

SEEING THE SHOOTS: A REPORT FOR THE SCOTTISH CHURCH PLANTERS NETWORK

Church Army's Research Unit, December 2024



Summary

This report presents the findings of a short-term research project on church planting in Scotland commissioned by the Scottish Church Planters Network (SCPN). The research was conducted by Church Army's Research Unit and included a literature review, interviews with SCPN members, and an online survey of Scottish church plants. The table below summarises the main findings.

Research objective	Findings
Identifying churches planted in Scotland since 2010	Many denominations / networks do not keep central records about this, but a very conservative estimate would be that at least 200 church plants and new worshipping communities have been started in Scotland since 2010. We suspect that the actual figure is much higher.
Assessing missional impact and vitality	Most church plants report they have been 'mildly' or 'moderately' successful in reaching the non-churched and de-churched and are seeing some faith commitments. Attendance has also increased at most church plants.
Comparison with other approaches	The mission impact that Scottish church plants reported needs to be considered against the backdrop of declining church attendance and religious affiliation in Scotland. Many interviewees also stressed the need for church planting to work hand-in-hand with church revitalisation.
Identifying factors which contribute to missional impact and vitality	Four key factors that contribute to a church plant's missional impact and vitality were identified: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong leadership teams• Spiritual maturity• Missional / evangelistic culture• Contextual church

In the light of these findings, the report concludes with six recommendations around:

1. Shared vocabulary and understandings of church planting.
2. Consistent record keeping among different denominations and networks.
3. Ensuring that church planting is missional and contextual.
4. Reflection on ways SCPN could enable more effective church planting.
5. Potential further research e.g. evaluating different church planting models.
6. Encouraging existing denominations / networks to engage with SCPN in conversations about the place of church planting.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in church planting in Scotland who participated in or assisted with this research.

Dr Andy Wier and Dr Edd Graham-Hyde
Church Army's Research Unit, December 2024

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a research project on church planting conducted by Church Army's Research Unit (CARU) for the Scottish Church Planters Network (SCPN) between March 2024 and September 2024. SCPN commissioned the research with the purpose of: *Developing understanding of how church planting compares with other possible missional approaches, as a strategy for discipling those who do not currently go to church (dechurched and unchurched), within a Scottish context.* As requested by SCPN, this project had two inter-related components:

1. A review of existing research into the establishment of church planting in secularised contexts, and an assessment of its quality and relevance to the current Scottish context.
2. A research exercise within the Scottish context to identify churches planted since 2010, assess their missional impact and vitality, provide a comparison with other approaches (e.g. revitalisation of existing churches), and identify factors which contribute towards the missional impact and ongoing vitality of a church plant.

We are very grateful to everyone involved in church planting in Scotland who participated in or assisted with this research. In keeping with SCPN's desire for a short and accessible report, we have kept the main body of this report relatively brief but have also provided more detailed background information in supporting appendices.

Methodology

Two main research methods were used to gather data and insight on church planting in Scotland:

1) Interviews with representatives of denominations / networks involved in SCPN

Representatives of 16 denominations / networks / movements involved in SCPN were contacted and invited to participate in the research. Of these, representatives of the following 14 responded and agreed to take part in a research interview and/or provide a completed data capture form:

- Assemblies of God
- Cairn Movement
- Church of Scotland
- Elim
- Free Church of Scotland
- Free Methodist Church
- Go Global
- ReHope
- Church of the Nazarene
- Salvation Army
- Scottish Baptist Union
- Scottish Episcopal Church
- Scottish Network Churches
- Vineyard

2) An online survey of church plants and new worshipping communities

An online survey was designed to gather further data about churches planted in Scotland since 2010. An invitation to complete the survey was sent to church plant leaders by SCPN members and generated 104 useable responses. This report summarises some of the main findings, but Appendix 3 provides a more detailed question-by-question analysis of survey responses.

Church Planting Beyond Scotland - Literature Review

This project began with a literature review of existing research on the establishment of church planting in secularised contexts beyond Scotland. The key insights emerging from this exercise are summarised below, with further supplementary information in the supporting appendices.

Models of Church Planting

Our first task involved reviewing some of the different models of church planting identified in relevant literature. Though different categorisations and frameworks abound, the seven-model framework (summarised opposite) provides one potential way of categorising different church planting approaches. Appendix 2 describes and reflects on these models in more depth, though it should be noted that any categorisation system has its limitations.

Seven models of church planting

1. House / Simple Church
2. Missional Communities
3. Fresh Expressions
4. Conventional / Traditional
5. Multisite
6. Multicultural / Ethnic
7. Replants / Grafts

<https://asburychurchplanting.com/models-of-church-planting/>

Within the wider church planting literature, there are also differences of opinion about how different terms relate. George Lings (2014), for example, argues that ‘church planting’ should be seen as a subset of ‘fresh expressions of Church’ rather than the other way round. Within the work of Hodgett and Bradbury (2018), church planting, fresh expressions of Church and community activism / social enterprise are all part of a wider ‘spectrum’ (pictured below) of different approaches to ‘pioneering’. The introduction of the vocabulary of ‘new worshipping communities’ within a ‘mixed ecology’ Church in denominations like the Church of England (Olsworth-Peter, 2024) complexifies the picture further. Interestingly, a recent report on 11 Church of England diocese’s church planting experiences by Cranmer Hall Durham’s Centre for Church Planting Theology (*New Things* by Foulger, 2024) deliberately omitted the word ‘church’ from the title because it was difficult to find ‘a comprehensive term to describe what it is that these dioceses have been starting’ (Foulger, 2024: 7).

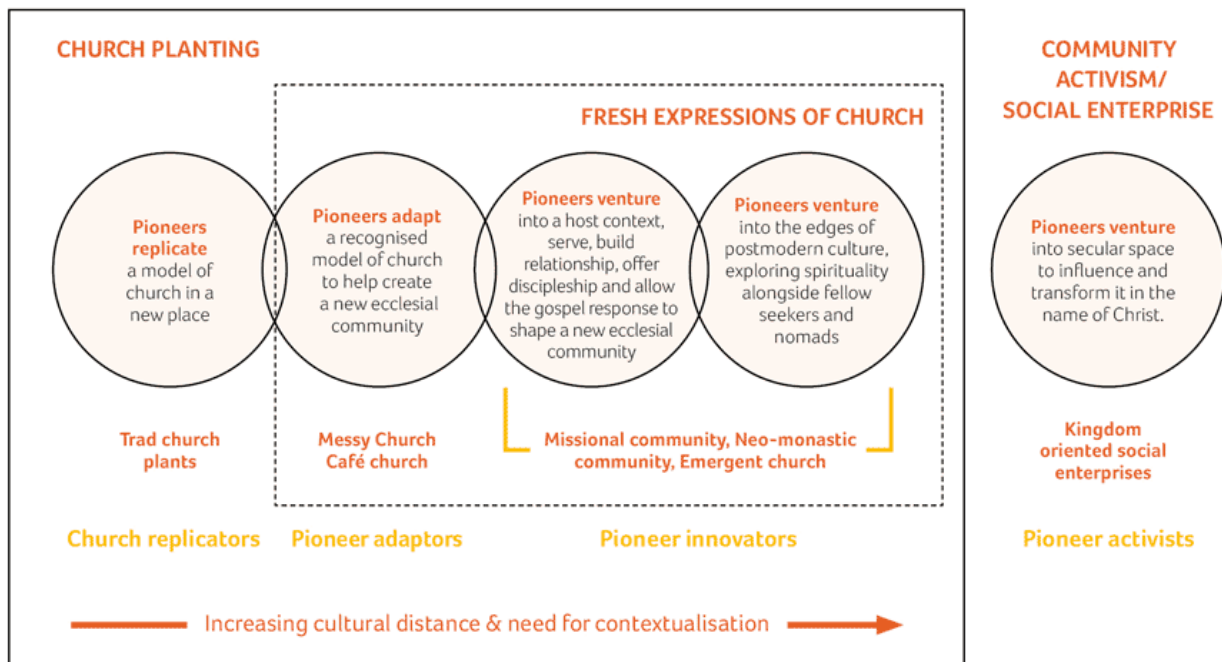


Figure 1 - Hodgett and Bradbury’s Pioneer Spectrum (2018)

The impact of church planting beyond Scotland

The second element of the literature review involved drawing together available evidence about the missional impact of church planting beyond Scotland. This focused primarily on sources from western Europe because research conducted in other contexts like the U.S. is of more limited relevance to a European context (Paas, 2016: 155). In England and beyond, Church Army's Research Unit (CARU) have been tracking the development of church planting and fresh expressions of Church (fxC) for over a quarter of a century. In the late 1990s and 2000s, our *Encounters on the Edge*¹ series told the stories of many 'new forms of Church' and helped prepare the ground for the Church of England's *Mission-Shaped Church* report (Archbishops' Council, 2004). This then led on to a 2012-2016 research project on fxC in 21 dioceses of the Church of England that culminated in the publication of *The Day of Small Things* (Lings, 2016). As far as we are aware, this is the largest and most comprehensive survey of church plants and fxC ever conducted in the UK. Selected findings are summarised below. These led Lings to conclude that 'Nothing else, as a whole, in the Church of England has this level of missional impact and the adding of further ecclesial communities, thereby fuelling ecclesial re-imagination' (Lings, 2016: 10).

Selected extracts from *The Day of Small Things* (from Lings, 2016: 10-11)

- Across 21 dioceses surveyed, 1,109 fresh expressions of Church were uncovered. On average, these 1,109 make up 15% of a diocese's church communities. Their combined attendance (50,600) is the equivalent of two average sized dioceses.
- For every 1 person sent out to be part of beginning a fxC, there are now more than 2½ more people.
- Leaders' estimates suggest that these fxC were made up of 40% Christians, 27% de-churched and 33% non-churched. However, the supplementary *Who's there?* (Dalpra and Vivian, 2016) report yields more modest figures (20% for the de-churched and 21% for the non-churched).

More recently, CARU have conducted evaluations of church planting and pioneering for various other institutions, including the Church of Scotland (CARU, 2020). In 2022, we published *Paid Pioneers: From the Margins to the Mainstream?* (CARU, 2022) to mark our 25th anniversary. This drew together key insights from various recent studies and reflected on the changing landscape of pioneering in the UK. It concluded with four provocative messages for the wider Church:

- **Don't dismiss grassroots pioneering [and fresh expressions of Church]** - *Discern carefully which models of pioneering [and church planting] are appropriate in different contexts.*
- **Don't domesticate [church planters] and pioneers** - *Create space for risk-taking alongside appropriate accountability... Build in regular, relational reviews.*
- **Don't decouple evangelism from [church planting and] pioneering** - *Put the 'evangelism' back into 'pioneer evangelism' and train pioneer evangelists.*
- **Don't overlook unpaid forms of [church planting] and pioneering** - *Look below the radar. Don't only take an interest in what you fund!*

Bob Jackson's book *What Makes Churches Grow?* (Jackson, 2015) also provides a review of insights from various studies of church growth in England and Wales. A key finding is that it 'is the ability to change that means a church can grow' (Jackson, 2015: 185). Comparing the attendance patterns of churches that make significant changes and those that do not uncovers various 'types of change that deliver growth'. Jackson suggests that no one factor alone in the 'magic ingredient' and church planting is one of eight

Changes that deliver growth (Jackson, 2015)

1. Planting new congregations
2. More relaxed worship
3. Better children and young people's provision
4. Better welcome / integration of newcomers
5. Better small groups and pastoral care
6. Evangelism, basics or nurture courses
7. More lay involvement in leadership
8. Improvements to buildings

potential changes identified. Some of these,

however, seem more conducive to attracting existing Christians, while others like church planting and evangelism offer better prospects for reaching the non-churched and de-churched.

Beyond the UK, Stefan Paas (2016) provides a helpful review of available evidence about the missional impact of church planting in western Europe (Paas, 2016). Though there have been various church planting initiatives in France, there is no available data as to how many people are reached who were not previously involved in church life (Paas, 2016: 169). In Germany, there is 'imprecise but encouraging data' about attempts to plant new churches in the largest Protestant church, the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (Paas, 2016: 169). But Pass suggests that Vos' study of three Reformed denominations in the Netherlands provides the best evidence he knows that 'church plants attract more newcomers than older churches' (Paas, 2016: 174). In a jointly authored article, Paas and Vos review the data from this study's comparison of the conversion success of older and younger congregations in the Netherlands. This suggests that 'the younger churches gained approximately four times as many converts and five times as many returnees as did older churches' (Paas and Vos, 2016: 243). Further analysis of the data for the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (CGK) 'strongly suggests that the church plants have increased the evangelistic returns of this denomination' (Paas, 2016: 175). In reflecting on these findings, Paas and Vos suggest that there may be various reasons why younger churches gained considerably more converts and returnees than older churches, but three explanations seem the most plausible: younger churches are more often in good demographic locations, they spend more time and energy on outreach, and their leadership is more entrepreneurial (Paas and Vos, 2016: 243). Whilst acknowledging that the effects of church planting are difficult to measure, and that church planting is 'not a panacea' for conversion church growth, they conclude by suggesting the available data on church planting in western Europe show that 'conversion church growth is possible, even in a highly secularized context' (Paas and Vos, 2016: 250). As such, the impact of church planting can be 'much larger than its numerical results alone'; it provides 'an antidote to the belief that we are facing a culture of inevitable decline' (Pass and Vos, 2016: 250).

Church Planting in Scotland – Research Findings

In this section, we summarise findings emerging from our interviews with SCPN members and online survey of Scottish church plants and draw out their relevance to the research objectives.

A varied landscape

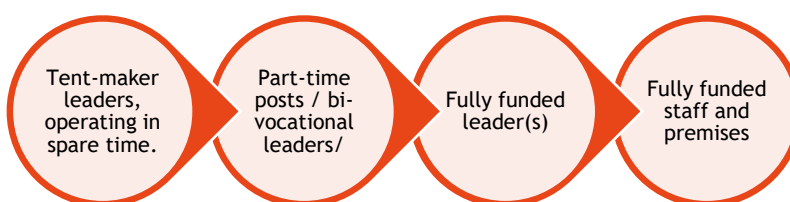
From the interviews we conducted, the church planting landscape of Scotland appears very varied. The 14 denominations and networks interviewed (listed on page 1) vary considerably, both in how important they see church planting and in their strategies for promoting it.

- For some denominations / movements / networks, commitment to church planting appears central to their identity, vision and strategy, while for others it is a more marginal or peripheral activity. Some indicated that they had become much more intentional about church planting in recent years or had set explicit priorities and numerical targets around this. Within others, there is no formal national strategy, but church planting is encouraged at a local level.
- Though some denominations / networks / movements seemed to have one preferred model of church planting, many employed a diversity of models or stressed that different approaches may be needed in different contexts (e.g. cities, towns, villages). Some also said that their understanding of church planting had changed or broadened over time and talked about ‘widening the envelope of church planting’ to include creative ‘missional expressions’ and ‘new worshipping communities’ alongside traditional church plants. Responses to the online survey also highlighted this important distinction. As Appendix 3 explains more fully, 53% of respondents identified as ‘an entirely new church’ and 44% described themselves as a new ‘worshipping community’ linked to an existing church.

This observation brings into sharper focus some of the questions emerging from the literature review about what constitutes a church plant and how ‘traditional church plants’, ‘new worshipping communities’ and ‘fresh expressions of Church’ inter-relate. Though the Pioneer Spectrum (Hodgett and Bradbury, 2018), provides a helpful visual framework for mapping these and other approaches, different denominations / movements and networks involved in SCPN appear to draw the line about what constitutes ‘a new church’ in different places, and this inevitably makes statistical comparisons more difficult. Some interviewees also stressed that the question of whether a new worshipping community will eventually become a ‘standalone church’ or an ‘extension’ of its sending church is not always clear at the outset. There is inevitably a degree of ‘wait and see’, but again this makes the task of categorisation harder.

The research also uncovered several different financial models at work. One SCPN member suggested that, among the various denominations / networks / movements involved in church planting in Scotland, there seems to be a continuum of different financial approaches. These range from a very ‘low cost’ (tent-making leaders operating in spare time) model on the left-hand of the diagram below to a very ‘high cost’ model on the right-hand side. Though examples of all these approaches can be found across SCPN, some interviewees told us that their denomination / network had deliberately moved away from a very expensive building plus salary model (‘Rolls Royce’ model) over recent years. This was because such an expensive approach limited the number of new initiatives that can be established.²

Figure 2 - Financial Models (Staffing)



How many churches have been planted in Scotland since 2010?

This research aimed to establish how many churches have been planted in Scotland since 2010, so SCPN members were asked what information they already had about this. Responses revealed that many denominations / networks do not keep central records about churches planted and, where they do, definitions of what constitutes a church plant vary. However, the following sources provide a helpful starting point in beginning to answer the above question:

- Peter Brierley’s *Fourth Scottish Church Census* suggests that 277 new churches were started in Scotland between 2002 and 2016 (Brierley Consultancy, 2016: 18).
- *Analysis of New Worshipping Communities in the Church of Scotland* (Aisthorpe, 2023) suggests that there are at least 122 new worshipping communities in this denomination.³
- A recent Brendan Research (2024) study of diaspora churches in Scotland identified over 200 churches in Scotland with significant ethnic diaspora memberships. Many of these have been planted since the start of the millennium. Since then, the authors suggest, ‘a new congregation has been planted every 8 weeks’ (Brendan Research, 2024: 2).⁴

We also asked each SCPN member we interviewed to estimate the number of churches that had been planted in their denomination / network since 2010. The table below summarises the estimates provided alongside the number of responses generated by the online survey.

	SCPN member estimate: churches planted since 2010	Completed survey responses
Church of Scotland	Around 10 traditional church plants. At least 122 new worshipping communities.	23
Free Church of Scotland	19	14
Redeemed Christian Church of God	Not provided	13
Vineyard	12 new churches. 9 multi-site church plants.	13
Go Global	Not provided	11
Assemblies of God	6	4
New Frontiers	6	4
Elim	Not provided	3
Scottish Baptist Union	17	3
Scottish Episcopal Church	3	2
Free Methodist Church	1	1
ReHope	2 independent church plants. 4 locations with 3 in process.	1
Salvation Army	4 in the last year. Numbers before that not known.	1
Scottish Network Churches	6	1
Nazarene	4	0
Cairn Movement	Not listed here to avoid double counting. ⁵	1
Other ⁶		9

The total number of church plants and new worshipping communities identified by those SCPN members who were able to provide an estimate comes to 227. But the actual number of new church plants and new worshipping communities established in Scotland since 2010 is probably much higher for the following three reasons: 1) some SCPN members were only able to provide estimates for the very recent past, 2) some of the denominations / networks that did not provide an estimate are known to be active in church planting,⁷ and 3) the above figures will not include many ethnic minority or diaspora churches not linked to SCPN member organisations, such as those identified by Brendan Research (2024). In view of all this, a very conservative estimate would be that **at least 200 church plants and new worshipping communities have been started in Scotland since 2010**, but we suspect that the actual figure will be much higher.

Assessing missional impact and vitality

At a denominational / network level, there is very little data available about the impact of church planting in Scotland. But SCPN members provided various qualitative insights attesting to the missional impact of church planting activity. Many provided stories and examples of people finding faith within church plants, though some suggested that initial conversion growth is likely to tail off if church plants fail to remain responsive to the needs of their immediate community. Others also highlighted the strategic significance of church planting within broader missional strategies. As one participant put it: 'Church planting and installing new sites is massively important in Scotland. New locations gain a next generational focus [innovating on] established methodologies of church'. It was also acknowledged, however, that sustaining young churches is an ongoing challenge and some of the new churches planted in Scotland over recent decades have come to the end of their life.⁸ The online survey responses (from 104 individual church plants / new worshipping communities) generated further insights about the missional impact and effectiveness of the church plants that responded to our online survey. Appendix 3 presents the results in full, but some of the main headlines are summarised below:

1. Most church plants report they have been 'mildly' or 'moderately' successful in reaching the non-churched and de-churched

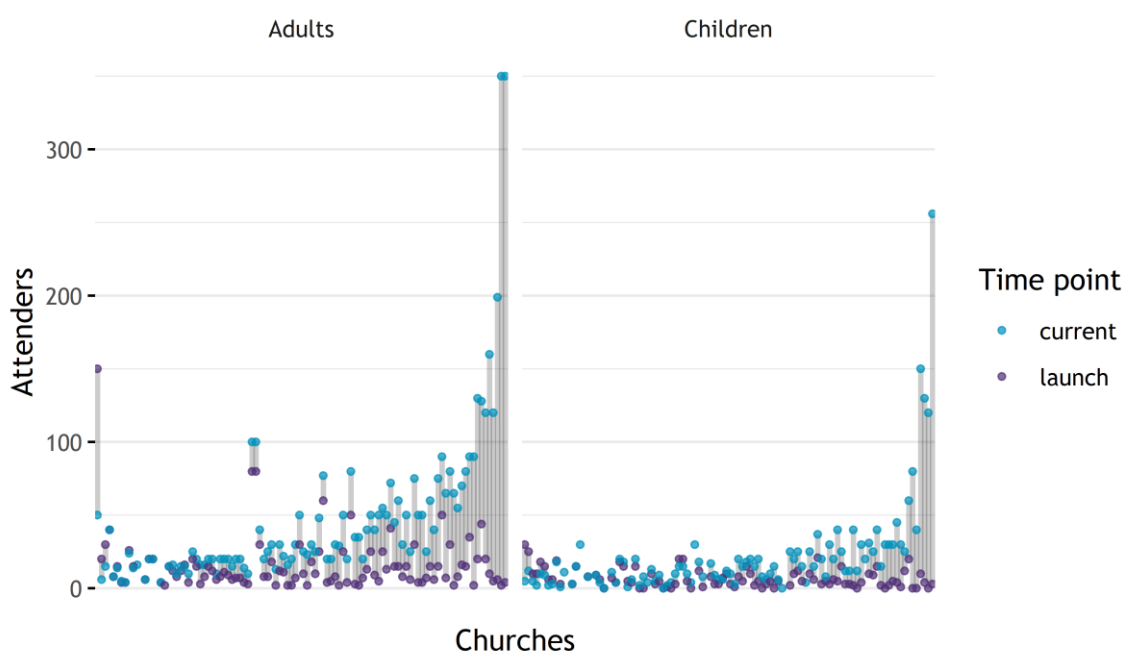
Responses to the question 'Compared to your original aspirations, how successful/unsuccessful has the church plant been at reaching those who are non-churched or de-churched?' suggest that most church plants have been 'mildly' (28%) or 'moderately' (25%) successful, with just 8% reporting they have been 'very successful'. Though these figures may appear small, other studies suggest that church plants still attract more newcomers than older churches (Paas, 2016: 174).

2. Attendance at most church plants has increased

Most church plants' attendance numbers had increased considerably since their launch. The average (median) launch size of each church plant was 14 (median 10 adults and 5 children), while the average (median) current attendance was now 45 (median 30 adults and 15 children).

Attendance has increased at most church plants

For adults and children alike



3. Most church plants have a clear (often geographic) mission focus

Responses to the question ‘Which group of people is your church plant primarily aimed at / intended for?’ indicate that the majority of church plants surveyed had a clear mission focus. For 80% of participants, this included ‘people living in a particular geographic area’. Only 11% indicated they did not have ‘a specific mission focus’.

4. Many church plants have developed new missional practices

Many participants indicated that their church plant had developed new missional practices to reach and disciple people who do not already go to church. 47% said this had happened ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’, with a further 29% indicating this occurred ‘somewhat’. Examples of ways these church plants were trying to engage the non-churched and de-churched are detailed in Appendix 3.

5. Some church plants are tailoring and adapting their services to local mission contexts

To provide some indication of whether church plants are tailoring and adapting their services to their local mission context, participants were asked ‘On a scale from 1 to 100, how different are your church’s regular services from those of your sending church? (0: absolutely identical, 100: completely re-imagined)’. Responses to this question reveal substantial variations between church plants, but moderate levels of difference were more frequently reported than extremely high or low levels.

6. A relatively small proportion of overall attenders are non-churched or de-churched (but we suspect church plants still attract more non-churched people than existing churches)

Overall, leaders’ estimates suggest that 15% of church plant attendees come from non-churched backgrounds, while 17% are de-churched.⁹ Once again, these figures may appear relatively low but previous studies suggest that ‘inherited Church’ congregations may have even lower numbers of non-churched attending.¹⁰ The reported proportion of non-churched and de-churched attenders also varied considerably between the church plants studied. Further research would be needed to investigate the reasons for this, though church attendance should not be seen as the sole indicator of missional effectiveness.

7. Most church plants are seeing some faith commitments

Church plant leaders were also asked to estimate the number of faith commitments their church had seen since their launch. Responses to this question reveal that most church plants are seeing some faith commitments. There was a median of 1 faith commitment per year. Interestingly, Paas suggests that: ‘A British, Dutch or German church with a hundred members may expect on the average to welcome one initiate or returnee every 5-10 years. So a church plant with 50 members that enfold one ‘true’ convert (i.e. not a switch or transfer) per year into the Christian community is doing a significantly above average job already in terms of evangelistic growth’ (Paas, 2016: 163).

Comparison with other approaches

The overall perception of many SCPN members was that church plants are often more effective than existing congregations at reaching those who are not currently in church. As one participant put it: 'Newer church plants are more effective in evangelism because the team have moved houses, jobs, schools, and are super effective in reaching people because they have mission energy'. There is not sufficient statistical evidence to definitively prove whether church plants are more effective. But at various places in the previous section (see points 1, 6 and 7), we briefly reflected on the results of our online survey in the light of other studies that compare the mission impact of church plants with that of other churches. Though in one sense, the missional impact of the Scottish church plants we surveyed seems relatively modest (with most reporting they have only been 'mildly' or 'moderately' successful in reaching the non-churched and de-churched and a median of one faith commitment per year), this needs to be considered against the wider backdrop of declining church attendance and religious affiliation in Scotland. So as the quote at the end of the previous page reminds us, a church plant that enfolded one 'true' convert per year into the Christian community is doing 'a significantly above average job' (Paas, 2016: 163).

It also needs to be remembered that there are many different models of church planting and not all will be equally effective. Further work would be needed to compare the effectiveness of different church planting models but, drawing on our wider research experience, it seems likely that church plants which are intentionally missional (focused primarily on engaging with people beyond the church) will be more effective in reaching and discipling those who do not currently go to church than church plants which started for other reasons. This is not to say that they will necessarily have higher overall attendance numbers because (in our view) church attendance is not the sole indicator of missional effectiveness.

SCPN were also keen for this research to consider how church planting compares with other approaches that focus on the revitalisation of existing churches. During our interviews, we found that 'church revitalisation' is sometimes understood differently within different denominations and networks. Sometimes, for example, it is associated with church grafts (revitalisation through church planting) and sometimes it is associated with taking an existing congregation through a structured process of church development and renewal. Nevertheless, many of the SCPN members we interviewed stressed the need for the continued development and revitalisation of existing churches alongside church planting. Or as one interviewee succinctly put it, 'You need healthy churches to plant churches'. This kind of 'both-and' thinking implicitly reflects what some within other denominational contexts have called a 'mixed economy' or 'mixed ecology' church.¹¹

Reflecting on the relationship between church planting and church revitalisation, some of our interviewees indicated that their denominations / networks are currently in a season of consolidation, focused on strengthening and revitalising existing congregations. This, they suggested, could help lay a foundation for future church planting. But others suggested that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between planting and revitalisation which works both ways. In fuelling 'ecclesial re-imagination' (Lings, 2016: 10), church planting can support the revitalisation of existing churches. However, not everyone felt that church planting received sufficient institutional backing from their denominations and church networks, with several suggesting that church planting was seen as less important than maintaining existing congregations. This was particularly the case within some of the more historic denominations in Scotland.

