synod*. Adelaide, SA.
- NCLS Research. 2016. *National church life survey*. North Sydney, NSW.

- Payne, J.D. 2009. *Discovering church planting*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.
- Powell, R. and M. Pepper, eds. 2004. *Local churches in Australia: scanning the landscape*. Adelaide, SA: Mirrabooka Press.
- Stetzer, E. 2016. *Support experience and intentionality: 2015-2016 Australian church planting study*, Sydney, NSW: Lifeway Research.
- Stetzer, E. and W. Bird. 2010. *Viral churches: Helping church planters become movement makers*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Stetzer, E., and D. Im. 2017. *Planting missional churches: Your guide to starting churches that multiply*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic.