

Church Planting and Partnering in Japan:

Learning from Pastors' and Missionaries' Perspectives



Eido
RESEARCH

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Foreword

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”

– Matthew 16:18

When Jesus promised to build His Church, He made it clear that the initiative and authority for this task are His. But He also says He will use Peter and the confession of faith he has just made. When we work to build the Church, we are in an amazing partnership with our Lord Himself. We know that He wants us to work with Him to make disciples and see them gathered in local expressions of His one Church.

OMF is committed to planting churches in Japan and this research project is focussed on that task. How can we do better at planting churches here in Japan? How can we partner well with others to see more churches started? What wisdom has the Lord given to brothers and sisters working in this area that we can learn from? Japan is changing, and existing churches face many challenges. How can we face these challenges and still work to plant churches that go on to plant churches?

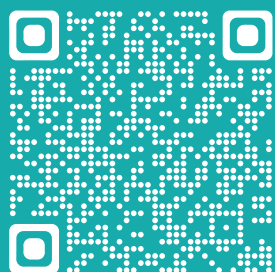
I am excited about the results of this research which identifies key areas for us to pay attention to as we plant, highlights different trends in how Japanese pastors and missionaries may think and gives us recommendations for partnering well together.

Thank you to everyone who took part in this research, giving their time, expertise and encouragement. Thank you also to the team at Eido Research for their wisdom and enthusiasm in designing the research, analysing the results and writing this report. I am grateful to the OMF Research Reference Group and other OMFers who prayed, researched, interviewed, translated and more to make this possible.

Our prayer is that this report will help OMF and the wider church in Japan to learn and grow together so that we might see many more churches planted here to the glory of God.

Chris Pain, OMF Japan Field Director, August 2023 (Revised Second Edition)

To download the report or see it in other languages visit: cpsr.omf.or.jp



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Executive Summary

What are the principles of effective church planting in Japan?

For church plants to succeed, they needed to be **inwardly healthy, outwardly looking, methodologically flexible**, and have an **effective handover of leadership**.

Each of these characteristics could be broken down into further components:

Inward health

In terms of inward health, participants emphasised that it was important to:

1. **Clearly articulate their vision** from the beginning of church plants
2. **Disciple believers and involve them in leadership and evangelism**
3. **Commit to prayer**
4. **Build unified teams** that bring together diverse gifts and are not overly concerned about making mistakes, but are able to learn from them

Outward focus

Likewise, with regard to external **focus**, **respondents stressed that church plants needed to focus on evangelism, network with other churches, and attend to the felt needs of their communities.**

Methodological flexibility

According to participants, there was no “one right model” for church-planting. Instead, **leaders should choose a model or combination of models according to their context and the gifts of the church planter.** Respondents also noted that, regardless of model, most church plants should aim to eventually have both small groups and some form of central gathering.

While there were contexts in which the traditional model was appropriate, Japanese pastors also noted that **the context of church decline made the traditional model hard to replicate since it required so many resources in terms of people and finances.**

Effective handover

Effective handover relied on the following criteria:

1. An (often lengthy) overlap between the old and new leader
2. Shared values between the outgoing and incoming leader
3. New “head leaders” should be supported by a team of lay leaders within the church
4. The church needed to be prepared for handover through teaching or (in some cases) a Japanese advisor pastor
5. Church planters should be careful to set expectations that their successors could fulfil

Missionaries could be wedded to their own ideas and unwilling to accept the value of Japanese leadership and culture.



Barriers

Participants also discussed barriers to these characteristics of healthy church plants, and added another category of obstacle, **spiritual resistance**, that church plants would encounter even if they were perfectly healthy.

Barriers to internal health

Respondents mentioned three primary barriers to internal health:

1. A lack of believers equipped for service, and, relatedly, a lack of discipleship
2. The general decline of the Church in Japan
3. Busyness and perfectionism within the Japanese Church

Barriers to outward focus

They also discussed four barriers to external focus: a **lack of focus on evangelism and church-planting**, a **lack of contextualisation of the Gospel**, a **lack of willingness to take risks**, and (especially for pastors) **feeling daunted by church-planting**.

Barriers to methodological flexibility

In different ways, a **lack of flexibility** could be an obstacle for both missionaries and pastors. On the one hand, missionaries felt that pastors could be **slow to try new ideas**. On the other hand, pastors thought that **missionaries could be wedded to their own ideas and unwilling to accept the value of Japanese leadership and culture**.

Spiritual resistance

Even if Japanese church plants were perfectly healthy, they would still encounter spiritual resistance. This resistance included seekers' **reluctance to break with their family or traditional religious practices**, a **tendency to see all belief systems as equally valid**, and **active opposition from spiritual forces**. It also incorporated a **fear of damaging relationships**.

Partnerships worked well when there was shared vision, an opportunity to share complementary gifts and ideas, good communication, cultural sensitivity, and teams that were individually capable and worked together well.



What are the best ways to work with partners?

1. Partnerships worked well when there was **shared vision**, an opportunity to share **complementary gifts and ideas**, **good communication**, **cultural sensitivity**, and teams that were **individually capable and worked together well**
2. Consequently, participants were looking for church-planting partners with whom they had a **shared vision** and with whom there was **potential for a good working relationship** – including trust, good communication, doctrinal alignment, flexibility, respect, and commitment to the work
3. **Missionaries and pastors also wanted to begin relationships differently**: missionaries wanted to begin by establishing a shared vision and good quality communication, while pastors wanted to begin by building a trust relationship. Understanding these different preferences will be crucial to building effective partnerships
4. **Detailed conversations about the vision and strategy of church plants were vital**. The data shows that missionaries and pastors often thought they agreed on strategy, only for discord to surface later in the partnership. Having clear, in-depth conversations on vision, strategy and what is actually meant by commonly used terms such as “shared leadership”, “discipleship”, “evangelism” and “every member ministry” can help to forestall these disagreements

For missionaries and mission agencies

1. **Missionaries’ primary role should be in planting churches, but missionaries should plant alongside Japanese partners wherever possible**. Missionaries can also catalyse mission and church planting more widely, support Japanese church plants, and share resources from their mission agency
2. For good partnerships, missionaries need to have **experience in church ministry** in their home country, **evangelistic gifting**, **pastoral ability**, and **cross-cultural training** – as well as **flexibility and humility**
3. **Missionaries should have clear conversations about the desired length of partnerships**, recognising that their expected length of partnership may be shorter than the length desired by pastors. The church needed to be prepared for handover through teaching or (in some cases) a Japanese advisor pastor

For Japanese pastors

1. Consider **creating more time for missionaries to spend on evangelism** (as opposed to internal church activities)
2. People who had partnered with Japanese pastors also expressed a desire for more **flexibility** (not being tied to a particular way of doing things) and **better communication**

What are the opportunities for future partnerships?

1. Participants saw a range of opportunities for church planting: including through addressing social need, working in rural areas, working with young people, and in specific geographical areas
2. Respondents suggested that OMF should adopt a **variety of strategies**, including **targeting towns and villages without any churches, concentrating on a small number of churches to ensure deep discipleship, and concentrating on influential cities**
3. **Non-OMF participants were highly interested in receiving OMF missionaries** – over 50% of respondents expressed a desire to partner with missionaries to plant new churches.
4. Virtually their only concern was ensuring that they received **high-quality missionaries**, who were cooperative, culturally sensitive, and a good match for their church or church plant

Recommendations

For OMF and other mission agencies

1. **Communicate the principles of (and barriers to) effective church-planting** within the church-planting community in Japan
2. While there was “no one right model” for church-planting, and times where the traditional model was appropriate, mission agencies should **bear in mind that many Japanese pastors did not find this model reproducible because of the resources it required**
3. Develop specific plans to **incorporate these principles and barriers into church-planting strategy and training**
4. **Initiate partnerships with missionaries and pastors differently**, bearing in mind that these groups tend to hear about partnerships through different means and prefer to begin them differently (shared vision/good communication versus trust relationship)
5. **Recruit missionaries with the characteristics described in the partnership section above** (experience in church ministry, evangelistic gifting, pastoral ability, cross-cultural training, flexibility, and humility), and **consider how to instil these characteristics in current missionaries**
6. Respondents had different suggestions for where they would like OMF to focus (targeting towns and villages without any churches, concentrating on a small number of churches and discipling deeply, and concentrating on influential cities). **OMF and other mission agencies may therefore wish to weigh these suggestions, and select the ones which best fit their contexts (perhaps adopting a variety of approaches)**
7. Since some pastors felt that they lacked the knowledge or experience to plant churches, **mission agencies may wish to offer church-planting training for pastors**, particularly exploring which models might match their context and gifts

Respondents suggested that OMF should adopt a variety of strategies, including targeting towns and villages without any churches, concentrating on a small number of churches to ensure deep discipleship, and concentrating on influential cities.



For missionaries

1. **Missionaries can feel confident about being involved in church-planting projects, knowing that Japanese pastors wanted them to contribute. While they should partner with Japanese Christians wherever possible, there may be scope for them to lead church plants without a Japanese church-planting team**
2. Missionaries may want to **meditate on the desired characteristics for missionaries above**. In particular, pastors expressed a desire for them to grow in **flexibility and humility**. **How can missionaries humbly accept the value of Japanese culture and ideas and allow themselves to be led as well as lead others?**
3. **Missionaries should have clear conversations with pastors about the desired length of partnerships**

For Japanese pastors

1. Consider **creating more time for missionaries to spend on evangelism** (as opposed to internal church activities)
2. People who had partnered with Japanese pastors also expressed a desire for more **flexibility**, although in a different sense: they wanted Japanese pastors to be **more open to new ideas**. They also thought that Japanese pastors could **improve in how they communicated with partners**
3. As discussed for missionaries above, **pastors should have clear conversations with missionaries about the desired length of partnerships**
4. Some pastors felt they lacked knowledge and experience in church-planting, and may want to **consider receiving church-planting training**

Missionaries can feel confident about being involved in church-planting projects, knowing that Japanese pastors wanted them to contribute. While they should partner with Japanese Christians wherever possible, there may be scope for them to lead church plants without a Japanese church-planting team.



Introduction

Research purpose

Plan strategically and increase alignment

The first purpose of this research was to enable OMF Japan to further develop its thinking about church-planting. Insights from this research will enable OMF to develop its church-planting practice to fit its context. It will also enable increased internal and external alignment about the best approaches to church-planting in the country.

Partner well with relevant organisations in the future

Furthermore, this research will allow OMF to understand how to work well with current and new partner organisations and leaders in the future.

Improve the likelihood of success of church plants in the future

This research sought to help OMF improve its impact in and through church plants in Japan. Results will provide key insights into the best approaches to church-planting and by God's grace promote numerical and spiritual growth in churches.

Research questions

In order to fulfil this purpose, the following research questions were identified in partnership with OMF Japan:

What are the principles of effective church planting in Japan?

This research starts by focusing on the specific principles of effective church planting in Japan. What are the best approaches and keys to planting churches in Japan? What are the main barriers to success in this process?¹

What are the best ways to work with partners?

The second question looks at the direct relationship between OMF and partners. What are the best ways to partner with churches and organisations in the future? How can OMF better partner with churches and organisations? What are the keys to success?

What opportunities exist for future partnerships?

Having answered the previous two questions, the third question looks to identify the opportunities for renewed and new partnerships with churches and organisations in Japan. What opportunities exist? What are the best ways to initiate engagement with these groups?

¹ Success in this report is not only about growth metrics but includes what church planters identify as keys to vibrant, sustainable and reproducing etc. churches.

Methodology



To answer these research questions, a mixed methods methodology was developed using OMF's Literature Review and in partnership with the Research Reference Group. This consisted of an online questionnaire and interviews with respondents identified using purposive sampling techniques.

Research design

The research design chosen for the Listening Project was a cross-sectional design. This involved conducting research at a single point in time through two methods:

1. A questionnaire circulated with 71 respondents. This questionnaire was sent to (a) a "core sample" of OMF missionaries, missionaries from other mission agencies, Japanese pastors, and other leaders, and (b) an "additional sample" of other OMF missionaries
2. Interviews with the "core sample" of missionaries, pastors, and the leaders. Forty-seven leaders were invited to interview

Respondents were asked about their experiences and perspectives on church planting.

The questionnaire consisted primarily of closed-answer questions completed online. Most open-answer questions were incorporated into the interview script. The interviews were conducted by OMF's Research Reference Group who were trained by Eido Research. Where necessary, the interviewers followed up the scripted questions with further questions for clarification. The interviews were conducted in a mixture of Japanese and English, but all notes were translated into English for the purpose of analysis.

Questionnaire and interview design

Before designing the survey and the interview, Eido began by reading OMF's detailed Literature Review and its draft of an initial listening project questionnaire.² The Literature Review informed the focus of the tool design as the questions of the survey were developed to test the principles of church planting and barriers included in the Literature Review document. Several questions from the initial questionnaire were used to develop the final survey.

The survey questions were also informed by a meeting with the Research Reference Group in which members of the group volunteered key questions they would like to ask of the sample population.

These three sources yielded too many questions to reasonably ask in the survey and the interview. Therefore, to identify common themes, Eido coded questions from all three of these sources using qualitative analysis software.

¹ The Literature Review may be found in Appendix 1.

Those questions which could be asked in a multiple-choice and closed-answer format were incorporated into the survey. Those which needed to be discussed in depth were phrased as open-answer questions and written into the interview script.

Throughout the design process, the Research Management Team was consulted on the most context-appropriate way to word the questions and structure the interview according to Japanese culture.

Population and sampling

Purposive sampling was used to create a sample of 71 individuals who were invited to engage with the questionnaire and 47 who were asked to engage with the interview. This sample consisted of three research populations who were identified by OMF Japan: firstly, Japanese church plant leaders (19 participants); secondly, missionary church plant leaders (11 respondents); and thirdly, agency leaders and experts on church planting in Japan (12 respondents). The individuals were selected by the OMF Research Reference Group following consultation with OMF missionaries, other agency leaders, and Japanese partners. The team worked to ensure that the sample covered individuals from a spread of geographical areas, denominations, experience in different types of church, and Japanese as well as non-Japanese leaders.

The online survey was also circulated with a wider selection of OMF Japan members, particularly missionaries with church-planting experience. This wider sample allowed for more bivariate analysis, especially on differences between missionaries and Japanese pastors.

Interpreting the results

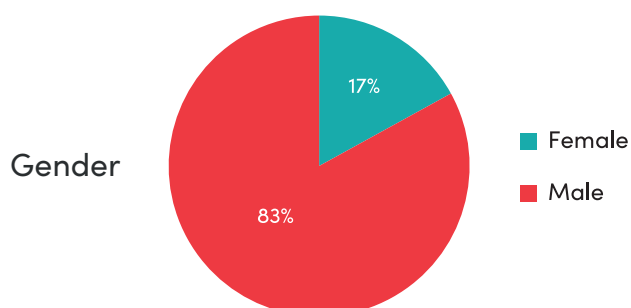
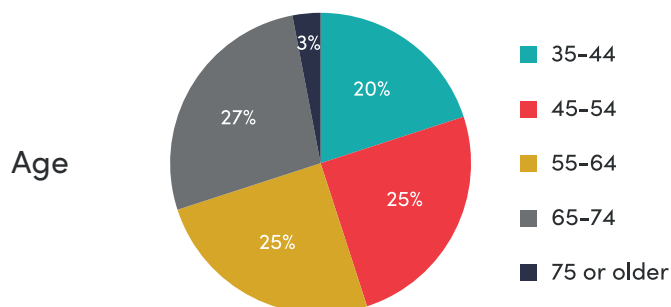
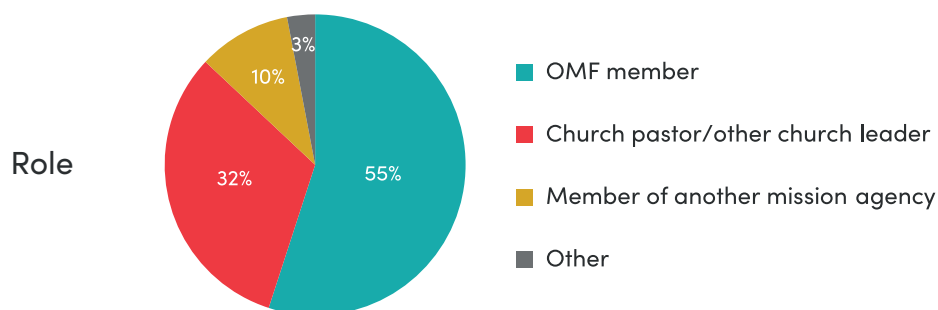
Throughout this report, Eido and OMF have adopted a “right fit” research approach, balancing best practices from academic research with affordability for the Christian sector, utility for Christian organisations, and comprehensibility for a wide range of audiences.

As an example of this approach, Eido has chosen to report ranking questions according to the percentage of respondents who selected a given response option as one of their top two or three choices. We think this approach is both more comprehensible (for most audiences) than mean scores and is more likely to reflect participants’ true opinions, as there were some signs in the data that respondents had randomly ordered lower-ranking preferences.

Likewise, Eido has chosen to include differences between groups with small sample sizes (missionaries vs. pastors, rural vs. urban respondents, the most “successful” leaders vs. the general sample) on the basis that these findings may be interesting and useful to OMF. However, we would urge readers of this report to interpret these differences with caution: i.e., prayerfully, in discussion with others, and in light of their own experiences of mission in Japan. While the differences noted in this report accurately reflect the opinions of interviewees and survey respondents, they are best regarded as an invitation to further conversation rather than as a final and definitive account of what the wider groups these respondents represent (missionaries, pastors, etc. across Japan) are likely to think.

Response rates and representativeness

The questionnaire received 60 valid responses, yielding a response rate of 85 percent. Twenty-three of these responses were partial and 37 were complete. The following is a basic demographic breakdown of survey respondents:



Thirty-eight percent of respondents identified Japan as their country of origin. Twenty-three percent identified as British and 20 percent said they originated from the United States. The remaining 18 percent were from Singapore, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Australia, South Africa, and Hong Kong.

Of the 47 individuals invited to participate in an interview, 42 agreed. As such, there was a response rate of 89 percent for those who participated in the survey and the interview.

Analysis

In analysing the questionnaire data, we created a “success metric” for church planters. This metric was a score between 0 and 1, with 1 being very successful and 0 being not successful at all.

The metric was calculated using data from the questionnaire on the following three factors:

1. The extent to which this leaders’ church plant was self-governing, self-financing and self-evangelising
2. The percentage of the congregation who came to faith through the church
3. Whether the church plant has been handed over to a Japanese leader

This success metric enabled Eido to conduct bivariate analysis and to highlight how answers to other questions varied according to the “success” of the church planting leader.

Crucially, this “success metric” does not provide a definitive measure of success; it simply assesses how churches scored on the specific questions we asked them. From a Christian perspective, this report cannot, and does not seek to, trespass on God’s right to determine who has ultimately been “successful” (cf. Matthew 25:23).

Ethical concerns

A final, but vital, step in finalising the methodology and questionnaire was to ensure high ethical standards.

Given the highly personal nature of the research, there were several ethical precautions that were taken in line with the British Sociological Association’s Statement of Ethical Practice.

Firstly, all data collected was voluntary, and participants were given the option of not partaking in the research.

Secondly, to create a “safe space” to allow participants to be completely honest, all questionnaire data collected was anonymous and stored on encrypted hard-drives.

Thirdly, if participants were experiencing any forms of hurt and life difficulties and this was brought up through the research process, participants would have been directed to suitable counselling and support.

What are the principles of effective church planting in Japan?



Principles of effective church planting

In interview responses, participants stressed that successful church plants needed to be both inwardly healthy and outwardly looking, methodologically flexible, and have an effective handover.

Inwardly healthy, outwardly looking

Inwardly healthy

When they discussed inward health, nearly half of respondents (48 percent) emphasised a need to **involve ordinary believers in leadership and evangelism**. As one pastor commented:

Laypeople need to “do” church. We see many models of missionaries doing church planting, and no one has said to lay people “you can’t do this”, but many people see that missionaries do it and assume only missionaries can. But we need to see other models.

Specifically, respondents wanted to help laypeople discover their spiritual gifts so that they could both plant churches and be involved in church leadership. “Churches should have plural leadership [rather] than just relying on the pastor”, one leader said, while another noted that “church planting isn’t rocket science” and that they “would love to see Japanese people empowered to plant churches locally”.

With regard to evangelism, leaders wanted to see church members develop a “longing to see family, friends, and neighbours... come to know the Lord”. In the words of one missionary:

The pastor is the coach. The believers are the players on the team. And the believers... are the very key [people for]... reaching out into the community. And we have to empower them.

The discipleship of church members was a crucial part of this vision: as one missionary noted, “people need to be disciplined first so they can disciple others”. Specifically, participants emphasised the importance of obedience – a theme also discussed in the Literature Review. As one participant commented, new Christians “need to understand the need for obedience to Jesus, not just belief in who He is – even demons believe Jesus is God”. Respondents also suggested that new Christians were most likely to grow through mentoring: one pastor, for instance, noted that he was having a “Barnabas time” with each of the small group leaders at his church, “individually, once a month”:

It is a one-on-one time, to encourage them, affirming them, listening to God's Word and guidance [for] their lives together with them.

Another added that mentoring could be “done not just by... a pastor, but believer to believer.... Just mentoring one person is good!”

In describing inwardly healthy church plants, participants also stressed the importance of **prayer** and **good teams**. Respondents thought there was a need for “a lot more prayer and fasting” and noted that it was vital to build teams that were **unified, brought together diverse gifts, and were able to learn from their mistakes**. “I think it’s about good leaders and good leadership teams”, a pastor said:

People who can learn from mistakes and actively seek to grow. And also able to ask and get help from appropriate people as the situation demands. It's not about being independent. It's about interreliance. If you have that, then I think you'll do well.

Finally, respondents thought it was crucial to have a clear vision for church planting. When asked what they would have done differently in prior church plants, participants often wished that they had more clearly articulated their strategy. In the words of one leader:

“I would have provided more organisation and a strong vision to [the church plant]. We [did] have strong aims, but maybe we didn't articulate [them] as much. I would have provided constant vision casting... [and kept] doing it”.

Outwardly looking

For church plants to succeed, participants stressed that they also needed to look outwards: that is, to **network between churches, communicate the Gospel, attend to the needs of the community, and benefit from church-planting training**.

Japanese pastors, in particular, expressed a desire to **network with other churches** when planting. As one observed, “it’s easy to feel isolated when doing church planting in an unchurched area. So people need to feel that [they are] part of the bigger picture”. Another thought that there could be a lack of communication between church-planters: “We don’t seem to know what others are doing... Everyone is busy with their own thing. But we can do better than this”.

With regard to communicating the Gospel, one pastor explained how a focus on evangelism had to drive church-planting efforts:

We need to think about the harvest, the spiritual poverty, feel the pain of the lost. If we don't have this vision, then it will just be a... project. We need passion and compassion for the lost. If we do not have this – it will just be a strategy.

Continued dedication to evangelism was also essential once a church plant had been established: “if [a church] doesn’t evangelise, then it will become small”, another leader said. “There [will be] no young people in the church, and it will disappear with only aged people”.

Moreover, leaders thought that church-planting would be most successful when it paid **close attention to the needs of the community**. One missionary, for example, recalled how she had “hit a stalemate” while planting a church and decided to walk around the neighbourhood and pray. Since she saw lots of mothers and children, she decided to start a parenting class, where she introduced the Bible and formed deeper relationships with these families. Reflecting on her experience, she raised two questions which apply to church-planting in Japan more widely: **“Where are the felt needs? How can we scripturally meet those felt needs?”**

Lastly, some leaders expressed a need for more church-planting training for both leaders and congregations. “[We need] training for church members, as [a] ‘church plant’ is a vision of the whole church”, one pastor said, while a missionary expressed a need for “better coaching”:

Every church planter shouldn't be alone – they should have someone at their side helping [them] get through their challenges. It seems every church planter is discouraged. They need someone who can come alongside and ask the right questions.

Inwardly healthy, outwardly looking: quantitative data

Many of these same themes appeared when we asked survey respondents to rank the ten principles of church planting that OMF had identified in its Literature Review (for which see our **Appendix**).

Respondents emphasised prayer, having a clear vision, and communicating the Gospel in word and deed. However, they were much less likely to mention “Gospel unity” and “Leadership shared” – two concepts which overlapped with interviewees’ themes of networking and involving believers in leadership.

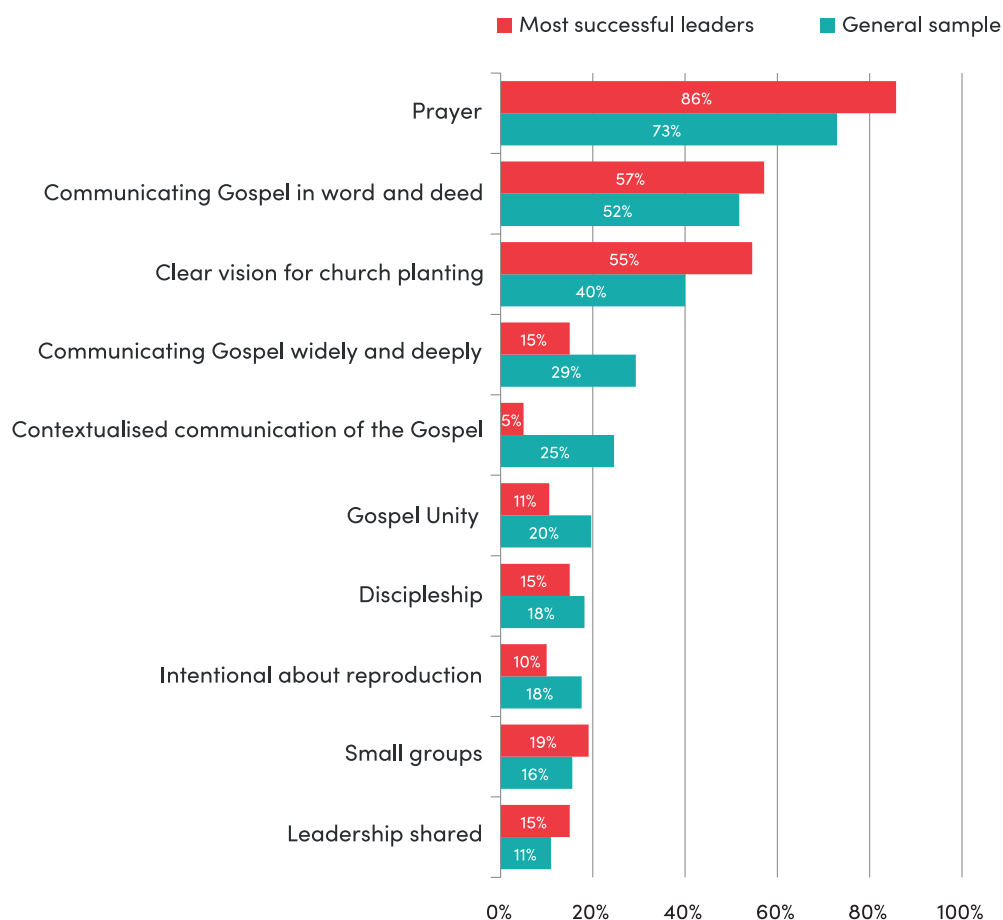
We believe that this discrepancy is due to question phrasing: our analysis of the quantitative question showed signs that respondents had been overwhelmed by having to rank ten variables, reducing the quality of the data. In open-answer responses, participants also noted that they had found it difficult to rank answer choices because they considered several of them equally vital.

Nonetheless, it was intriguing that leaders with high scores on our success metric were even more likely to prioritise prayer, communicating the Gospel in word and deed, and having a clear vision for church-planting – suggesting the centrality of these aspects of church-planting.

Leaders with high scores on our success metric were even more likely to prioritise prayer, communicating the Gospel in word and deed, and having a clear vision for church-planting - suggesting the centrality of these aspects of church-planting.



Principles of successful church planting (by percent ranked in top 3)



Methodologically flexible

In addition to inward health and external focus, the third criterion of successful church-planting mentioned by participants was **methodological flexibility**.

Rather than advocating for a single model of church plant, **more than three in five leaders (and eight in ten missionaries)** said that church-planters should vary which model they used according to the local contexts and the gifts of the church-planter. These figures — 63 and 81 percent, respectively — are unusually high for an open-answer question, and suggest a remarkable degree of consensus on this issue.

When asked which he considered the most effective model for church-planting in Japan, one leader responded:

I think just about every model has its value. There is no one model that is most effective. I think there are models that are not effective at certain times and certain places. So for me it's not about a church planting model but the sensitivity [to the leading of the]... Holy Spirit regarding the gift of the missionary, the pastor of the church, the community (urban/rural area). What's the setting? Is it a fishing village? [...] Each of these different kinds of setting will require a different approach.

Others agreed: "I really think it's good to have a variety of models and to be aware that different people or parts of society... will be attracted to different styles," another said. **"There is no silver bullet in terms of models."**

Regardless of the specific model that church planters adopted, many spoke of the importance of eventually having some form of **central gathering** (32 percent, and 50 percent of missionaries) and **small groups** (16 percent). As one experienced church planter reflected, there are:

Two things to think about in any model that are very important: [1] large corporate worship is extremely encouraging in your faith. [2] Small groups. Japanese people are very relational and like these small groups. A lot of life change happens in small groups.

This did not mean that all church plants needed to have both of these elements immediately; the same respondent quoted above, for instance, also advised church-planters not to start a larger service until their small groups were well established. However, many participants felt that these ingredients were eventually helpful in the life of the new church.³

Crucially, the fact that there was **"no one right model"** also did not absolve church-planters of responsibility for choosing a model. Since it is not possible for a church plant to be founded on no model at all, if church-planters did not consciously select a model, they were certain to use one (or a mixture of models) unconsciously – and possibly one that was less suited to their context and the personalities of their church-planting team. While this primary research did not provide specific principles for choosing a model (beyond a general attention to context and church-planters' gifts), further information on how to choose a model may be found in resources 21 and 25 of the Literature Review. This may also be an area for further primary research, which might examine how church-planters had selected a model and what they had found helpful in doing so.

Rather than advocating for a single model of church plant, more than three in five leaders (and eight in ten missionaries) said that church-planters should vary which model they used according to the local contexts and the gifts of the church-planter.

”

³ Interestingly, several participants (16 percent) also felt that having a building could benefit church plants. While these respondents did not suggest that all church plants should have a building, they noted that "because Japanese people have this background of temples [and] shrines", the "presence of a building is still quite important". The Church, they explained, needed to have "a presence they [could] show to the outside" – and, furthermore, "for many Japanese people, going into each other's homes can be hard".

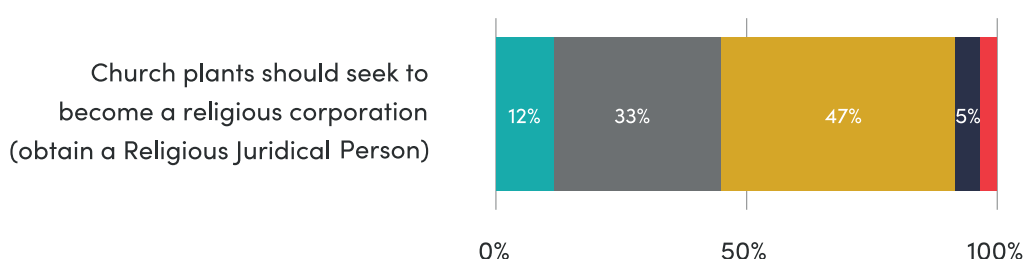
Quantitative findings

A commitment to methodological flexibility was reflected in our quantitative findings. Intriguingly, when asked what model best represented their church plant, the participants who scored highest on our metric of success were most likely to write in their own responses, rather than selecting one of our predefined models. When we examined their written responses, we found that they had used a blend of models – reinforcing our conclusion that **success in church planting was not due to finding a single “correct” model so much as finding the best model (or mix of models) for particular circumstances and the gifts of individual leaders.**⁴

Furthermore, participants were ambivalent about whether church plants should seek to become a religious corporation, as shown in the graph below:

Views on becoming a religious corporation

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree



While 45 percent of respondents thought that church plants should become a religious corporation, an even larger proportion (47 percent) neither agreed nor disagreed – presumably because they thought that church plants should do what was right for their circumstances.⁵

Perhaps even more revealingly, the most successful leaders were more likely to think that nearly all models were effective than our sample at large, once again suggesting that there are few “bad” models, but only models better or worse suited to individual church-planting contexts.^{6,7}

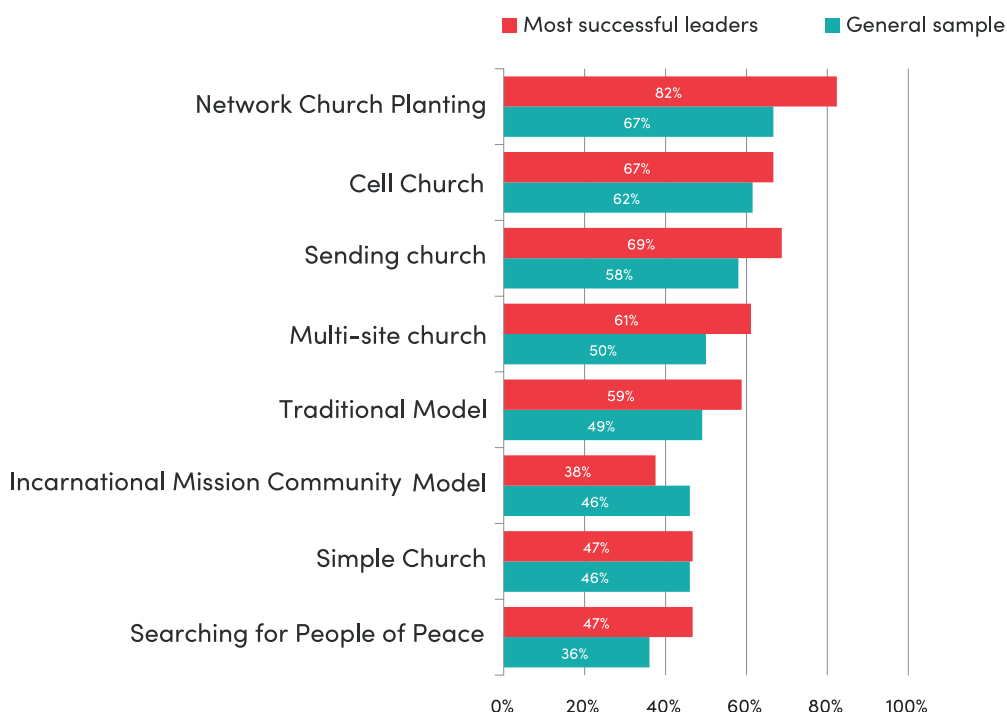
⁴ Importantly, however, these participants had consciously selected models and were able to specify which models they had chosen. This finding is therefore not in tension with our point above about the importance of choosing a model; to the contrary, they show how church-planters had innovatively (and carefully) chosen models to fit their circumstances.

⁵ There was some interesting variation within this finding. Participants who thought that the traditional model of church planting was effective were most likely to agree that church plants should become a religious corporation, while participants who thought that simple churches were effective were least likely to agree. Participants in rural locations were also less likely to agree that church plants should become a religious corporation.

⁶ Japanese pastors did, however, suggest that the model of growing churches planting “daughter churches” may be less successful given the context of general church decline in Japan.

⁷ Although it is true that the most successful leaders were less likely to rate the incarnational mission community model as effective, this may be due to church planters’ lack of familiarity with this model: our data shows that very few participants had used it.

Which of the following models do you consider to be effective



As can be seen in the chart above, the most popular individual models were network church planting, the cell church model, and the sending church model. Network church planting was particularly favoured by Japanese pastors – perhaps because, as we shall discuss below, they sometimes found it daunting to plant without the support of other churches.

Effective handover

For church plants to be successful, there also needed to be an effective transfer of leadership. Participants described five components of an effective handover: (1) an (often lengthy) period of overlap between the old and new leader, (2) shared vision and values, (3) shared leadership, (4) preparing the church for handover, (5) setting reasonable expectations.

By far the most prominent of these themes was allowing for a period of **overlap between the old and new leader**. This idea was mentioned by 74 percent of respondents, and over nine in ten missionaries (93 percent). These are astonishingly high figures for a qualitative question. As missionaries explained, this overlap between church leaders allowed the new pastor “time to understand [the] vision, [and build] relationships and connect with everyone”.

In particular, many of these leaders advocated for a long handover period of at least a year, although sometimes considerably longer. “Two to three years is too short for a handover”, one missionary said, and others had transferred leadership over a period of five to ten years. When possible, many participants suggested bringing in a leader who had been disciplined within the church community (this theme was mentioned by 10 leaders – 26 percent of those who answered this question); as one reflected, the new pastor:

Was raised and matured in the church which he then took over. That has been a massive help because there wasn't any relationship building to do, he knew the history, he knew why things had been done as they are. There's already the relationship, there's already the connection with that church. When [the new pastor] was doing his theological education, he was already thinking specifically how to apply the studies to the new church.

Secondly, participants stressed the importance of the new leader agreeing on the same **vision and values**. Around four in ten respondents (39 percent) and more than half of missionaries discussed this theme. When the new leader has a “different way of thinking”, the “momentum is stopped”, one missionary explained. Some leaders also noted specific values that they would want incoming leaders to have – such as an emphasis on servant leadership and involving laypeople in ministry, and a willingness to listen.

Respondents also observed that **handovers tended to be more successful when leadership was shared within churches**.⁸ Some leaders, for instance, suggested that Japanese pastors might be involved from the start of missionary-led church plants so as to smooth the handover process. More commonly, participants advised that even when responsibility was entrusted to an individual, **this “head leader” should be supported by a team of lay leaders within the church**. These leaders (who, in many cases, would be ordinary churchgoers, rather than “staff”) could then help to share the responsibility of leadership, hold pastors accountable, and provide them with emotional support.

As one leader commented, when congregations had come to trust their lay leaders, and these leaders worked alongside the new pastor, it helped them see that even in times of leadership transition, there was “no abrupt change”. “In teams,” she said, “we can transfer trust”.

Participants described five components of an effective handover: (1) an (often lengthy) period of overlap between the old and new leader, (2) shared vision and values, (3) shared leadership, (4) preparing the church for handover, (5) setting reasonable expectations.

”

⁸ This theme was mentioned by 37 percent of respondents, and 60 percent of missionaries. Only 22 percent of pastors discussed it.

Churches also needed to be **prepared for handover** (a theme noted by 34 percent of participants). This could be done through Bible teaching on leadership transitions – one missionary, for instance, had taught his congregation about how “church members are connected because of God... [not] man, so whoever comes into the role, the relationship of the church [to] God doesn’t change”. Other respondents had found it helpful to have a Japanese advisor pastor to give seminars on the differences between missionaries and pastors and what it would be like once the church had called a Japanese pastor.

Lastly, 18 percent of respondents urged missionaries to **set expectations that would be sustainable** once their churches were handed over to a Japanese pastor. This was particularly important with regard to giving: “Missionaries bring their own support with them”, one pastor said, “but the pastor is called and paid from offerings”. Unless missionaries set expectations carefully, “the believers will... complain, ‘It was good when we had a missionary; we did not have to give so much!’” Likewise, some respondents described how missionaries could be more “relaxed” and less “strict” than Japanese pastors:

Actually, we are making it harder for a Japanese pastor to come in because, most likely, most of them will be more structured and have higher expectations of believers. So if we don’t do this sort of preparation well, then we are setting up the Japanese pastor to fail because people may rebel a bit. So I wish we would have been more conscious of that and been stricter, realising the importance of structure, and have greater understanding of Japanese culture.

This missionary had concluded that the solution was for missionaries to be more strict, but other solutions may also be possible: for example, during the period of **overlap** described above, and while discussing the **values** of the church plant, missionaries and pastors might have more open discussions about the level of strictness they would like to see in the church.

In summary, missionaries and pastors discussed the following principles of leadership handover:

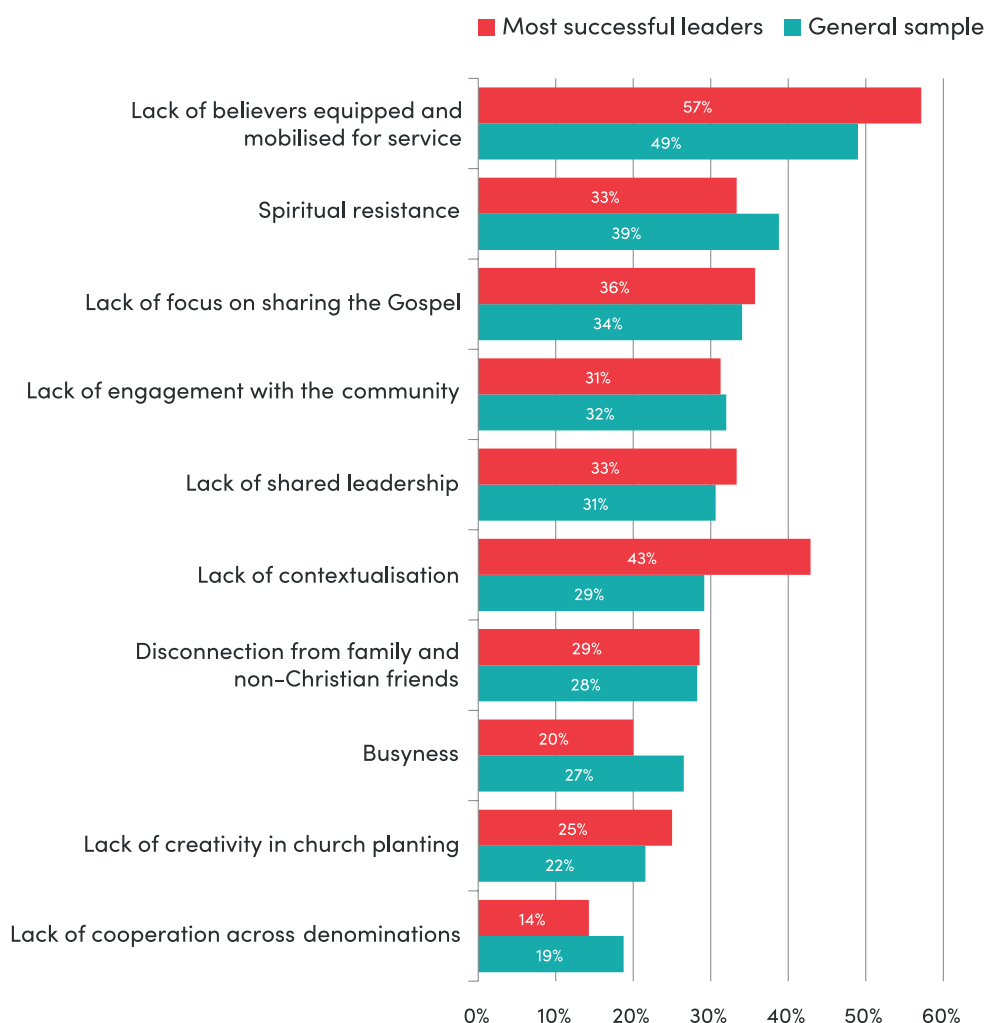
MISSIONARIES’ TOP PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP HANDOVER	PASTORS’ TOP PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP HANDOVER
1. Overlap between old and new leader (93%) 2. Church prepared and Shared leadership (tied at 60%) 3. Shared vision and values (53%) 4. Same expectations of missionary and pastor (33%)	1. Overlap between old and new leader (61%) 2. Shared vision and values (30%) 3. Shared leadership (22%) 4. Letting go of authority and Church prepared (tied at 17%)

On the whole, missionaries and pastors discussed similar principles. While there were slight differences between missionaries’ and pastors’ priorities in leadership handover (e.g., missionaries prioritised preparing the church while pastors were more likely to mention letting go of authority), the main difference was simply that missionaries mentioned all principles more frequently – whereas, apart from the need for an overlap between old and new leaders, pastors had less agreement on which principles of leadership handover were most significant.

Barriers to effective church planting

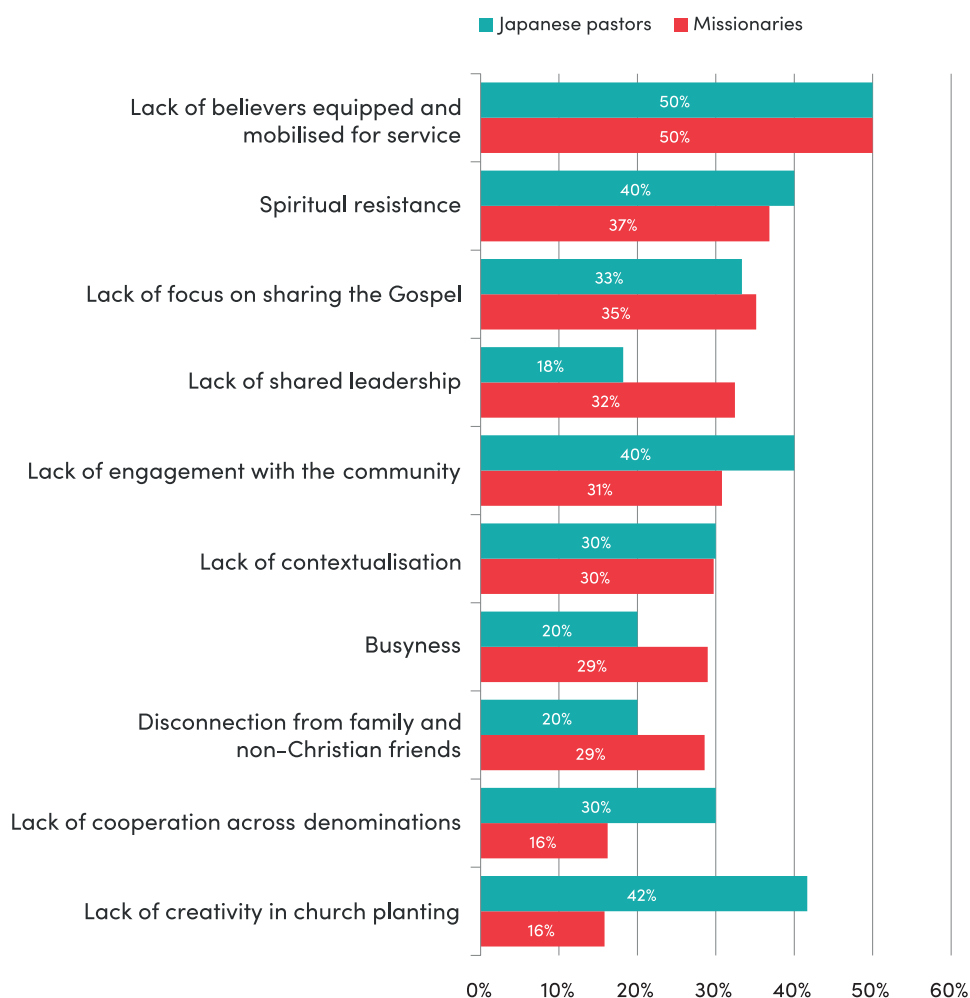
This study evaluated barriers to church planting in two ways. First, we asked participants to select which of a predefined list of barriers they considered most severe. In interviews, we then gave them the opportunity to answer this question in an open-ended format.

Barriers (by percent ranked in top 3)



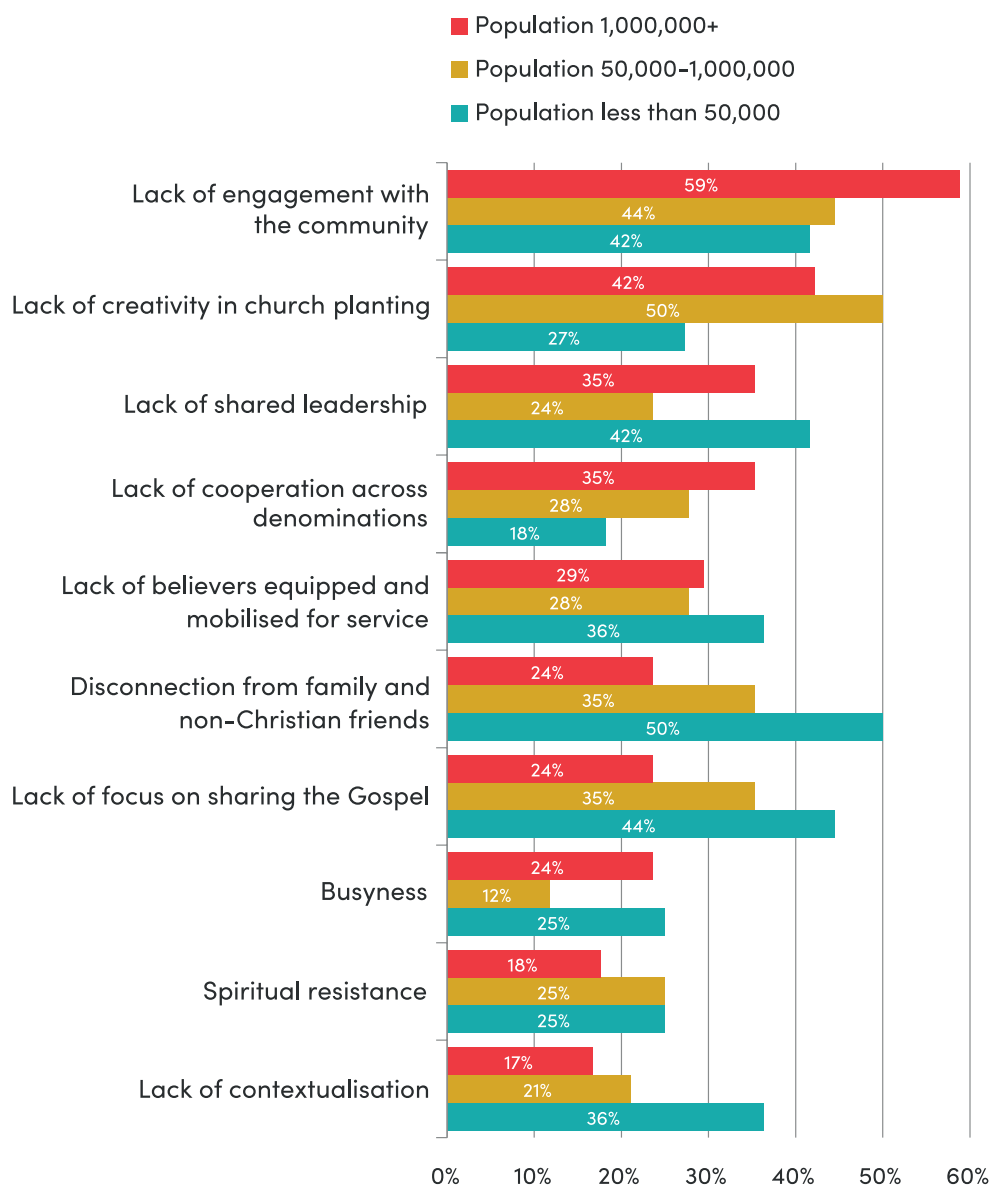
In survey responses, participants identified **a lack of believers equipped for service, spiritual resistance, and a lack of focus on sharing the Gospel as the primary barriers to church planting.** Interestingly, participants who scored the highest on our metric of success were more likely to emphasise the importance of contextualisation (and somewhat more likely to select a lack of believers equipped for service).

Barriers (by percent ranked in top 3)



Missionaries and Japanese pastors also differed in their responses to this question, with pastors more likely to believe that a lack of creativity and a lack of cooperation across denominations were barriers to church planting. Missionaries, by contrast, were more inclined to see a lack of shared leadership as a barrier.

Barriers (by percent ranked in top 3)



We also saw significant differences by the population of the town or city where the church plant was located. The following table lists the primary barriers for each population bracket.

TOWNS/VILLAGES SMALLER THAN 50,000 PEOPLE	TOWNS/CITIES BETWEEN 50,000 AND 1,000,000 PEOPLE	CITIES LARGER THAN 1,000,000 PEOPLE
1. Disconnection from family and non-Christian friends 2. Lack of focus on sharing the Gospel 3. Lack of engagement with the community 4. Lack of shared leadership	1. Lack of creativity in church-planting 2. Lack of engagement with the community 3. Disconnection from family and non-Christian friends 4. Lack of focus on sharing the Gospel	1. Lack of engagement with the community 2. Lack of creativity in church-planting 3. Lack of shared leadership

As can be seen in the table above, disconnection from family and non-Christian friends was a more significant barrier in rural contexts – implying that **seekers in these areas may have to sacrifice more to become Christians**. This theme was also reflected in our qualitative data: “the fear of [what] other people think is oppressive”, one missionary said:

In rural areas, this barrier is strong, especially for people who are the elder son of the family.... The urban areas appear more open to the Gospel... just because they are less [under the influence of] extended families and under less pressure from them.

Many of these same barriers appeared in interview responses, which we will discuss with regard to the principles of church planting identified in the previous section. We will also examine a fourth category of barrier – spiritual resistance.

Barriers to internal health

As participants explained, it could be difficult for church plants to be internally healthy because **they lacked believers who were equipped for service** (a theme mentioned by 33 percent of respondents), because of a wider **lack of discipleship** (17 percent) and church decline (17 percent) in Japan, and because of the busyness (10 percent) and perfectionism (7 percent) of both church leaders and congregations.

While we have discussed the first two of these barriers above, church decline was a major obstacle. Since few Japanese churches were growing, there was limited potential for successful churches to send members to form a daughter church. Many churches also lacked staff and sufficient income to hire a pastor. These realities had caused at least one pastor to see church-planting as an unrealistic proposition for most churches:

Current Japanese churches have to give up church planting. The reality now is that one pastor is looking after more than one church, and this kind of situation is happening continuously.... We can predict that half of existing churches will be without a pastor after 2030.

Revealingly, the pastor in the quotation above seemed to assume a traditional model of church-planting – suggesting that, while the traditional model may be appropriate in certain contexts, other models may also be required for church-planting in Japan to continue.

Several churches were also impeded by **busyness**: as one missionary commented, the “Japanese secular work environment is very demanding and time consuming. So it is difficult for part time pastors or bi-vocational pastors to have much time for church work”. Busyness could also be an obstacle to people who were exploring faith: in the words of another missionary, with women there is “the issue of how to follow through with worshipping God when [their] husbands’ only free time is Sunday morning”.

With regard to **perfectionism**, a final pastor noted that “a fear of mistakes or failure can be a problem”, while a missionary observed that Japanese people’s commitment to a “high standard of performance” could sometimes be an obstacle in church-planting. Leaders had tried to combat perfectionism by deliberately confessing their sins from the pulpit so that “people feel [that] church is not a place like the PTA or... [the workplace] where you have to do everything right”, and by creating a “culture of authenticity” and grace in their churches. One missionary, for example, remembered how another she had worked with wrote on the wall of their church “失敗してもいい教会” – “This is a church where it is okay to make mistakes”.

Barriers to external focus

Furthermore, participants faced a range of obstacles to enthusiastically sharing the Gospels with others, including a **lack of passion** for evangelism, church-planting, and their faith as a whole (33 percent) and a **lack of contextualisation** of the Gospel for the Japanese context (26 percent, but 38 percent of missionaries).

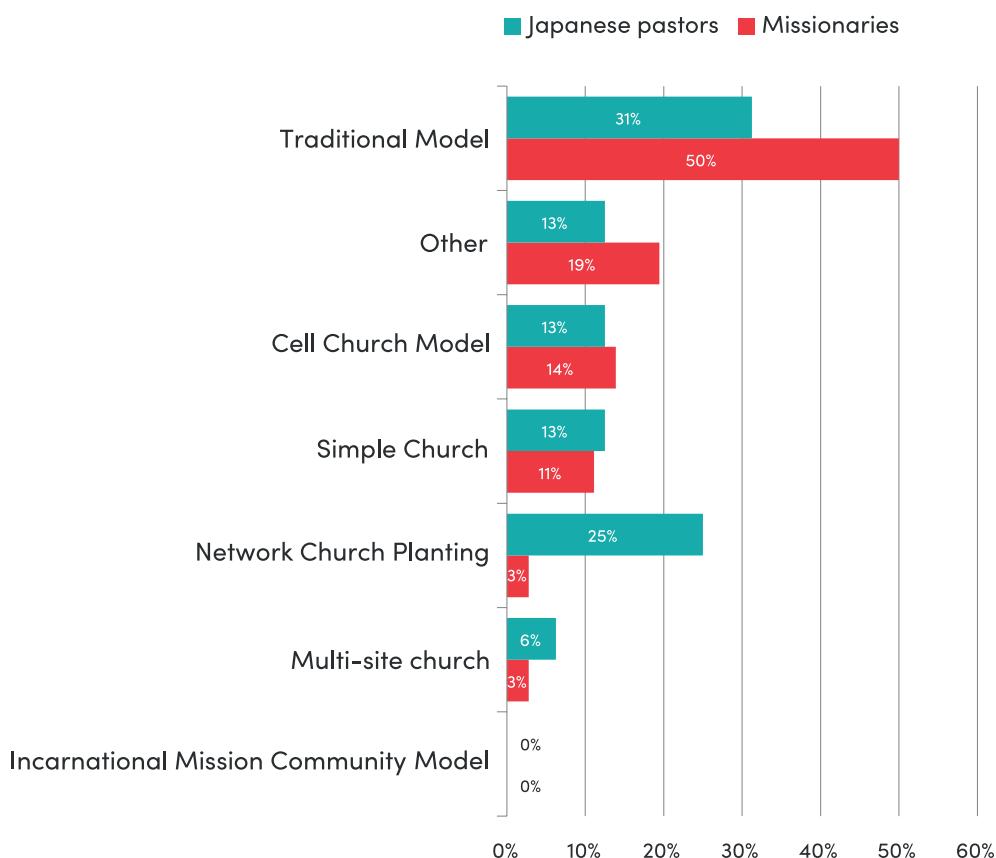
Pastors, especially, felt **daunted by church planting** because of a perceived lack of knowledge and experience (24 percent, but 31 percent of pastors). These participants tended to feel particularly discouraged when plants depended on a single parent church: in these cases, pastors explained, the parent church risked “becom[ing] isolated” – **especially in the context of decline in the wider Japanese Church**. “There is a stereotype of church planting that it should be done by one church and by one pastor”, another agreed. “People may hold back [from] church-planting if that is the case”.

These findings were also reflected in our quantitative results. As shown in the graph below, **pastors were much less likely than missionaries to use the traditional model and much more inclined to opt for network church planting** – almost certainly as a means of sharing the burden of church planting described above.

Participants faced a range of obstacles to enthusiastically sharing the Gospels with others, including a lack of passion for evangelism, church-planting, and their faith as a whole and a lack of contextualisation of the Gospel for the Japanese context.



Which of these models best represents your church plant?



Finally, and perhaps relatedly, participants felt that church plants could be hindered by an unwillingness to take risks (10 percent). Some missionaries saw this as related to the perfectionism they perceived in Japanese culture, but pastors also admitted that this could be an issue: “I also think that perfectionism and a fear of mistakes or failure can be a problem”, one said.

Barriers to methodological flexibility

While methodological flexibility was essential to successful church planting, some participants (21 percent) said that Japanese church culture could be **rigid**. “組織[soshiki] becomes 葬式[soushiki]”, one missionary said – a phrase which might be liberally translated as “too much organisation is deadly”. “The church is often too bound by program,” another missionary agreed:

And not willing to adjust and change to different settings and circumstances. I think many of the churches are trying to do church the way it was done 20, 30, 40 years ago. We're not touching the community around us anymore.

While this theme was primarily mentioned by missionaries (44 percent of missionaries, as compared to 8 percent of pastors), the one Japanese pastor who mentioned it felt that **missionaries could be equally inflexible**:

[Missionaries] want to do things the way their mission agency says, and they want to be successful through doing things that way, so they can send updates with success stories. [But] they... need to be flexible. [To] understand and adjust to the culture of Japan... of the people they are currently interacting with. But they are fixated on doing things their way. I feel that after a few years of that, they will end up giving up. And that's such a waste.

As we will discuss in the Partnerships section below, flexibility was an area in which both missionaries and Japanese pastors could continue to grow.

Spiritual resistance

Even when church plants were internally healthy, externally focused, and methodologically flexible, however, they still encountered resistance. This resistance may be usefully separated into **spiritual** and **cultural barriers**.

Spiritual barriers

More than two in five participants (43 percent), and three in five missionaries (63 percent), discussed spiritual barriers that could hinder church-planting. In particular, they mentioned that **it could be hard for Japanese people to break with their family or traditional religion** (19 percent), **a tendency to see all belief systems as equally valid** (12 percent), **active opposition from spiritual forces** (10 percent), and the fact that **Christianity was sometimes confused with cults** (7 percent).

As one Japanese pastor commented, “it is culturally quite difficult for Japanese people to get out from a society which is based on Japanese Buddhism and Shinto[ism]...or from [a] culture with mixed religions”. Another participant agreed:

One of the words that I keep hearing a lot from people is the Japanese word しがらみ [shigarami] – the bond and the relational limitations that people feel. They say that I agree with Christianity, it sounds great to me but I had the shigarami [chain, bondage] of the Buddhist altar, ancestor altar, non-believing family members that I just cannot leave. People recognize that to become a Christ-follower means a spiritual break.

Other respondents felt that new Christians could be hindered by a **sense that all religions were equally valid**:

*In the Japanese mindset... it doesn't matter what you believe because **religion is functional**. For example, if somebody dies, I go to the Buddhist temple, but I will go to a Shinto shrine when a baby is born. It's not about what I believe but what I do. Religion fills different needs at different times. So people can be quite open, say, to go[ing] to church at Christmas. Some people are against the idea of exclusivity, that it is only Jesus.*

Still other respondents (exclusively missionaries) thought that **church-planters were opposed by spiritual forces**:

There is strong opposition in spiritual places to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is really the one most important point in this list. It is spiritual opposition that gives rise to many of the other points in this list. Satan and the demons resist giving up their territory or the souls of their conquered humans to the forces of God and his Kingdom.

A final group also noted that **Christianity was sometimes confused with sects** such as Aum Shinrikyo, Mormonism, the Unification Church, and others. (One missionary, for example, had encountered a school of Buddhism teaching “salvation by grace through faith”.) While some of these sects seemed like easier alternatives to Christianity, offering “worldly benefits without the uncomfortable necessity of repentance and a holy life”, others (particularly Aum Shinrikyo and the Unification Church) caused seekers to worry that Christianity might be a cult. “Non-Christian people [are suspicious of] Aum Shinrikyo, the Mormon Church’s teaching”, one missionary said. “People worry about that”.

Cultural barriers

Another four in ten participants (40 percent) described cultural barriers that hindered church-planting efforts. Most centrally, they said, **it could be hard for Japanese people to come to faith because they feared that doing so would damage their relationships with friends and family**. As one missionary commented, “the fear of how other people think is oppressive”, especially in rural areas. Another participant described how some Japanese people seemed impeded by a sense that since “my family has always been Buddhist, even if Christianity is good and true, I can’t and won’t become a Christian”. “Their faithfulness, in a way, is a barrier”, another said. “Faithfulness to being Japanese, Buddhist... faithful to traditions [and] taking part in family traditions”.

Less frequently, participants discussed other cultural barriers, such as a **legacy of persecution against Christians** – including the danka system in which households continue to support Buddhist temples in their area – and the very **strength and capability** of Japanese people. “Another reason why the Church is not growing in Japan is because people are so capable and good”, one missionary noted. “Christ’s power [is made perfect] in weakness and not in ability or organisation”. Lastly, some participants observed that it could be **hard to convince Japanese people to congregate in churches**: “many people in Japan are hikikomori [shut-ins]”, one said, and the “pandemic hasn’t helped”, while another thought that smartphone and computer use were making young people less likely to “leave home and come to... church”.

How can these barriers be overcome?

The most frequently mentioned strategy for overcoming these barriers to church planting was **engaging in the local community**. This was mentioned by 10 interviewees. Individuals cited the importance of being present in and building trust with members of the local community in order to “build up a positive image” of Christians. “We can show the community that Christians are loving, kind but not looking for money”, said one respondent, “church is somewhere you can come safely, and is trustworthy”.

The value of engaging in the community was often linked to providing more opportunities to share the Gospel. “People in Japan are open in terms of practical religion but not so much doctrine”, said one respondent. Therefore, addressing practical needs in the community is a key way of enabling people to see what Christianity looks like. Other respondents noted the value of increasing curiosity and the importance of the church engaging in social issues in order to attract people to ask questions about Christianity.

The most frequently mentioned strategy for overcoming these barriers to church planting was engaging in the local community.



Two respondents explicitly mentioned the importance of building **trust** in order to share the gospel. In referencing both Jesus' method of evangelising, and their experience of Japanese culture, these individuals suggested that the best way to tell Japanese communities about Jesus was to get to know them, build relationships with them, understand their needs, and develop trust.

The second most frequently referenced strategy for overcoming barriers to church planting was **exploring new methods of church planting and evangelism**. This was mentioned by eight respondents. Individuals referenced options such as **designating some missionaries to focus on evangelism**, "these should be set free to do anything they want, and not worry about the church," **and some on church planting**; finding new ways to train future leaders; and trialling team ministry to more than one church where a group of missionaries and pastors are supporting several churches at once. Above all, individuals who touched on this topic encouraged **flexibility to try different things and to explore using different models of church planting for different contexts**, such as traditional models for Japanese leaders with a traditional view of church, alongside other, newer models.

Thirdly, seven respondents noted that in order to overcome the barriers to church planting, there needed to be a **change in how missionaries and pastors worked together**. One respondent noted that missionaries needed to better transfer their apostolic vision for the church to the pastor at the point of handover. Others talked about the value of building relationships across churches and generations so that older and more experienced church planters could share with younger leaders, and church plants would not become isolated but could learn from others. As one respondent remarked, "what is needed are experienced, humble leaders who will be a mentor to those doing church planting."

Six respondents cited the importance of **increasing fellowship** within churches in order to overcome the barriers to church planting. Individuals mentioned the value of meeting in homes, taking communion together, praying, and encouraging one another. Respondents stressed that opportunities to meet and build relationships with church members needed to be regular and suggested options such as making time for conversation after a Bible study group.

Fifthly, six respondents said that in order to overcome barriers to church planting, **work had to start with the pastors themselves**. "Japanese churches will not change if pastors don't change," said one individual and others noted that as long as pastors remain inwardly focused on "making their own church bigger", there will never be an increased rate of successful church planting. Specifically, **both missionaries and pastors mentioned that pastors need to learn to release lay people in leadership**, to delegate and spread leadership among a team, and to think about how they can contribute to the growth of the church nationally.

Finally, the sixth most frequently cited strategy for overcoming the barriers to church planting was **contextualising the Gospel** for Japanese culture. Respondents mentioned the importance of not transplanting Western concepts into how the gospel is preached in Japan and also the value of embodying and contextualising its relevance through the way in which Christians live.

What are the best ways to work with partners?



In the following section, we first examine what participants had learned from previous partnerships before considering how best to initiate church-planting partnerships, and examining feedback for missionaries and pastors specifically.

What had participants learned from previous church-planting partnerships?

Lessons from previous church-planting partnerships

Partnerships worked well when there was (1) shared vision, (2) an opportunity to share complementary gifts and ideas, (3) good communication, (4) cultural sensitivity, and (5) a good team.

Nearly one in three respondents (31 percent), for instance, noted the importance of having a **shared vision** – and some had cautionary stories of what had happened when the vision had not been agreed in sufficient detail. As one missionary commented:

We came to realise that the church's understanding of the church plant and our understanding... had been vague. As we talked about it... I saw the church... [wanted the church plant to go one] way and we wanted to go [another] way. And it was so disappointing to see the church was a mismatch.

Crucially, **agreeing to start a church plant was not enough** – having a shared methodology and long-term direction was also vital.

On the other hand, when church-planting partners agreed on a vision, they often valued the opportunity the partnership provided to **share complementary gifts and ideas** (a theme also discussed by 31 percent of respondents). One missionary, for example, spoke highly of a pastor with whom he had partnered:

He was very affirming; he intentionally trained us.... He was able to defend a Japanese perspective without thinking of it as the only perspective.

Conversely, pastors also appreciated the gifts that missionaries brought to church-planting partnerships. At times, one pastor admitted, Japanese churches can become “closed towards outsiders” and “stubborn” about their own ideas. “However, missionaries show themselves as living examples that the Gospel is open to everybody in the world. Therefore, churches become [more] open by simply having a missionary there”.

Some respondents (mostly Japanese pastors) saw these complementary gifts as especially important in evangelism: one participant, for instance, described a mutually beneficial relationship in which:

The national partner [e.g., Japanese pastors] can provide the cultural context. Missionaries start relationships, the opening point or contact point. But when you get to deeper things and going beyond that [i.e., discipleship], then national church pastors can help with continuing relationships.

Several Japanese pastors echoed this idea. “Missionaries, as they are foreigners”, they said, can “share the Gospel boldly and [more easily] than Japanese people”. These evangelistic breakthroughs could then be followed up by Japanese churches.

However, many missionaries were highly sceptical of this idea, and the Literature Review also suggested reason for caution. As we shall see below, no missionaries agreed with the statement that the primary “benefit of working with a missionary is the attraction of meeting a foreigner”, and some spoke of the dangers of missionaries being seen as “*kyakuyosei panda*” (cute pandas that attract customers in Japanese shops). As one commented, “I don’t believe that is what God calls missionaries to do”. The Literature Review also noted that English-teaching, one of the primary ways through which missionaries had formerly attracted seekers, was no longer as effective in 21st-century Japan since “most [secular] schools now have at least one English teacher who is a native speaker”. As the Literature Review went on to observe, it is vital to “meet [the] felt needs of Japanese (both Christians and non-Christians) in a reproducible way that does not rely on foreign people or language”.

In order for partnerships to function well, they needed to be characterised by good communication and cultural sensitivity (themes mentioned by 39 and 26 percent of participants, respectively). Respondents spoke of a need to “talk about problems and failures in a culturally appropriate way”, for missionaries to discuss problems directly with pastors instead of speaking about them to their congregations, and to clarify expectations.

Pastors, especially, stressed cultural sensitivity: “I think it is important to check carefully if the partner is taking what is important to Japanese people as important to them or not”, one said:

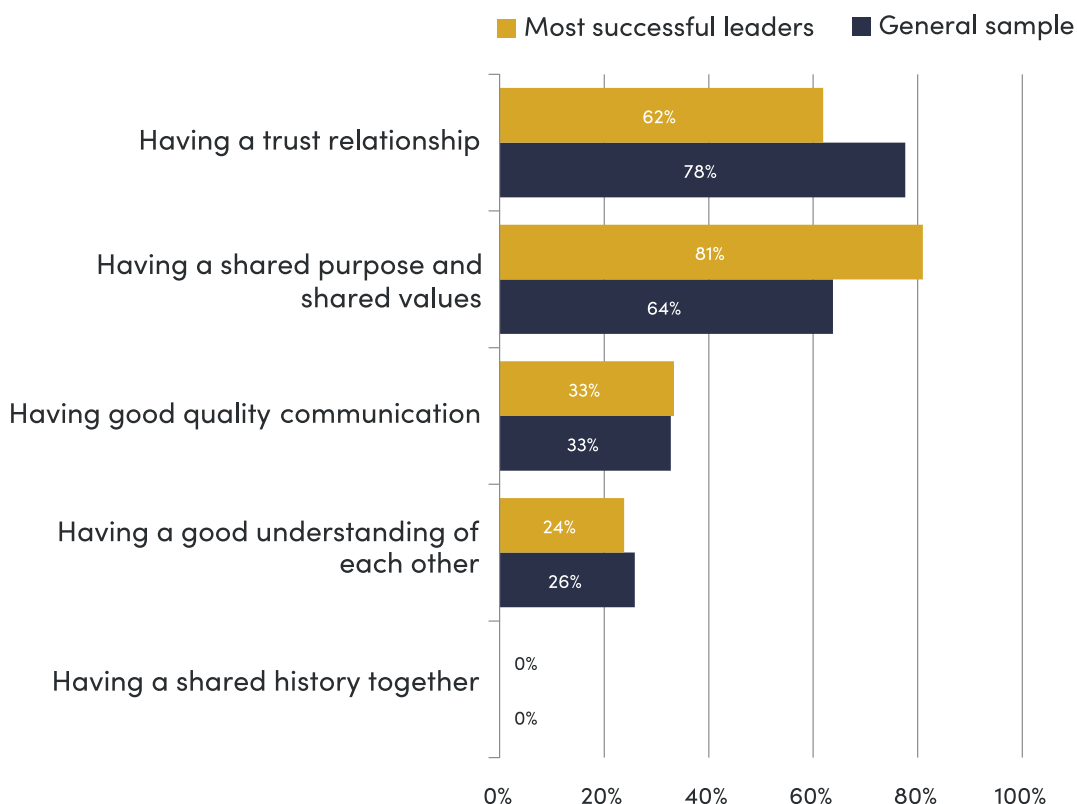
Are they willing to respect the key ways Japanese have of doing things? I am not saying they are the only way to do things, but if we are to cooperate – are they willing to take our ways seriously?

If missionaries do not “try and understand our situation in Japan, this is not good”, another agreed. “They seem to condemn Japan – although they come to encourage, they fail to and criticise instead”. “Things mission agencies should be careful about is the attitude of superiority about faith and of ‘We teach you!’”, a third commented. “I would like them to understand Japanese mental structure and [for] them [to be willing to]... learn Japanese originality, history, and Christian history”.

Lastly, respondents discussed the importance of having good teams – by which they meant teams where the members were individually capable and worked together well. Pastors appreciated when missionaries had the humility to accept Japanese leadership, while missionaries valued when pastors were affirming, created time to bond as a team, and gave them freedom to pursue new initiatives. We shall discuss these themes further in the What were participants looking for in a church-planting partnership? section below.

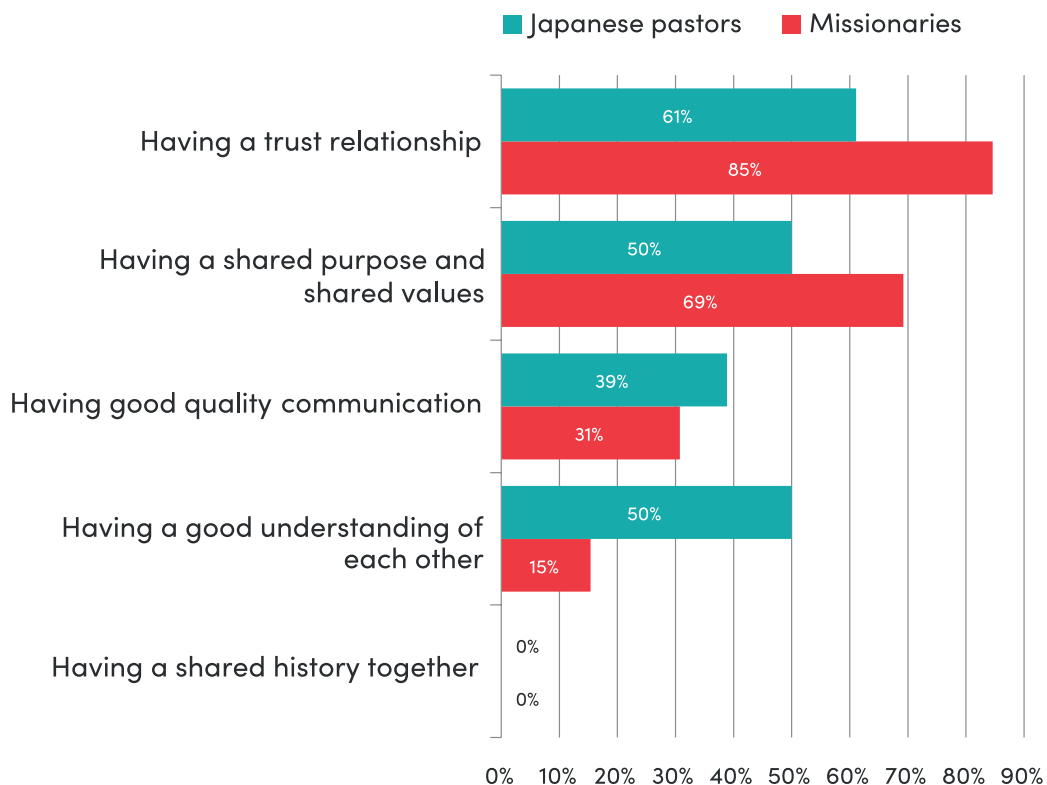
What were participants looking for in a church-planting partnership?

What is important to you in selecting a church-planting partner?
(Percent in top two)



In selecting a church-planting partner, respondents were primarily looking for people with whom they shared a purpose and values and with whom they had a trust relationship – although, interestingly, leaders with the highest scores on our success metric were much more likely to prioritise having a shared purpose and shared values and less inclined to value having a trust relationship.

What is important to you in selecting a church-planting partner?
(Percent in top two)



Missionaries and pastors also had slightly different criteria for selecting church-planting partners, with Japanese pastors much more inclined to value having a good understanding of each other alongside having a trust relationship and a shared purpose.

These findings were also reflected in interview responses: when respondents were asked what they were looking for in church-planting partnerships, they primarily said that they were looking for partners with whom they shared a **purpose and values**, followed by partners with whom there was potential for a good working relationship – a category which included the criteria of **trust** and **good communication** from the graph above, as well as themes suggested by respondents themselves, such as **valuing people and relationships**, **doctrinal alignment**, **flexibility**, and **commitment to the work**.

Missionaries and pastors also had slightly different criteria for selecting church-planting partners, with Japanese pastors much more inclined to value having a good understanding of each other alongside having a trust relationship and a shared purpose.



More than half of participants (52 percent) discussed having a shared purpose and values – although missionaries were especially likely to mention this theme (it was discussed by 64 percent of missionaries, as compared to 42 percent of pastors). In the words of one pastor, “the key [thing] to think about is the match: what do they want to do and can we help them? And can they help us to achieve what we are aiming for?”. A missionary added that he would ask about how potential partners had already pursued their vision: “What have they been doing already? So we don’t just trust their words, but we want to see a history of action to show if their vision matches ours”.

Even when partners agreed on a vision, however, they also wanted to establish whether they could work together well. As discussed above, many participants were seeking partnerships characterised by **trust** and **good communication** (each of which were mentioned by 18 percent of respondents in open-answer questions). “If we don’t have trust, we’re not going to go very far”, one missionary said, adding that it was important to both start with trusting relationships and to continue to build that trust over the course of the relationship. Likewise, good communication was essential; as one pastor explained: “I look for people who can communicate well, and not just say: ‘It’s okay, it’s okay’. If you can share what is not okay, then you can be easily prayed for”. This pastor also looked for partners who **were willing to communicate when they needed help**: “if they cannot be helped or won’t accept help, they are likely to suffer burnout.... So before they both get burnt out, if [both missionaries and pastors] can become people that are easily helped and help each other, things will go better”.

Missionaries, in particular, appreciated when partners **valued people and relationships** as well as simply accomplishing a task (this theme was discussed by 18 percent of respondents, but 29 percent of missionaries). One missionary, for example, was looking for partners who wanted to develop:

Relationships, including drinking coffee, going to the onsen, or even playing ping pong together. [I want somebody] willing to invest time. Some pastors just want to use you. We must be willing to develop a relationship. It is more than just a working relationship; it’s a family. [We need to] get to know and love people.

“Does the pastor value people?” another missionary asked. “Or does he value the program?”

Furthermore, missionaries were also especially likely to mention that they were seeking partners with whom they agreed on doctrine (once again this theme was noted by 18 percent of participants, but 36 percent of missionaries). “It is important to agree on the main things”, one missionary said.

Interestingly, **both missionaries and pastors wanted their partners to be flexible, although they tended to define “flexibility” differently.** Missionaries wanted partners to be methodologically and (within reason) theologically flexible: “How strongly do they hold to contentious issues like infant baptism?” one missionary asked, noting that they wanted to work with someone who “majors on the majors”. Another explained that, when partnering with a Japanese church, “I’d ask, ‘How willing are you to try new things?’ If they’re too stiff and stuck with a traditional form, then I’d say, ‘Sorry’ [and not partner with them]”.

Japanese pastors, on the other hand, wanted missionaries to have a **“humble, learning heart”**, which allowed them to not just contribute their own ideas, but to flexibly accept guidance and join in with what the Japanese Church was already doing. As we discuss in our **Recommendations**, openly discussing these different desires for flexibility may help Japanese missionaries and pastors work together more effectively.

Crucially, both missionaries and pastors were also clear that they wanted potential partners to be **committed to the work of church planting**. Once again, however, missionaries and pastors spoke about this idea in slightly different terms: missionaries wanted partners who were externally focused, with a hunger to “see Japan transformed”, and not just invest in their own congregations. Pastors, on the other hand, wanted missionaries who were able “to stay in Japan for a long time” and “continuously and patiently [love their] neighbours as they are faithful to the Lord”. As we shall see below, Japanese pastors’ expectations that missionaries make long-term commitments may derive from the fact that pastors in our sample had historically had longer-term partnerships than missionaries.⁹

Crucially, both missionaries and pastors were also clear that they wanted potential partners to be committed to the work of church planting.

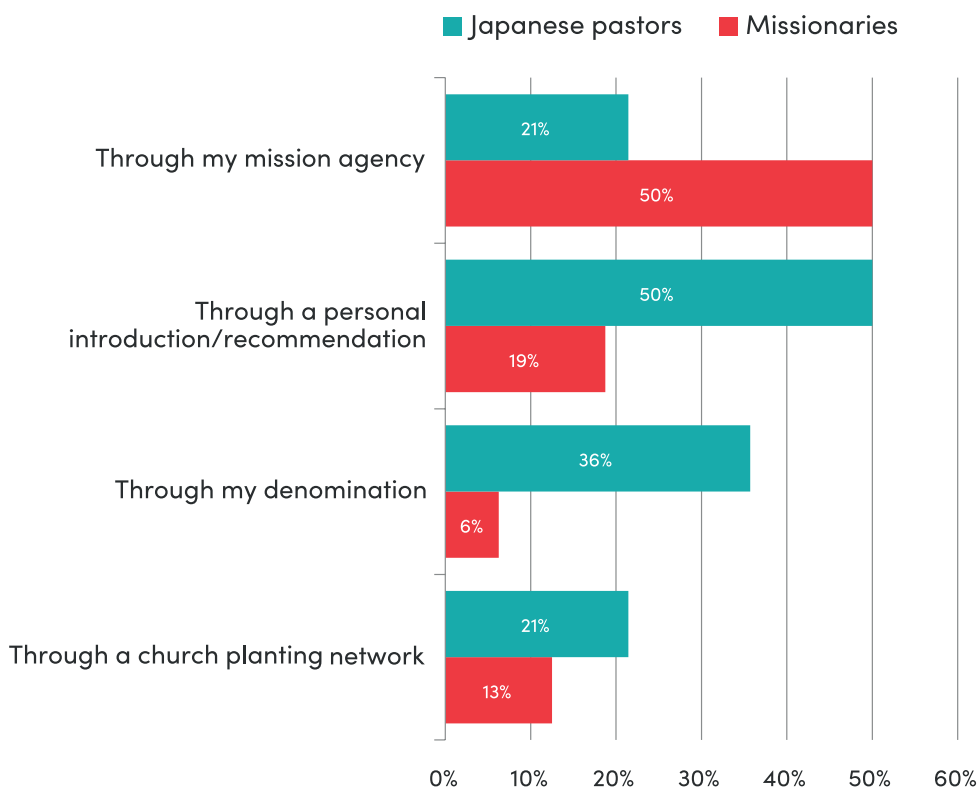


⁹ These partnerships had often been with church-planting networks.

What are the best ways to initiate partnerships with missionaries and pastors?

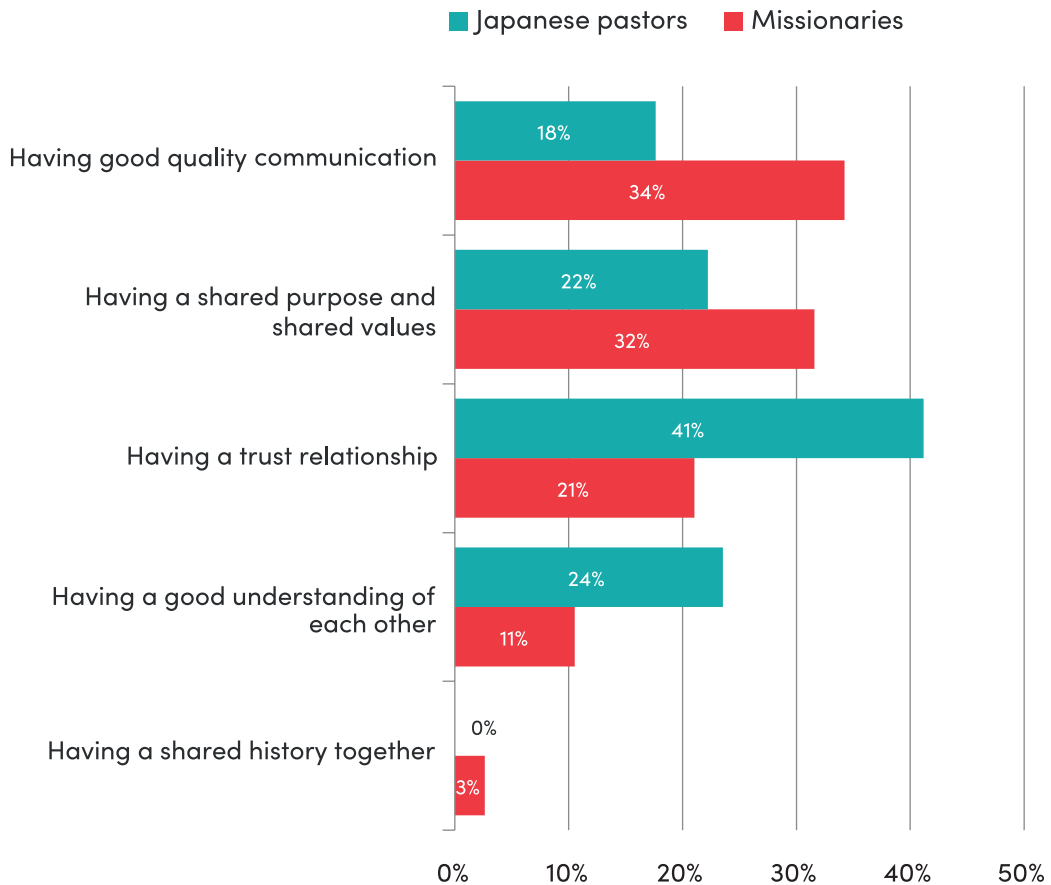
Missionaries and pastors tended to hear about partnerships through different means. As can be seen in the chart below, missionaries most frequently heard about new partnerships through their mission agency, while pastors tended to discover them through personal introductions and their denomination.

How did you hear of the church or mission agency you partnered with?



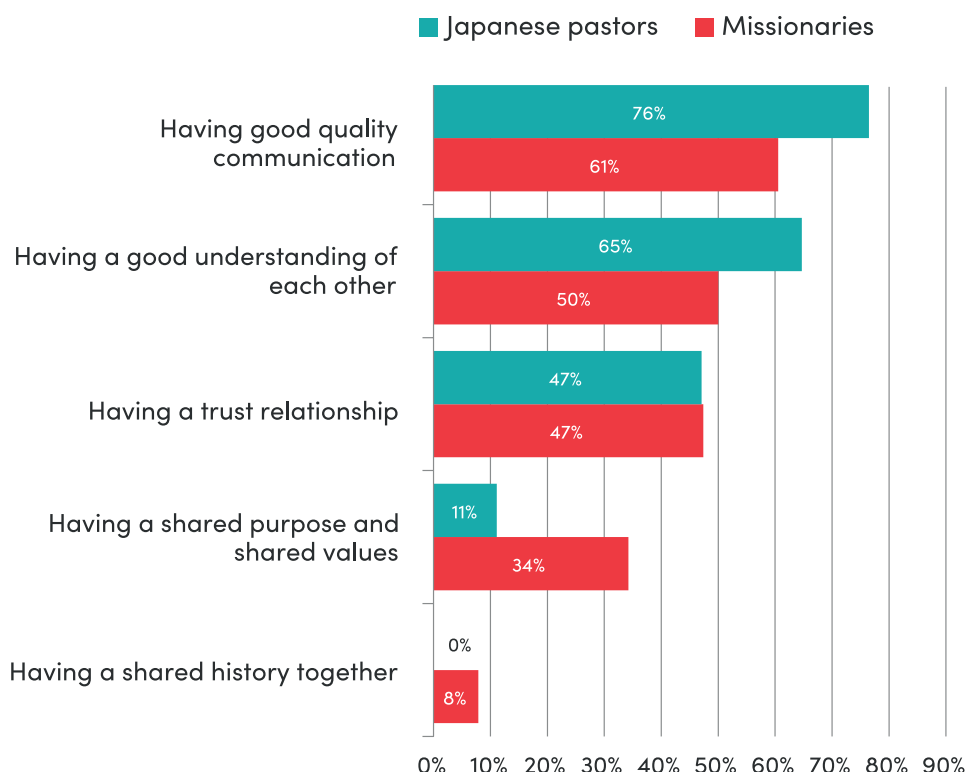
Perhaps more interestingly, missionaries and pastors also wanted to begin relationships differently: as can be seen in the chart below, **missionaries wanted to begin with having a shared vision and good quality communication. Pastors wanted to begin with a trust relationship.**

Which of these dimensions of relationship would you prefer to establish first?



While they differed on how they would prefer to begin a relationship, however, missionaries and pastors agreed on what should happen next: as shown in the chart below, both groups said they would like to deepen the relationship through developing better communication and a more complete understanding of each other.

Which of these dimensions of relationship would you prefer to establish next?



For missionaries and mission agencies

Participants had three general pieces of advice for missionaries and mission agencies: (1) missionaries should plant churches; (2) for good partnerships, missionaries needed experience in church ministry, evangelistic gifting, pastoral ability, and cross-cultural training – as well as flexibility and humility; and (3) to set clear expectations for the length of partnerships.

Missionaries should plant churches

In interview responses, participants were clear that **missionaries should be involved in starting churches**. While missionaries were more likely to discuss this theme than pastors (88 percent, as compared to 63 percent), these were both large proportions for a qualitative question, suggesting a high degree of consensus on this issue.

Respondents also stressed that, **when possible, missionaries should not plant churches on their own**, but rather partner with Japanese churches and Christians. (This theme was discussed by 53 percent of participants, with 45 percent discussing partnering with churches and 10 percent mentioning working with individual Christians.) “I want them to do it together with us”, one pastor said. “This provides a real help and encouragement.” Missionaries agreed: “I don’t feel very comfortable with the idea that we just start some independent church that [has] no connection with other churches. I feel it’s important for accountability, for mutual encouragement, and support that a church is connected in some ways with other churches”.

In exceptional circumstances, however, both missionaries and pastors mentioned that it might be acceptable for missionaries to start churches on their own. “There are... places where there is nothing happening [i.e., no churches], so missionaries can start things from scratch... In these places it’s important to [just] go ahead and start something”, one missionary said. Other participants agreed, but suggested that these roles be given to more experienced missionaries, who should partner with Japanese churches as much as possible: “it is important for a mission agency to have the same vision [as] a church or a group of churches and build cooperation firmly”, a pastor said.

Despite this exception, all participants agreed that **partnership between foreign missionaries and Japanese Christians should be the rule**; in the words of another pastor:

Of course, perhaps there will be church planting done by just missionaries, but for people in the Japanese Church such church planting may cause them to think, “Oh, they are just doing it as they want to!”, and this will not give them encouragement. So if it is possible to create a church planting team that is encouraging for the local church, I think this will be a real strength.

Other roles for missionaries

Much less frequently, respondents discussed other roles for missionaries, such as **catalysing evangelism and church planting initiatives within the Japanese Church** (mentioned by 28 percent of respondents), and **providing an external perspective on church planting** (23 percent). As a Japanese pastor commented:

I think that existing churches in Japan lack awareness towards their call for church-planting or [the] mission of the Good News. There is a big gap between how much awareness Japanese churches have towards mission and how much mission agencies have. Mission agencies should continue to... [raise the issue of] mission [with] Japanese churches.... That is the same with individual missionaries. Missionaries’ role is important [in] show[ing] how to live and how to share their testimonies as good models.... As co-workers of Japanese churches and Christians, [they can show] that they have a burden to save souls.

“Our ultimate role is not to plant churches ourselves”, but to help “Japanese people to plant churches”, a missionary agreed. “Some missionaries shouldn’t plant churches; they should be trainers. Some are better as coaches or trainers, some better as doers”.

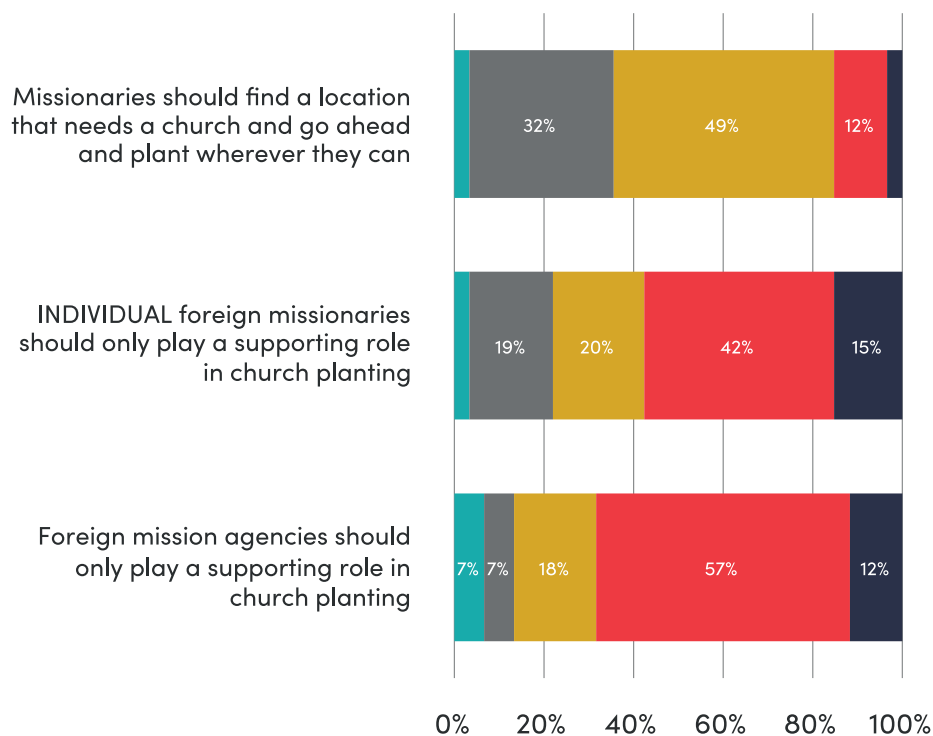
A final group of respondents thought that missionaries had an important role in providing an external perspective on church-planting: “missionaries are change agents”, a missionary said. “Sometimes you need people from the outside [to change the way we plant churches].” Several Japanese pastors expressed similar ideas: “I also would like missionaries to positively join [in mission].... Then... local churches will become healthy by having multiple points of view”, one said.

Quantitative data

These findings were supported by our quantitative data. Participants disagreed that foreign mission agencies and missionaries should only play a supporting role in church-planting, and while only 35 percent thought that missionaries should find a location that needs a church and plant wherever they could, they also did not disagree with this statement – quite possibly because they thought that there were exceptional circumstances in which missionaries should plant churches on their own, as discussed above.

Role of missionaries and mission agencies: starting churches

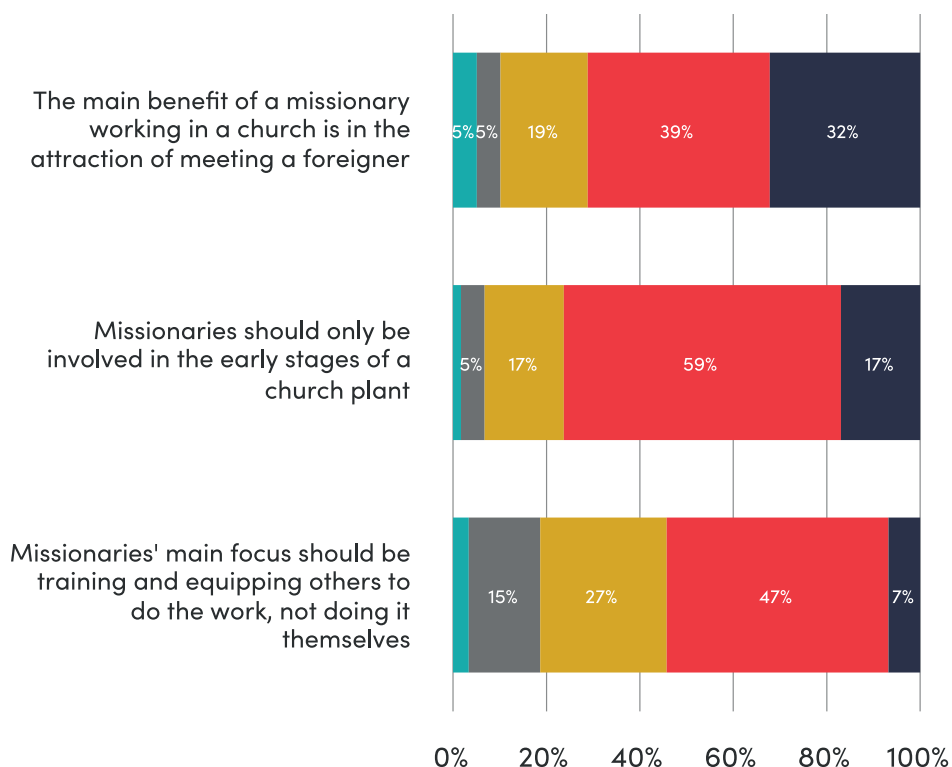
■ Strongly agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree



Respondents disagreed that missionaries' primary focus should be on training and equipping others and that missionaries should only be involved in the early stages of a church plant (perhaps surprisingly, pastors were more likely to disagree with these statements than missionaries).

Role of missionaries: general

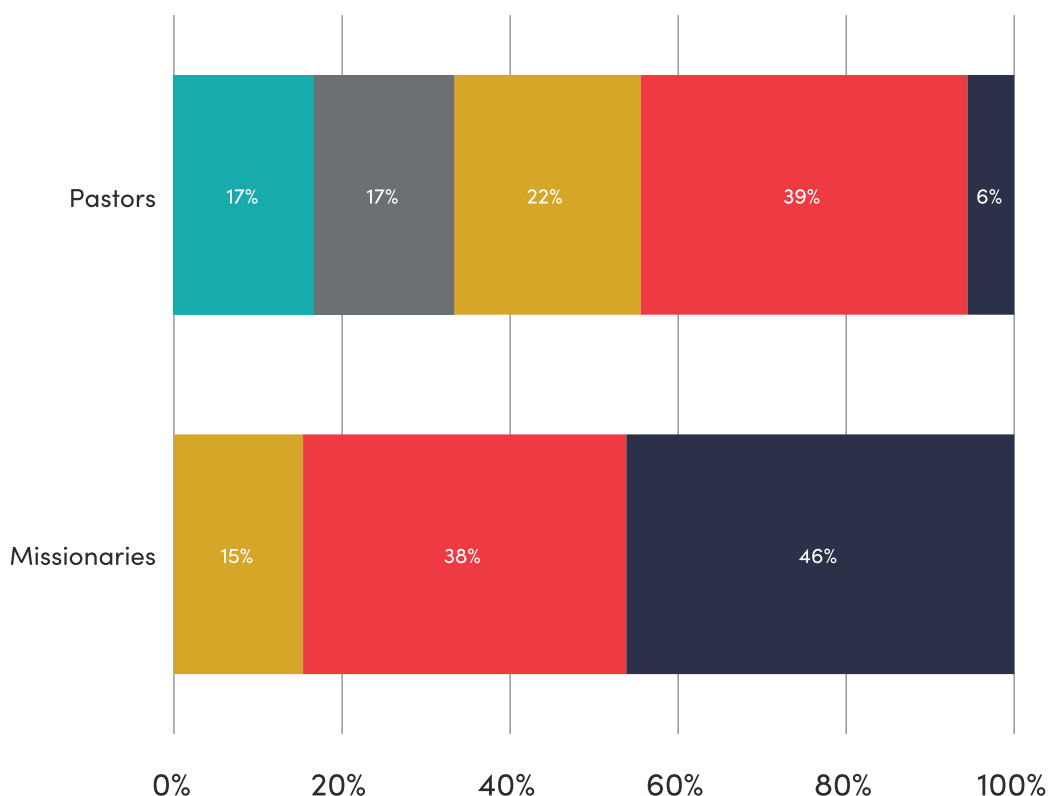
■ Strongly agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree



On the whole, participants denied that the main benefit of working with a missionary was the attraction of meeting a foreigner – although, interestingly, a significant proportion of pastors agreed with this statement (33 percent, and no missionaries). Perhaps this agreement resulted from the fact that pastors had seen the evangelistic usefulness of working with foreign missionaries, as discussed above.

The main benefit of a missionary working in a church is the attraction of meeting a foreigner

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree



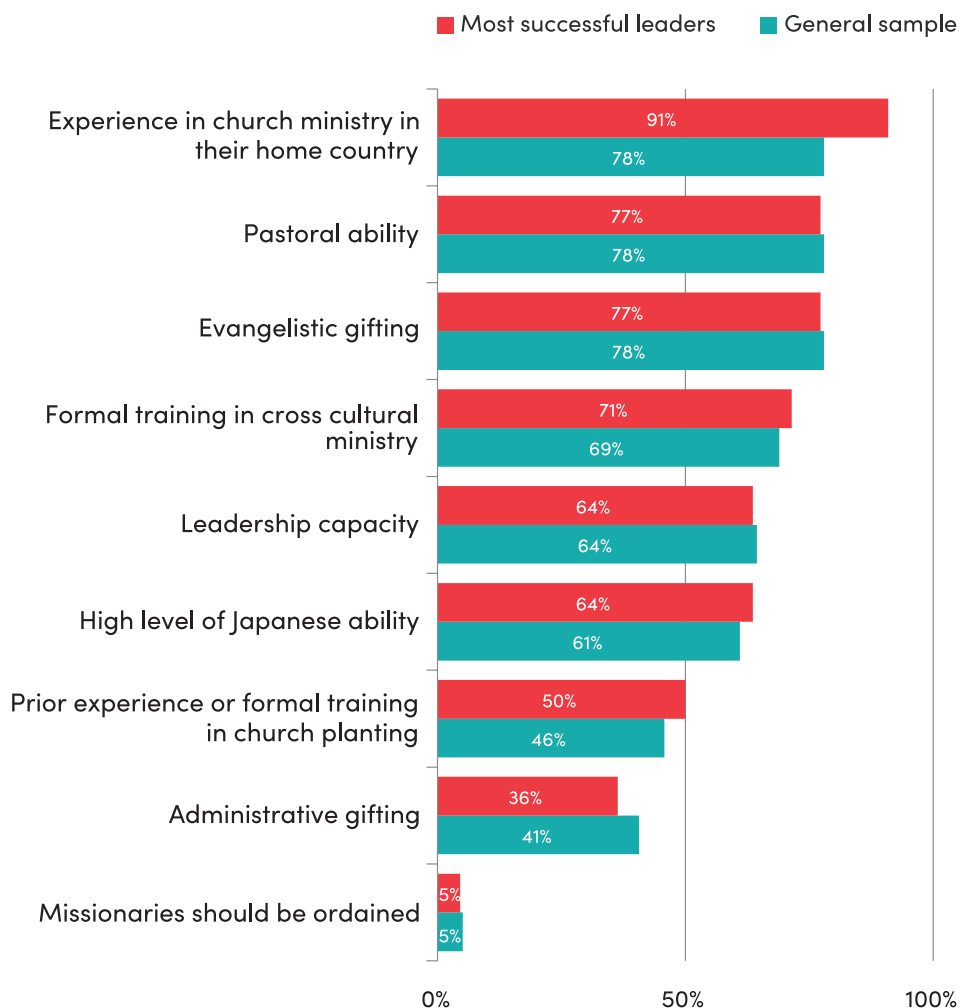
Our analysis also revealed some differences by context and preferred church-planting model. Participants working in rural locations, for instance, were most likely to say both that foreign mission agencies should only play a supporting role in church planting and that missionaries should go ahead and plant churches wherever they could. Although it is difficult to know how to interpret this finding, perhaps it represents an ideal and actual state of affairs: ideally, mission agencies should only play a supporting role in church planting, but, given the lack of churches in rural areas of Japan, missionaries should go ahead and plant churches wherever they can.

Likewise, respondents who thought the traditional model was effective were least likely to think that foreign mission agencies should only play a supporting role in church planting (perhaps because the traditional model was most popular amongst missionaries), and respondents who thought that sending churches and incarnational mission communities were effective were most likely to say that missionaries should plant churches wherever they could.

Participants had specific characteristics in mind for missionaries with whom they would consider partnering

For good partnerships, respondents thought that missionaries needed to have **experience in church ministry** in their home country, **pastoral ability**, **evangelistic gifting**, and **cross-cultural training**. These findings are shown in the chart below.

In the Japanese church-planting context, it is essential that missionaries have the following characteristics

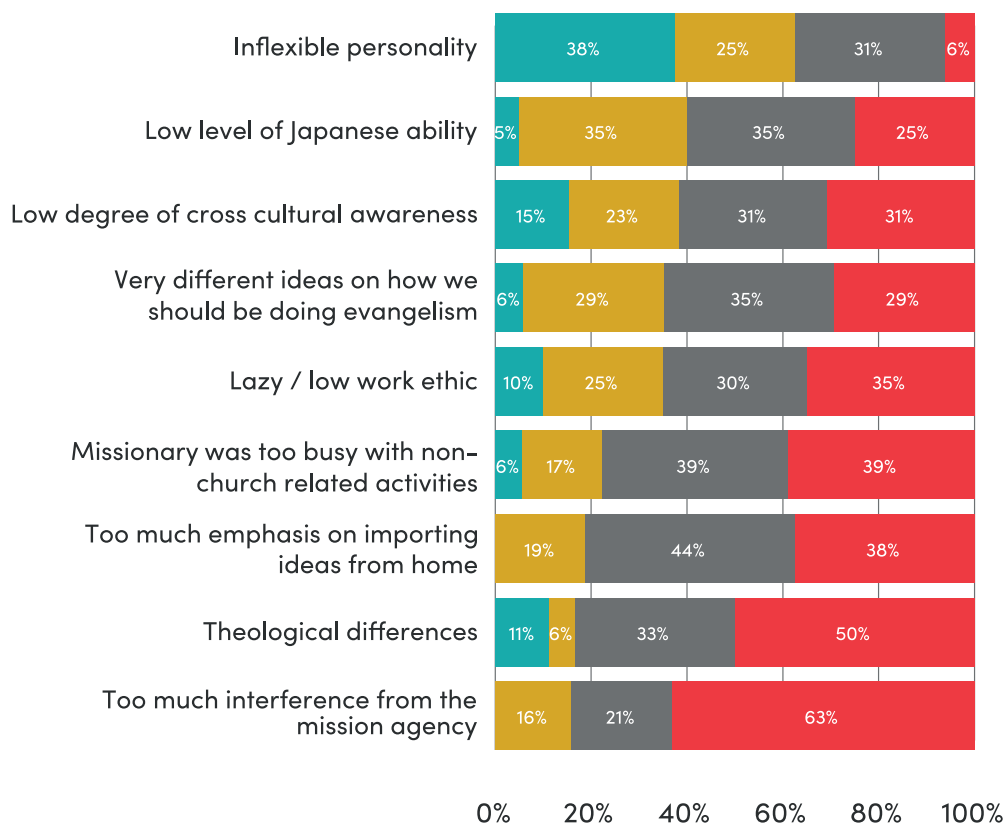


However, participants were also clear that missionaries needed to be **flexible** and **humble**. As shown below, more than six in ten participants who had partnered with missionaries (63 percent) found that missionaries' inflexible personality had been at least a significant barrier – and, as we have already seen, when Japanese leaders referred to missionaries' inflexibility, they often meant that missionaries had been unwilling to accept Japanese leadership and ideas. **It is challenging "to work with missionaries who are stubborn with their vision..."** without flexibility to co-work with the church", one pastor said, while another had heard from other pastors about "short-term missionaries who have come with quite specific ideas of mission, what he/she wanted to do in Japan, [and had then] got upset when he/she wasn't able to do that". **"It is not about what [missionaries] want to do, but [serving] the Lord... together"**, a third said.

As a final pastor observed, this flexibility needed to come from humility and a recognition of the value of Japanese culture: "Although missionaries are mostly humble... there are some missionaries who look down on Japanese people and culture a little bit", he said.

How significant were each of the following challenges when working with missionaries?

■ Extremely significant ■ Significant ■ Somewhat significant ■ Not at all significant



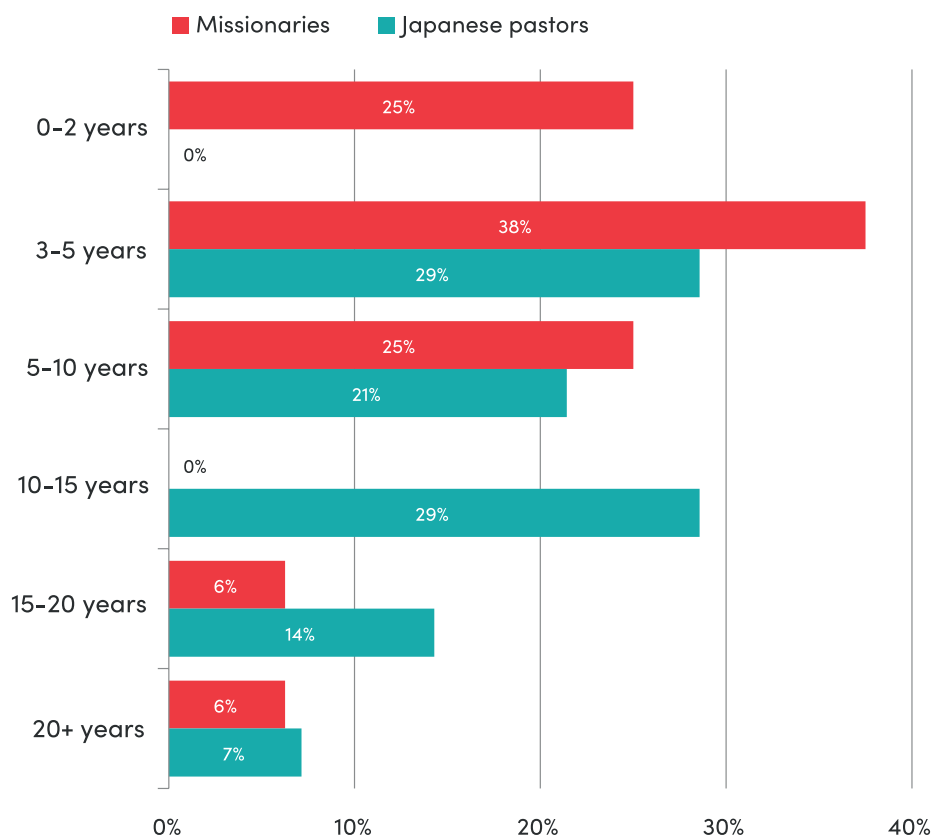
Communicate about the length of partnerships

Although participants did not comment on this directly, the quantitative data also showed that missionaries may wish to communicate with pastors about their desired length of partnership. As shown in the chart below, pastors tended to have (and, presumably, to expect) long partnerships – with the majority having had partnerships that lasted longer than five years.

We believe that the primary factor which explains these differing lengths of partnerships is missionaries' terms of service: after five to ten years, many missionaries had returned to their home countries. However, since we have already seen above that several pastors wanted missionaries to stay longer in Japan, these findings suggest that **missionaries and pastors may wish to have clear conversations about how long they expect partnerships to continue**. Explicitly discussing how long both missionaries and pastors expect the partnership to continue may help to forestall tension later in the relationship.

Interestingly, participants who scored highly on our success metric were also less likely to have partnerships that lasted fewer than five years, and more likely to have partnerships that lasted between five and ten years. While the data from pastors with high success scores is not sufficiently clear to say that longer partnerships made for more successful church plants, further research on this topic may be helpful.

How long did the partnership continue?

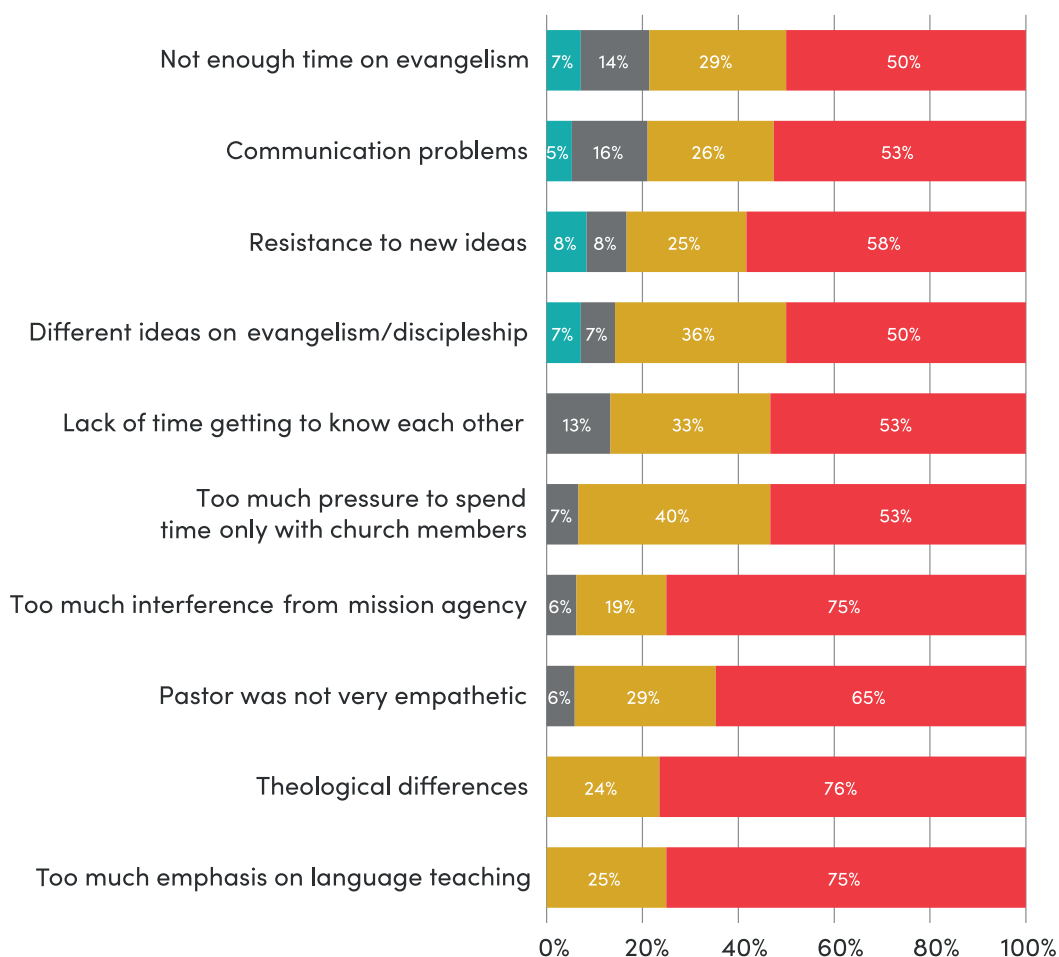


For Japanese pastors

While our survey asked fewer questions that directly generated feedback for Japanese pastors, it did ask respondents to rank which challenges they considered most significant when working with Japanese pastors. As indicated in the graph below, Japanese pastors may wish to consider **creating more time for missionaries to spend on evangelism** (as opposed to internal church activities), working with missionaries to **improve communication**, and being more **open to new ideas**.

How significant were each of the following challenges when working with Japanese pastors?

■ Extremely significant ■ Significant ■ Somewhat significant ■ Not at all significant



These themes were reflected in open-answer questions on missionaries' experiences of past partnerships, in which they were much more likely than pastors to say they valued individual freedom in church planting (23 percent of missionaries, versus 6 percent of pastors) and almost twice as likely to say that communication could be improved (56 percent of missionaries; 29 percent of pastors).

Although pastors should be encouraged that most missionaries did not consider the issues in the graph above to be significant, there is still room to improve – particularly as, **on the whole, missionaries were much less likely to be satisfied with church-planting partnerships than pastors** (69 percent of missionaries versus 92 percent of pastors).

On the whole, missionaries were much less likely to be satisfied with church-planting partnerships than pastors (69 percent of missionaries versus 92 percent of pastors).



What opportunities exist for future partnerships?



Opportunities

Nearly one in two survey respondents (49 percent) were planning to plant a church within the next five years. For non-OMFers, this figure was 50 percent, suggesting that there were ample opportunities for partnership.

In general

When asked in general terms what opportunities they saw for church planting, participants said that social needs in Japan might create an opening for church planting, and that there was a need for church plants (a) in rural areas and (b) which met the needs of young people. Other respondents discussed specific geographical areas in which church plants might be successful. Pastors were more likely to think that church plants might be successful in cities (24 percent of pastors noted this theme, as opposed to 7 percent of missionaries), while only missionaries mentioned concentrating on unchurched areas.

A full list of answers to this question will be provided to the OMF Research Management Team to guide their thinking on future church plants.

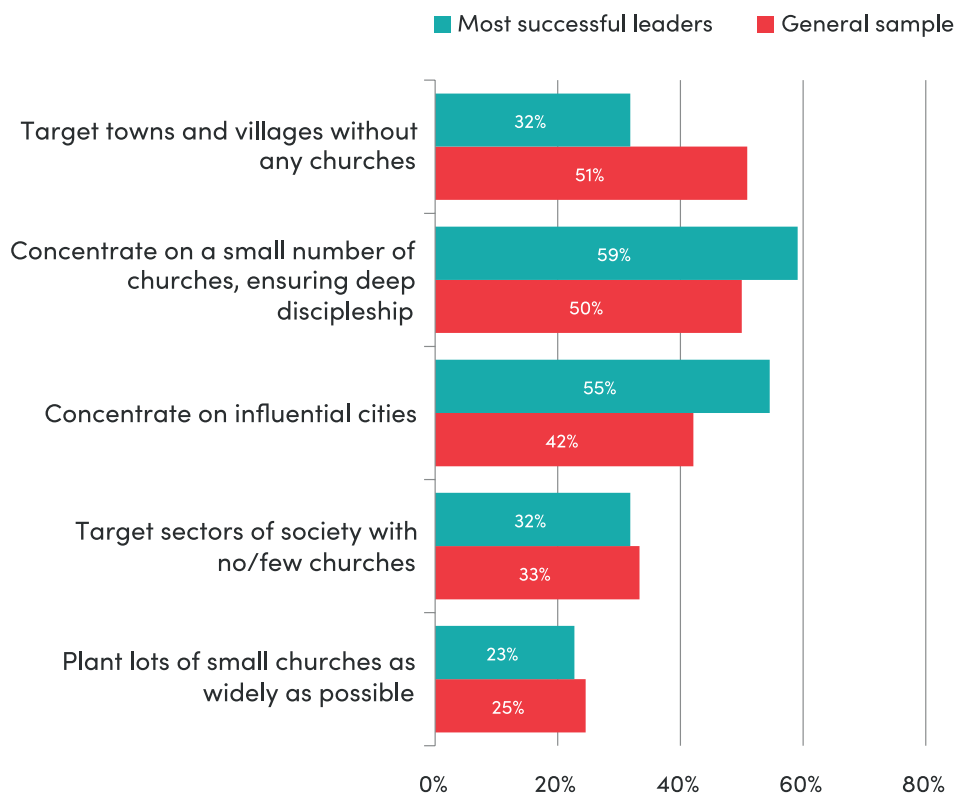
Which church-planting strategy should OMF adopt?

There was no consensus on which church-planting strategy OMF should adopt. While the most popular strategies were (1) targeting towns and villages without any churches, (2) concentrating on a small number of churches to ensure deep discipleship, and (3) concentrating on influential cities, these approaches were, at least in part, self-contradictory: it would be difficult for OMF to do (1) and (3) at once.

Nearly one in two survey respondents were planning to plant a church within the next five years. For non-OMFers, this figure was 50 percent, suggesting that there were ample opportunities for partnership.

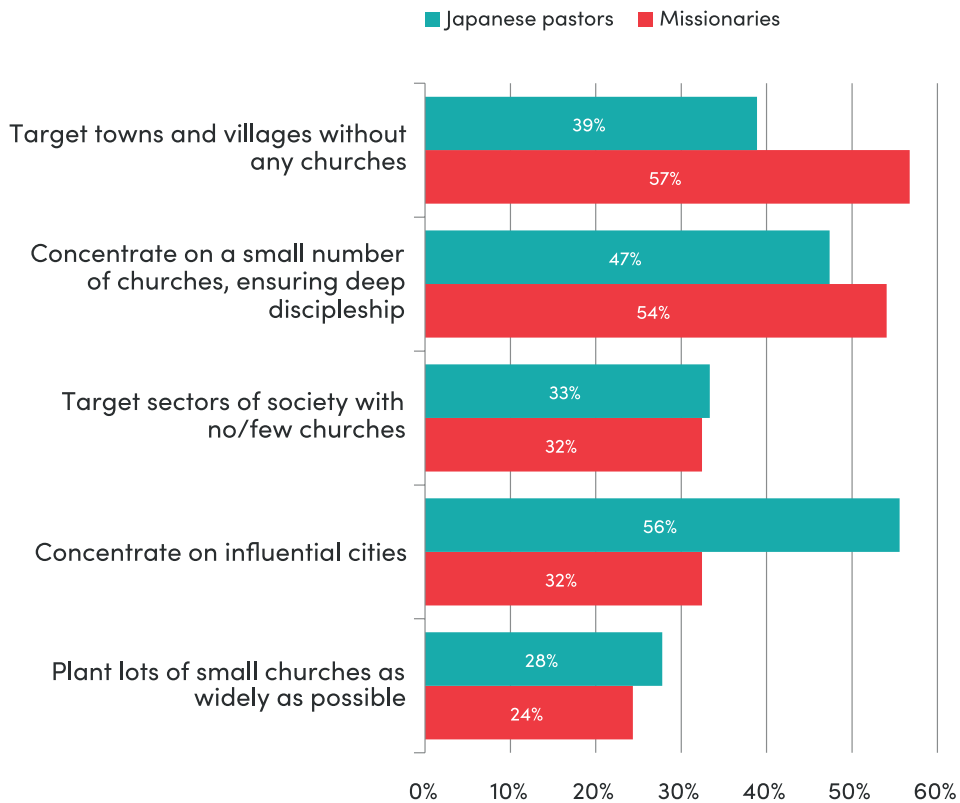


Which strategies did respondents consider most effective?



Interestingly, respondents with the highest success scores were most likely to emphasise concentrating on discipleship in a small number of churches and working in influential cities, and less likely to stress targeting unchurched areas. Pastors – as noted above – were also more likely to prioritise cities and discipling a small number of churches:

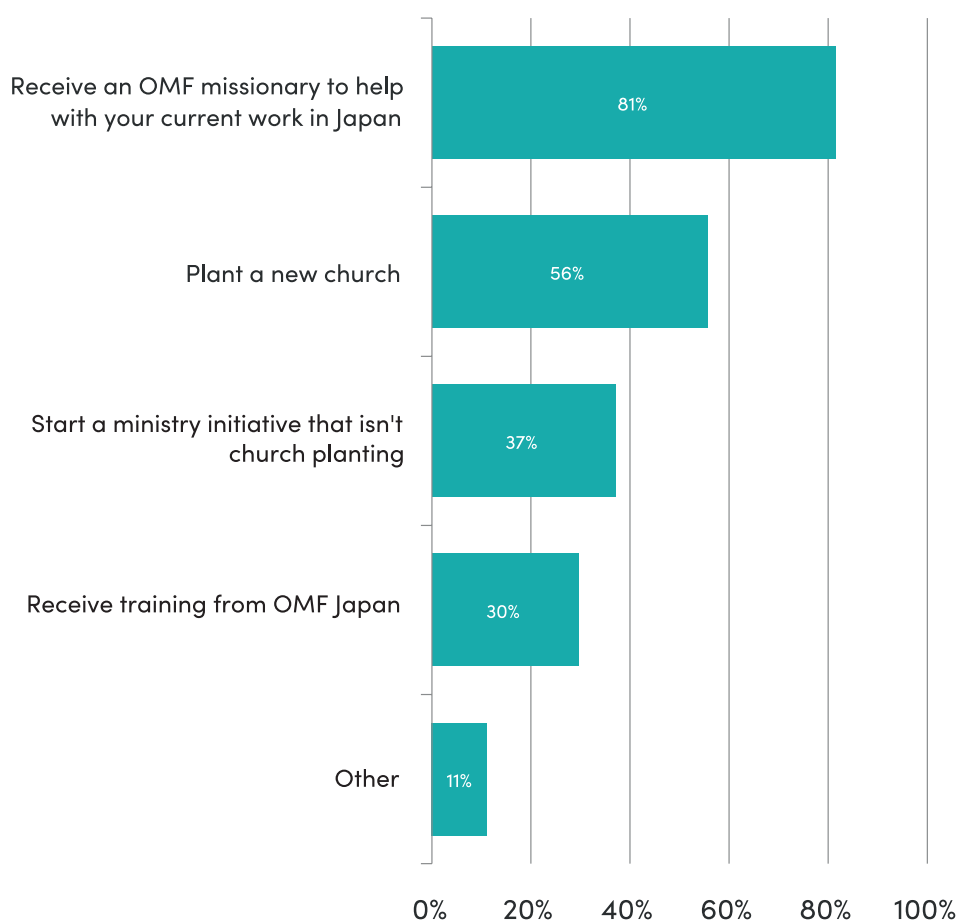
Which strategies did missionaries and pastors consider most effective?



In what ways were non-OMFers interested in receiving support from OMF?

Non-OMF participants were highly interested in receiving OMF missionaries – although getting help with their current work was most frequently mentioned, over 50% of respondents mentioned partnering with missionaries to plant new churches.

Would you like to partner with OMF in any of the following areas?



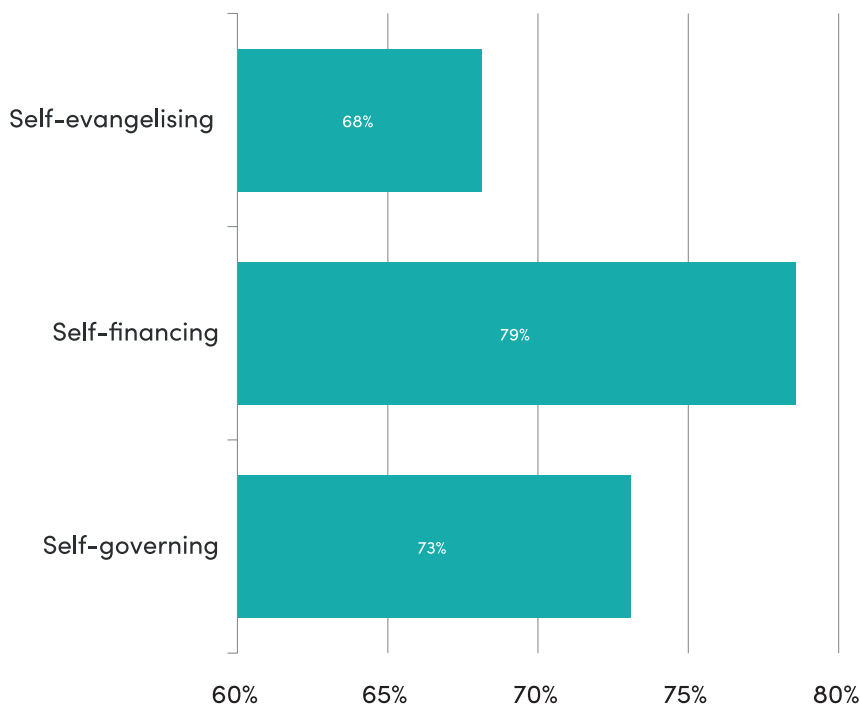
Other respondents mentioned forms of support not on this list, such as prayer (7 percent), benefiting from OMF's member care resources (7 percent – one said he had benefited from OMF's Pre-Home Assignment Workshop), and this research project (7 percent).

Virtually their only concern was ensuring that they received **high-quality missionaries** who met the criteria for missionaries discussed in the **For missionaries and mission agencies** section above.

Conclusion and recommendations

Amongst the most important findings from this research were the principles of church planting it revealed: **inward health, outward focus, methodological flexibility, and an effective handover.** Church plants also encountered barriers in each of these areas, as well as external **spiritual resistance**. The graph below, for instance, shows how much room for improvement church plants had in the area of outward focus: when assessing their own church plants, leaders in our sample were much more likely to say that the church plants were self-governing and self-financing than that they had taken charge of their own evangelism.

To what extent (0-100%) were church plants self-governing, self-financing, and self-evangelising?



This study has also demonstrated the importance of **shared vision, complementary gifts and ideas, good communication, flexibility, and humility** to healthy church-planting partnerships and revealed several opportunities for church-planting in Japan.

Consequently, we hope that the following recommendations help OMF and the rest of the church-planting community in Japan achieve the purposes set for this research: **improving the likelihood of success for future church plants, planning strategically and increasing alignment, and partnering with new organisations in the future.**¹⁰

Improve the likelihood of success of church plants in the future

To improve future church plants' likelihood of succeeding, OMF may wish to:

- **Communicate the principles of effective church-planting** (inward health, outward focus, methodological flexibility, and an effective handover) both within OMF and to the wider church-planting community in Japan, ensuring that communication includes detail on each of these principles – e.g., clear vision, involving believers, prayer, and good teams for inward health
- While there was “no one right model” for church-planting, and times where the traditional model was appropriate, mission agencies should **bear in mind that many Japanese pastors did not find this model reproducible because of the resources it required.** If their aim is to plant churches which go on to church-plant, they may therefore wish to consider whether the traditional model is feasible in their context
- Likewise, **communicate the barriers to church planting** within OMF and the wider church-planting community
- **Develop specific plans to incorporate these principles and barriers into OMF's church-planting strategy.** For instance:
 - How might this research on principles and barriers to church-planting inform the training that OMF offers missionaries?
 - How might it inform OMF's wider church-planting strategy? How can OMF be capitalising on each of the principles and mitigating the barriers described in this report?

This study has also demonstrated the importance of shared vision, complementary gifts and ideas, good communication, flexibility, and humility to healthy church-planting partnerships and revealed several opportunities for church-planting in Japan.



¹⁰ Success in this report is not only about growth metrics but includes what church planters identify as keys to vibrant, sustainable and reproducing etc. churches.

Plan strategically and increase alignment

This research was also designed to help OMF plan strategically and work towards a common goal (both internally and with external partners). It led to separate recommendations for mission agencies, missionaries, and pastors:

For mission agencies

- **Communicate lessons from this research** about what worked well in previous partnerships to the church-planting community in Japan – specifically, the importance of **shared vision, complementary gifts and ideas, good communication, cultural sensitivity, and a good team**
- **Initiate partnerships with missionaries and pastors differently**, bearing in mind that these groups tend to hear about partnerships from different sources and wanted different things at the beginning of partnerships (missionaries wanted to begin partnerships with shared vision and good-quality communication, whereas pastors wanted to begin partnerships with trust relationships)
- **Coach missionaries on having detailed conversations about the vision and strategy of church plants.** The data shows that missionaries and pastors often thought they agreed on strategy, only for discord to surface later in the partnership. Having clear, in-depth conversations on vision, strategy and what is actually meant by commonly used terms such as “shared leadership”, “discipleship”, “evangelism” and “every member ministry” can help to forestall these disagreements. The timing of such conversations also needs to be considered in light of different preferences in how to build relationships. From the research, missionaries may be happy to move quickly to discuss such issues, whereas pastors may prefer to establish trust in the relationship before tackling these kinds of details. Whatever is agreed, continuing flexibility is important
- OMF and other mission agencies may wish to consider the characteristics of missionaries desired in church-planting partnerships – experience in church ministry, evangelistic gifting, pastoral ability, cross-cultural training, flexibility, and humility – and consciously **recruit missionaries with these characteristics**. They may also wish to **contemplate how to help existing missionaries grow in these areas**
- Respondents had different suggestions for where they would like OMF to focus (targeting towns and villages without any churches, concentrating on a small number of churches and discipling deeply, and concentrating on influential cities). **OMF and other mission agencies may therefore wish to weigh these suggestions, and select the ones which best fit their contexts (perhaps adopting a variety of approaches)**
- Pastors often felt that they lacked the knowledge or experience to plant churches. Consequently, **mission agencies may wish to sponsor or offer church-planting training for pastors**, particularly exploring which models might match their context and gifts

This research was also designed to help OMF plan strategically and work towards a common goal (both internally and with external partners). It led to separate recommendations for mission agencies, missionaries, and pastors.



For missionaries

- **Missionaries can feel confident about being involved in church-planting projects**, knowing that Japanese pastors wanted them to contribute. While they should **partner with Japanese Christians wherever possible**, there may occasionally be scope for them to lead church plants without a Japanese church-planting team
- Missionaries may want to **meditate on the desired characteristics for missionaries above**. In particular, pastors expressed a desire for them to grow in **flexibility** and **humility**. While this is not a call for missionaries to abandon their good ideas for church-planting, **how can missionaries humbly accept the value of Japanese culture and ideas and allow themselves to be led as well as lead others?**
- **Missionaries should have clear conversations with pastors about the desired length of partnerships** – on average, Japanese pastors had historically had longer partnerships than missionaries and may want to partner for longer
- **Missionaries should have detailed conversations about the vision and strategy of church plants** including what is actually meant by commonly used terms such as “shared leadership”, “discipleship”, “evangelism”, and “every member ministry” to help forestall future disagreements. Missionaries may also wish to bear in mind research findings showing that Japanese pastors prefer to have these conversations once trust has been established in the relationship

For Japanese pastors

- Consider **creating more time for missionaries to spend on evangelism** (as opposed to internal church activities)
- People who had partnered with Japanese pastors also expressed a desire for more **flexibility**, although in a different sense: they wanted Japanese pastors to be **more open to new ideas**. They also thought that Japanese pastors could **improve in how they communicated with partners**, including time for relationship building through activities not directly related to work
- As discussed for missionaries above, **pastors should have clear conversations with missionaries about the desired length of partnerships**
- **Pastors should have detailed conversations about the vision and strategy of church plants**, including what is actually meant by commonly used terms such as “shared leadership”, “discipleship”, “evangelism”, and “every member ministry” to help forestall future disagreements

Partner with new relevant organisations in the future

Finally, this research sought to enable OMF to partner with new organisations and leaders in the future, and suggested three primary recommendations:

- **OMF can be confident in supplying missionaries to church-planting projects**, knowing that most non-OMFers in our sample wanted to work with an OMF missionary
- **OMF should examine specific responses to interview questions on opportunities on church-planting** and consider which of these opportunities they might exploit and with whom they might partner to do so
- While it is encouraging that more than half of non-OMFers wanted to receive a missionary to help with church-planting, **OMF may still wish to consider how to handle the fact that more respondents wanted missionaries to help with their current work than to start churches**

Appendix 1: OMF Japan Church Planting Strategy Review – Literature Review

Introduction

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18–20

These words of Jesus introduce his disciples to the essentials of the mission He was entrusting to them as His representatives on earth. They are familiar to us, but as the authority and instruction of Jesus provides the foundation and direction for our work, it is worth reading them again and asking the Lord to show us how we can better obey Him in this task.

The OMF Japan Church Planting Strategy Review is focussed on this question – how can we more faithfully obey the Lord in the task of going, making disciples, baptising them and teaching them to obey all that the Lord has commanded. This paper assumes that in teaching believers to obey everything the Lord has commanded, we will also see them gathered into communities of believers/churches. It is not assuming any particular model when referring to church, but rather to the essential characteristics set out in the New Testament. Discussion of appropriate models of church for use in Japan will be part of our work in this review process.

The review has several parts:

1. An initial consultation with OMF members about the issues we should be studying and the outcomes we want to see from this review.
2. A literature review of almost 40 key texts on church planting generally, church planting in Japan and recent Japanese church history including the state of the church in Japan today.
3. A ‘Listening Project.’ The results of the literature review will inform the questions we ask as we consult widely among churches and mission partners in Japan to learn from their perspectives and wisdom.
4. The results will be written into a report that will form the foundation for further reflection and discussion on what the Lord is doing in Japan and how He is leading OMF Japan to serve Him in church planting.
5. We hope that the results of this work will also be shared with others in Japan and contribute to the overall mission work here.

¹¹ By outcomes we mean what should this review help us to achieve, rather than what conclusions should it draw!

Context for the review

A brief context for this review is helpful. Since 1951 OMF missionaries in Japan have been seeking to make Japanese disciples and see churches planted that would then continue under Japanese leadership and make new disciples and plant new churches. By God's Grace, we have seen over 70 churches planted and we praise the Lord for all that He has done.

However, in recent years we have seen a considerable slowdown in the progress of the work and some significant questions being raised about whether the style of church planting we have pursued is still appropriate in today's Japan. Alongside this, we have seen great interest in church planting movements and discipleship making movements around the world. Workers coming to the Field have some different expectations and aspirations about how they will continue the task of making Jesus known in Japan. All of this makes it timely to review our church planting work and seek the Lord's leading for the next chapter of our service of Him in Japan.

Methodology and purpose of this paper

We consulted with OMF Japan Members and other partners about key resources on church planting that we should review. From these suggestions we selected a representative sample. The reviews were conducted by members of OMF Japan taking notes on key topics of interest and submitting them. The notes were then analysed, points that were unclear clarified and the themes that emerged identified and synthesised. The results of our literature review are briefly presented in this paper. The resources consulted are listed at the end. We have not followed conventional academic referencing, but to aid those who want to follow up a particular point we have listed resource numbers in square brackets [*] throughout the document.¹² We will now present our summary findings on:

1. Questions arising from a brief review of the history of the church in Japan especially OMF's work
2. Principles of effective disciple-making and church planting especially in Japan
3. Analysis of where there are barriers to effective disciple making and church planting both in and outside the church in Japan
4. Areas we want to explore further in the listening project.

Questions arising from a brief review of the history of the church in Japan especially OMF's work

Japan's first encounter with Christianity began in the 16th Century and was exclusively with the Roman Catholicism of Europe. Its second and third encounters were mainly with Protestantism (1859-1945; 1945-present). In between the first and second encounters there was a 250-year period of 'closed country.' In this period foreign Christians were expelled, believers persecuted, and Christianity was outlawed.

¹² As we have read as a team and used those notes to produce the report, it's not possible to quote a particular page number for most references.

It was said that basic Christian education (publishing biographies of the Saints and catechism etc.), clear understanding of suffering, Confrarias (Christian mutual aid societies which under persecution become house churches) and accommodation policy towards culture are the four crucial factors that helped the hidden Christians to survive underground during the persecution period [33]. It is a great reminder to us when reviewing church planting work in the past, to not just focus on quantitative change which is more visible, but also on the hidden qualitative growth, like the Christians' faith that stood firm in spite of the strong external pressure [39]. Within the history of Japanese Christianity there is a lesson on how to sustain faith during a dark period when all previous efforts seemed to be in vain and not producing fruit.

In 1873, freedom of religion was restored in Japan and there was a period of rapid church growth at the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th. Christians made a significant contribution in areas such as women's education. However, with the increasing emphasis on nationalistic Shintoism under the military government, the climate became increasingly hostile towards Christianity culminating in severe restrictions on churches during the Second World War. Although there is much to be learnt from this period [39, 46], it lies outside the scope of this review. OMF (It was called CIM at that time) started its first church plant in Hokkaido in 1952, Tohoku (the Northern Prefectures of Honshu Island) in 1954 and Kanto Area (Greater Tokyo Area) in 1979. During the first 40 years (1952-1991) 65 churches were started (of which 11 were abandoned) and about 2500 people baptized. OMF Japan at that time had planning committees for church planting but they usually did not continue for long.

During the time of 1982-1991, the growth of OMF Japan church plants slowed down. There was 73% growth in the combined congregations of all OMF Japan Church plants over 10 years compared to a remarkable 209% growth in the decade 1973-1981. Even though 1980 was a year of 'Prayer for Breakthrough in Japan', an emphasis that was continued through the whole decade, the '80s showed less growth than the '70s.¹³ For example, in a total of 10 churches in smaller Hokkaido cities & towns, only an average of 1 extra person was added per church per 3 years.

It was said that there had been an average of 76 missionaries in the Japan Field in the first 40 years. This means that there had been $76 \times 40 = 3040$ missionary years of activity, thus making 0.8 baptisms per missionary year. Furthermore, many of those baptisms occurred in churches which were no longer under missionary leadership, but under Japanese pastors. Looking back, it seems that OMF Japan churches were not multiplying their growth but adding to it quite slowly. In addition, OMF churches produced comparatively few pastors, but our churches seemed attractive to Christian workers from outside during that time.

In the '90s, 8 churches were started, with 2 restarted and one was taken over by OMF Japan. At the beginning of the new century, only 2 new starts were made. The formal church planting information/analysis was updated until the end of 2006.

In the past 15 years, OMF Japan missionaries were involved in a wider variety of church planting patterns compared to previous years. This included co-working with local pastors to start a church plant, cooperating with different local denominations (not only Japan Evangelical Church Association), starting house churches and café ministry. In addition, OMF's ministries were arguably more diverse than before and not limited to church planting (although student work and theological education have long been part of our work).