Factors which contribute to (or inhibit) missional impact and vitality

When we interviewed SCPN members, we asked them: ‘What would you say are the key factors which contribute to the missional impact and ongoing vitality of a church plant?’ Three key factors emerged from our analysis: leadership, spiritual maturity, and missional / evangelistic culture. The online survey also included ‘free text’ questions that invited leaders of church plants to suggest factors that cause church plants to thrive or falter. Analysis of this data revealed that many of the factors identified by church plant leaders were very similar to the three key themes identified by SCPN members. But a fourth key factor that emerged from the online survey responses concerned the need for churches to be contextual. These four factors and some associated risks are summarised in the table below.

Key factors	What helps?	Associated risks (if not cultivated)
Leadership teams	The physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of the leader is a large contributing factor to the ongoing vitality of a church plant.	Leader burnout stops church plants thriving.
	Accountability of and ongoing support or training for the leaders of a church plant was cited as a key indicator of success.	Leaders who have limited pastoral experience and do not connect with wider support.
	Leaders who build full leadership teams tend to be more sustainable, especially when developing local leaders.	Leaders who only delegate tasks but fail to holistically disciple new leaders.
Spiritual maturity	A culture of prayer was identified as being more evident in church plants which had survived than those that failed.	When people are simply being pointed to a vision without being invited to pray about it.
	People being pointed to God helps strengthen the community and make it become more sustainable. This is done through prayer, worship leading, and good teaching.	Communities which do not have strong worship and teaching are likely to look elsewhere to fill that gap, which may lead to leaving.
Missional / evangelistic culture	When the sending church has a strong pioneering culture, this often leads to a head start in the church plant developing the same focus.	When church plants have had to argue for their existence, it holds the evangelistic culture back.
	A commitment to service and evangelism in the wider community, developing an individual and organisational heart for the lost, galvanises those who join church plants.	Failing to recognise people with a heart for pioneering and evangelism may lead to them leaving.
	Early encouragements (e.g. new people joining or exploring faith) build momentum and morale.	A sustained early period with no visible fruit can be disheartening and lowers morale.
Contextual Church	Finding culturally appropriate ways of engaging with people in the mission context.	Only attracting existing Christians (transfer growth).
	Allowing the way the church plant ‘does church’ to be shaped and informed by the mission context.	Imposing the sending church’s cultural preferences on the new mission context.

Conclusion

This research project has explored the varied church planting landscape of Scotland across the different denominations and networks involved in SCPN. It has estimated that at least 200 (and probably considerably more) church plants and new worshipping communities have been started in Scotland since 2010 and reviewed evidence about their missional impact and vitality. During this project, we have found many encouraging signs about the impact of church planting in Scotland. For example, attendance at most church plants has increased considerably since their start, and most report some success in reaching the non-churched and de-churched. Though the numbers of new people coming to faith may be relatively small, when set against the backdrop of declining overall attendance in most denominations they are not insignificant. Borrowing George Lings' allusion to Zechariah 4:10, they might even be seen as 'one of the small things in our day which are signs of renewed hope' (Lings, 2016: 9). Alongside these signs of hope, this research also uncovered some signs of fragility and attrition among Scottish church plants that will need attention (though this is not unique to Scotland).¹² We have also identified four key factors (strong leadership teams, spiritual maturity, missional / evangelistic culture, contextual church) that contribute to the vitality of a church plant and mitigate against the risks of attrition.

In the light of the research findings, we offer the following recommendations for consideration by SCPN and other Church bodies with an interest in church planting in Scotland:

1. Shared vocabulary and understandings - It would be good to develop a shared vocabulary and understanding among SCPN members of terms like church planting, fresh expressions, new worshipping communities, and revitalisation. Though existing frameworks like the Pioneer Spectrum (Hodgett and Bradbury, 2018) and Fresh Expressions Journey¹³ provide potentially helpful starting points, these may need further contextualisation for a Scottish context.
2. Consistent record keeping - Many of the denominations / networks we spoke to did not seem to keep central records about the churches they had planted or their impact. This needs to be rectified to provide a more accurate and updatable picture of church planting in Scotland.
3. Ensuring that church planting is missional and contextual - Though it is understandable that some denominations and networks have their own preferred models of church planting, we would encourage further reflection on which models are most appropriate in different mission contexts. To ensure that church planting is missional, further consideration also needs to be given to the place of evangelism in church planting (see CARU, 2002 and Wier, 2024).
4. Reflection on SCPN's role - Consideration should be given to the following suggestions from SCPN members of things that could enable more effective church planting in Scotland:
More facilitated networking; helping develop a national church planting strategy (or perhaps a national church planting story?); gathering more stories and examples of planting by smaller congregations; advocating together for more investment in church planting; joint work around common concerns.
5. Potential further research - Inevitably, a short-term research project like this raises questions that require further investigation. In this regard, we suggest that further work evaluating the various models of church planting being used in Scotland may be particularly beneficial.
6. Churches' engagement with SCPN - In the light of this report, we would also encourage existing denominations / networks to engage with SCPN in conversations about the place of church planting within a mixed economy / ecology approach to mission in Scotland.



SCOTTISH CHURCH PLANTING NETWORK

The Scottish Church Planting Network is a group of Christian denominations and networks that together want to see a vibrant church in every community and network in Scotland.

SCPN formed in the autumn of 2022, when a group of those involved in leading church planting in each partner body came together to ask what we could do together. Through honest conversations and open dialogue, we discovered where things were, and it became clear that there was a shared agenda and a mutual desire to work together.

In April 2024 we held our first conference in Edinburgh, gathering over 150 church planters, pioneers and denominational leaders to encourage and strengthen the work.

SCPN commissioned this report on the state of church planting in Scotland by Church Army's Research Unit.

We plan to carry out a mapping exercise to identify where there are opportunities to plant new churches in the future. A SCPN Learning Community will also be run in early 2025 to support the development of the partners' work across Scotland.

For the time being SCPN continues to be a relational network rather than a constituted body. Information about the activities of SCPN are posted on our Facebook page "Scottish Church Planting Network".

Neil Glover (NGlover@churchofscotland.org.uk) and Alan McWilliam (alan@cairnmovement.com) took a lead in coordinating this report for SCPN and can be contacted for more information.

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Notes

¹ <https://churcharmy.org/our-work/research/publications/encounters-on-the-edge/>

² Drawing on Wier's work on financial models within fresh expressions of Church (Wier, 2016: 19), it is also helpful to distinguish between staffing and premises costs. Our online survey therefore asked church plants about the type of premises they met in, as well as the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff they employed. See Appendix 3 (Questions 8 and 9) for more details.

³ The Church of Scotland's 2021 annual statistical returns identified around 400 potential new worshipping communities across 251 parishes. 127 of these parishes were followed up and asked further questions about their New Worshipping Communities with relation to five criteria. Within these parishes, 122 New Worshipping Communities were identified that fulfilled all the criteria identified (Aisthorpe, 2023: 7-8).

⁴ See also Sheila Akomiah-Conteh's study of new churches in Glasgow. This found that, within Glasgow alone, 110 'new churches' were founded between 2000 and 2016. 65% of these were ethnic minority churches (51% African churches, 9% Asian churches, 5% Other), most of which had no association with historic denominations (Akomiah-Conteh, 2021: 60-69).

⁵ People who have completed Forge church planting training through the Cairn Movement have gone on to establish around 160 'new initiatives' (this includes church plants, mission projects, charities, and social enterprises / businesses e.g. coffee shops). As most of these have been established through existing denominations / networks, they have been excluded from the table to avoid double counting.

⁶ Survey responses received from 3 Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FEIC) congregations, 3 other Independent churches, and 3 other/multiple denominations.

⁷ The online survey generated 31 responses from church plants / new worshipping communities in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (13), Go Global (11) and Elim (3).

⁸ For future reflections on the relative importance of permanence and seasonality within church plants and fresh expressions of Church, see Wier's 2016 study on *Sustaining Young Churches* (Wier. 2016).

⁹ These figures are lower than those for fresh expressions of Church in the Church of England reported in the Literature Review. Further research would be needed to investigate the reasons for this.

¹⁰ A CARU study on the church backgrounds of attenders in Anglican fresh expressions of Church and inherited Sunday congregations reported: 'The inherited Sunday congregations in our control had a smaller proportion of simple non-churched attending (6%) compared with fresh expressions of Church and church plants (18%). Our inherited Sunday congregations had a greater proportion of simple de-churched attending (26%) compared with our fresh expressions of Church and church plants (20%)' (Dalpra and Vivian, 2016: 8).

¹¹ Within the Church of England, the phrase mixed ecology is used to describe 'the flourishing of church and ministry in our parishes, and in other communities of faith through things like church planting, fresh expressions of church, and chaplaincy and online'. <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy>

¹² Quantifying the number of church plants that have stopped or 'died' (or at least transitioned into something else) has not been possible, but some of the SCPN members we interviewed gave anecdotal examples of this.

¹³ <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/get-equipped/the-fresh-expressions-journey/>