¹³ Other Protestant groups also observed similar slowing of growth rates at a similar period. [24]

A further analysis of our work indicates that relatively few of the churches planted by OMF have gone on to plant another church and handover from missionary leadership to a Japanese pastor remains a challenge with a decline in church membership a regularly observed occurrence.¹⁴

However, church planting remains a key aspiration for OMF Japan. According to the OMF Japan VMV with our Focus and Goals to 2030, one of the goals is to have OMF missionaries involved in 50 church plants (both initiating our own and supporting others) in the 10-year period covered by the plan.

Overall, we can see that church growth and the rate of church planting has slowed considerably compared to the early years, not many of the churches that OMF has planted have gone on to plant churches and that there are challenges in the handover process from missionary pioneers to Japanese Pastors.

From this review of the history of OMF Japan church planting and related documentation [1, 9, 26, 31], several questions are worth mentioning here as we craft the future by faith:¹⁵

1. The traditional church plant model required land/building, sufficient numbers in the congregation and funding in order to sustain it. The 'end goal' was to pass the baton from the pioneer missionaries to the local pastors. Does this standardized model (with internal activities prescribed in the OMF Japan Church Planting Manual) effectively contribute to the Indigenous Biblical Church Movement that OMF is aiming for? If not, can it be amended to do so?
2. Did our church plants (either OMF-initiated or those done in cooperation with other organizations/churches) begin with a thorough investigation of the team leading the plant (e.g. personality, strengths, ministry experience, and ecclesiological inclinations), alongside the target audience (factors include a population's affluence, responsiveness, felt needs, potential and socio-demography [rural vs urban] etc.), develop a mission statement and goals before selecting a church model to use? [12, 21, 29]
3. What is OMF church planting strategy aiming for? 'Start small – disciple deeply', 'concentration strategy on influential cities', 'diffusion strategy', 'targeting towns and villages without any churches' or any other? [1, 7, 28]
 - a) Without studying the present situation of the Japanese churches, it is difficult to explore the ways forward and answer the above questions, here are some snapshots from recent research [6, 15, 20, 24, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45]:
 - b) (A survey in 2005 which 2000 pastors answered) The average age of pastors is 67.8. 29% of the respondents were in their 70s, 20% in 80s, 2% in their 20s and 30s.
 - c) (Japan Congress on Evangelism 2016) The attendance of Sunday services is on average 40 people. The largest proportion of the churches have an average of 20 people joining the Sunday services. Trends point to an increase in numbers of small-scale churches and 'mega churches' of more than 100 people.

¹⁴ The reasons for that decline still need to be better understood – observing that this occurs is not attributing fault or blame to one party or the other.

¹⁵ As we ask these questions, we want to affirm the faithful service, pioneering work and wisdom of our predecessors who laboured to see these disciples made and churches formed. Some of the questions we ask may seem critical, but we are able to ask them because we stand on the foundations laid by those who have gone before and because we have the benefit of looking back over years to see patterns. We raise these questions humbly and recognising we have limitations (both those we recognise and others we do not). On the other hand, the need to see gospel progress in Japan is too great and important to leave these questions unasked.

- d) (The United Church of Christ in Japan, the largest denomination) On average, a church had 0.64 baptisms in 2018 and 0.45 baptisms in 2020 meaning 55% of the churches did not have any baptism in 2020.
- e) (John Mehn – Multiplying Churches in Japanese Soil) 1-2% of population of Japan are said to have previously had Christian commitment of some kind, but studies show 80% of those baptized leave within 10 years and few people continue past 2.8 years.
- f) (OMF 2017 Church Growth Research) Less than half of Japanese Christians are actively sharing their faith. On average, Japanese believers have spiritual conversations with 2 people a month. For every new member, on average 1600 evangelistic conversations need to be had. Evangelism is hard and most of the time is not successful.
- g) (OMF 2017 Church Growth Research) It was somewhat surprising to find that it is not mainly the time spent by a Pastor in evangelism or training that correlates with growth, but the time spent in pastoral care. This could also explain the lack of growth beyond the average size of about 30. A single pastor can't pastor more than this. In addition, over half of the churches do not train leaders. This makes it hard to grow and to multiply and means that a greater burden falls on the pastors who usually minister alone and find it difficult to separate church administration management from ministries.
- h) Natural Church Development (NCD) found empowerment of others by leaders (out of the key eight growth factors) to be a key quality characteristic in growing churches worldwide. NCD survey studies throughout the church in Japan show this factor to be weak and Pastor Ishihara, from his work with NCD in Japan, affirms that, "The first quality characteristic of growing churches is leadership that distributes authority". National NCD Partner for Japan, Diathao Kamei, reported that after surveying over 150 churches in Japan "empowering leadership" was the lowest overall factor. [6]
- i) Churches in Japan are generally stronger on top-down knowledge-based Bible teaching, but perhaps not so strong on hands-on discipleship (e.g. small groups, peer teaching). This phenomenon may be further strengthened by the hierarchal culture in the society, affected by the local education tradition (sensei-student relationship) and the image of "religious teaching + gathering" as revealed by the Japanese Kanji character 教会 (which means "church" but literally reads 'teach meet.'). In this sense highly structured, hierarchical churches with a specialist teacher can be said to be contextualised, but whether it is helpful contextualisation needs to be evaluated.
- One local pastor and researcher described the typical local church as an "Aquarium-styled church". Believers are like fishes swimming in a designated direction or confined space in the aquarium which are well protected, relying on the pastors/leaders to feed them spiritual food, thus gradually losing the natural ability to seek the truth and find out what they need to be and to do in order to work out their faith. They are less willing to step out from their comfort zone and sacrifice themselves in order to fulfill the Great Commission in everyday lives.[42]
- j) Churches will also be affected by the following trends in Japanese society: decline of the population, people moving out from rural areas to metropolis/cities and extreme population aging. The foreseeable future of the churches will be as follows if no immediate actions are taken now: rural churches down-sized/close down, urban churches may grow 'naturally', more churches without their own pastors, pastors are forced to be bi-vocational due to inadequate financial support, cases of young pastors resigning may increase because the income from the church cannot support a family.

¹⁶ <https://uccj.org/organization/organization15> (accessed April 8, 2022)

¹⁷ This was a small survey of churches mainly from one church group and area so care needs to be taken extrapolating to the whole of Japan, although the findings shared in this paper appear to be widely applicable across Japan.

Principles of effective disciple making and church planting in Japan

There are many models of church and church planting and much debate about the core elements that should be present to enable growth both globally and in Japan specifically.

At the Hayamal missionary seminar in 1986 [12], the following factors were found to contribute to church growth in Japan:

1. The Spiritual Aspect: A strong Biblical foundation, importance of preaching, prayer and a warm fellowship;
2. Intent to Grow and Built-in Evaluation: Bold plans, centrality of evangelism and faith projections are some key words;
3. Organic Growth: Selection of right pastors, mobilization and training of lay people, shared leadership, personalized communication in outreach;
4. Bridges to the Community: As long as a church is isolated from the society it cannot grow very much. The service aspect of the church in Japan is weak;
5. Planned Church Multiplication: There needs to be vision, planning and a strong will to reach the unreached.

John Mehn in his book *Multiplying Churches in Japanese Soil* studies reproducing churches in Japan and lists several factors as particularly important to think about for Japan. A brief summary is produced here:

1. Dream big (plan towards multiplication), work small in discipling people who then disciple others
2. Grow a team of leaders, not a solo clergy
3. Define where and who you are reaching and contextualise to that situation
4. Clear vision and philosophy of ministry with evangelism training systems, discipleship etc. that matches it
5. Mobilise lay people in evangelism and ministry leadership
6. Relationship-focused evangelism that is both attractional and missional
7. Utilise small groups for evangelism, fellowship, discipleship and leadership development
8. Incorporate creative approaches to enhance ministry.

Many have attempted to describe principles for effective church planting and done significant research beyond description in the scope of this paper. However, having read widely and considered different, but often similar, sets of principles put forward, here are some summary findings of principles we believe are important for effective church planting in Japan.

1. We need to be deeply prayerful and follow God's leading in our ministry (as it is His work and He gives the growth).
2. Clearly understand and explain a vision (who trying to reach, how)
3. The gospel needs to be communicated:
 - a. faithfully – true to Scripture
 - b. abundantly – there is a need to tell many people
 - c. deeply – follow up those who show interest
 - d. contextually – use the full range of Scriptural descriptions of salvation, sin, etc. and explain in appropriate ways so that people can understand.
 - e. With integrity – word and deed

4. Believers need to be deeply disciplined and (over time) have their world-view transformed and be equipped to: read the Scriptures and apply them, communicate the gospel, disciple others and start new churches.
5. Small groups for fellowship, training & mission are key.
6. The authority of Scripture and the importance of everyone reading and applying it.
7. Plurality of local leadership with an emphasis on the importance of developing lay leaders
8. Intentional training of believers and leaders – learn by doing, and apply what is learned straight away. Get people active in ministry as quickly as possible.
9. Intentionally raise reproducing disciples who gather in churches intentional about planting reproducing churches, through using reproducible methods
10. Clear, shared ecclesiology with a view of church as a dynamic sending community with simple church structures
11. Be cautious about using foreign funds and avoid long-term reliance on them
12. Understand and engage the community you are trying to reach
13. Utilise appropriate tools to help the process (keep them under review and refined!)
14. Emphasise unity in the gospel and cooperation with others

Having considered questions raised by the recent history and current situation of the church in Japan and identified effective church planting principles we believe are important to bear in mind, we will now turn to barriers that our reading identified.

Analysis of where there are barriers to effective disciple making and church planting both in and outside the church in Japan

There are several practices which are said to be barriers to effective disciple making and church planting.

The Challenge of “ABC” Concept

First of all, the method of church planting by traditional pioneer evangelism was tied tightly to the concept of “ABC”, i.e. “Attendance, Building, Cash.” Missionary responsibility was focused on growing the membership to 30–40 to ensure adequate funding for ongoing church expenses (i.e. church running expenses, pastor’s salary, meeting place cost, pastor’s rent) and help acquire land for church buildings.¹⁸ This would also lay the foundation for acquisition of the church’s own legal registration. This process may take 12–15 years (or longer). Critics raise the concern that most of the effort would therefore need to be spent in maintaining the church structures, not reproducing other congregations in their community [17, 24]. The disciple making and church planting DNA would therefore not be implanted at the start of the church.

Some observe that the ABC model is often implemented uncritically as a standard model. If it is used those implementing it need to carefully think through principles of effective church planting looking at how and why they are using this model. Focus on the essentials of church (ecclesiology) and its purpose in God’s plan (missiology) with an expectation of growth (not just numeric, but in faith too) is vital. [43]

From Hamburger to Rice Burger

The second barrier to effective church planting is simply importing Western concepts to Japanese contexts without contextualizing to the local church planting situation. Even if the methodology may work well under the missionary's leadership it may not be easily passed on to the local leaders. Under this category of contextualization, it is worth mentioning here that Japanese people often understand truth mainly in concrete-relational terms, less conceptually, and are affected by the spiritual realm in all areas (for instance the opinion of ancestors as a moral guide) when compared to Western worldviews. As Japanese are generally spiritually sensitive, instead of theoretical argument, they may look for spiritual guidance and practical experience on spiritual things. [20, 42]

However, if they first hear the gospel and the Bible from missionaries who explain it conceptually, those 'concepts' could then become a tradition of how they should deliver the message (not just the content). A tradition cannot be easily changed, especially if the tradition is linked to the truth. Any effort to change or to contextualize the method takes a very long time as reformation may destroy or be perceived as destroying the foundation of the truth. [14]

In the aspect of preaching, chronological expository preaching that highlights God's overarching purpose for the world may be lacking. Teaching that impacts everyday life and teaching on the topics of spiritual battle/encounter may also be lacking as well. [4, 37]

It was reported that during the period of 1957-1964, the curiosity to see and hear foreigners, which was an original drawing card in smaller, remote towns had disappeared [1]. A recently retired missionary mentions that in twenty-first century Japan, most schools now have at least one English teacher who is a native speaker. Therefore, language classes, in churches in cities in particular, do not attract the numbers they once did in the late 1980s.¹⁹ Thinking through how to meet felt needs of Japanese (both Christians and non-Christians) in a reproducible way that does not rely on foreign people or language is still a challenge in this era. [9, 18]

Some have observed that Christian life and practice in many churches often focuses on the inner care of the soul, making religion about 'personal growth and richness in life'. However, compared with the past, Japanese now are less religious and less interested in religions. One solution may be for churches to take on a more developed role in relating to Japanese ceremonial occasions, traditions and customs in a concrete or practical way. For example, promotion of Christian funerals and teaching about the Christian view of the afterlife is something being tried by some churches. [38]

¹⁹ Church planters establishing house churches (which could save the cost of buying a land/building) may also need to re-consider how contextualised ritual should look like in a home space or a rental space, and how to make the church visible and accessible to the community. 'Japanese religions are extremely ritual-oriented.....Lack of contextual ritualization in Protestantism can be seen as one of the major reasons for the church's stagnation in Japan. Correctly following examples of strict and repetitively-patterned rituals are crucial for performing them. It is believed that kami (God) require the strict observation of rituals so that they may be respected or find solace,' 'One of the Japanese worldview themes is "form consciousness." It must be understood, in a worship service, Japanese people are not familiar with the idea of giving a spontaneous, varied expression of the life that is within them. They need rituals that they can follow and formed patterns of worship that almost all of the worshippers perform together. Contextual ritual is a necessary step for the contextualization of the gospel.' Mitsuo Fukuda, *Developing a Contextualized Church as a Bridge to Christianity in Japan* (U.K., Gloucester: Wide Margin, 2012), Chapter 3 & 12. [Kindle version]

Trevor's paper observes that the church community is often observed as much, if not more, than the individual gospel messenger or the message they share in Japan [9]. Reminding us how Japanese thinking on identity, relationships, group, community, and leadership need to be considered as we pursue contextualized church planting in Japan.²⁰

Lack of Shared Leadership (held by one Pastor) and Lack of Believers equipped and mobilized for service

One of the cultural barriers is the influence of Confucianism since the 6th century and Neo-Confucianism during the Edo shogunate (1603–1868).²¹ It has established the absolute superior-subordinate/patron-client/master-servant relationship in the hierarchy culture which in turn affects the church as well. The congregation depends on the pastor or missionary as the specialist qualified in ministry or spiritual matters. The pastor may view their responsibility as protecting church members from spiritual harm, not as equipping the saints for ministries. If pastors do not appropriately and intentionally share ministry responsibility, churches will likely be limited to 20–30 members. Strong gifted lay leadership is sometimes viewed as a threat to pastoral authority. [38, 40, 43]

Empowering lay leaders in this context is an important challenge. How can church plants and local churches fully acknowledge the importance of the 'priesthood of all believers', take 'risk' (which is difficult in Japan), train up lay people and share/delegate responsibilities? [2, 3, 22, 25, 28, 40]

When missionaries pass leadership to local pastors, they may not have equipped them or their church members on how to plant a church [43]. The result is that the church may become more structured and organized [36] but at the same time more focused on the internal relationship rather than outreaching (which is mis-understood as the responsibility of missionaries) and multiplying disciples.

Discipleship as about Gaining Knowledge rather than Obedience?

To what extent is positional leadership Biblical or un-Biblical? When planting a new church, should we embrace a hierarchical structure which may reflect more of what Japanese are used to? [20] Or conversely, is it the church planter's responsibility to teach and model an alternative structure as a counter-culture? How can we nurture an amae-driven small group pointing towards God rather than towards the leader (being too strongly amae-driven will make the church/small groups behave like a cult)?²² [13]

If discipleship is primarily obedience-based rather than knowledge-based (although obedience also requires knowledge), how would this look in a hierarchical context? Could an obedience-based focus further strengthen the hierarchy when in fact we want to decentralize the church leadership and encourage more lay leaders to be raised up (polycentric leadership)? Could local Christians feel greater stress as they already experience the stress of obedience in their workplace or other groups that they belong to? From Jesus' commandment, discipleship is clearly about obedience, but obedience to a gracious, suffering, humble Savior should feel different to obedience to the demands of a human group – so our church cultures need to be full of Jesus' grace and joy too. [19, 32]

¹⁹ Miriam Davis, Utterly Amazed: Following the call of God in Japan (Fabulahula, 2021), 94. [Kindle version]

²⁰ Goodmann, Bob, "Are We Accelerating or Inhibiting Movements to Christ," Mission Frontiers (Sep-Oct 2020). <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/are-we-accelerating-or-inhibiting-movements-to-christ1> (accessed April 1, 2022)

²¹ While these may seem like a long time ago, their influence is acknowledged by academics and social commentators. As one Japanese Pastor put it 'Japan was a closed country for nearly 300 years and we've only been open for 150 years' and in that time Japanese nationalistic Shintoism with strong Confucianist morals about hierarchy held sway for a significant period.

Lack of Church Engagement with the Community

One small OMF study found that the majority of conversions came about through a focus on knowledge of the Bible and truth, suggesting that our churches are pursuing one way of outreach, but that emotional/relational ties may need deepening. Are churches too focused on the Sunday service but less on thinking of creative ways for outreach that meet the needs of the community and suits the church's giftings, personality and context? Is there enough focus on living for Christ in all aspects of life and engagement with how to live for Christ and witness in the workplace, home and community? [5, 35, 37]

Community engagement would include knowing the neighbourhood and the area, having proactive strategies rather than a reactive posture and taking active roles in the community as an expression of Christian discipleship. Furthermore, this engagement should include the gospel being lived out and expressed through works of justice and mercy that reflect God's generosity to us. [5, 16, 35]

Church 'Membership' and 'Consumers'

Almost 9 out of 10 of those who become Christians come from homes where religious sentiments are respected. However, in the case of Christian baptism one out of four meet with family opposition [12]. Some suggest that (the typically followed) long baptism preparations discourage converts without reducing the risk of falling away. Does undue delay of baptism hinder dynamic church growth by implying that spiritual growth is a matter of curriculum completion and the approval of men, rather than a work of the Holy Spirit and obedience to Christ? Some suggest that delaying baptism becomes an inferior substitute for church discipline, which is a more effective guard against false converts. If we delay too long, new believers will learn to be consumers not ministers. How to get people active and obeying in ministry from the start? [8, 11, 34]

Lack of Vision/Plan/Mindset to Reach Out and Limited Partnerships Across Groups

One senior missionary commented that missionaries by their call and training have a concern to take the gospel to everyone and focus on outreach, whereas there is a (natural) tendency for Japanese nationals to have a less broad vision (e.g., to maintain the status quo, or in the church context too focused on meeting the needs of the congregation). Some studies suggest that Japanese church planters are more effective, but there are not enough of them. [20]

²² Takeo Doi, a Japanese psychoanalyst, uses the concept of 甘え (amae) (variously translated as 'dependence' or 'selfish love') to analyze attitudes which affirm dependence, and portrays this as the fundamental element in Japanese interpersonal relationships. Amai is related to the psychology of a never-fully-satisfied desire to be loved. He points out the similarity between amai and faith, and the superiority of faith to amai (Doi uses Luke 10:38-42, 15:11-32, Matt 16:13-23 to illustrate amai in the Bible). As the needs of amai give rise to groupism when they are not fulfilled by human relationships, they become projected into the religious sphere. Doi insists that the danger for the Japanese is their inclination to be self-sufficient in their amai. Faith is often confused with amai because amai and faith overlap and exist side by side. Fukuda commented on the missiological implication of amai as follows, "1) Amai mentality (the psychological desire to "belong", "to whom or to what do I belong?") will be a point of contact for the group-oriented Japanese people but it is not a goal of our witness. We need to challenge people to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus himself. 2) God does not want to nurse a greedy, selfish baby who doesn't grow for a long time; instead, He desires to have a growing child who maintains person-to-person interaction with Him. The Word of Christ commands the hearer's loyalty to be subject to the sovereign will of God and to His fatherly grace. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit, creating life and obedience". Fukuda, *Developing a Contextualized Church as a Bridge to Christianity in Japan*, Chapter 3, 5 & 9. [Kindle version]

There is also a lack of cooperation/partnership among denominations. Close cooperation of Japanese churches from different denominations in the same region is uncommon. [24, 37, 38, 43]

How to release pastors with the gifts of church planting to be involved in more frontline ministries? Who should train the local church planters and how should they be trained? How can greater gospel cooperation be encouraged? [8, 10, 34]

Other Cultural Phenomenon of Note

Other features of modern Japanese culture may also be considered to be barriers or challenges that need to be considered and worked through in church planting.

Busyness: Japan's working hours and culture, the way that the education system tends to fill students' time (especially in teenage years) and the requirement to meet social obligations of different kinds can mean that people are often very busy. Discipleship-making and church culture that is flexible to meet the busy realities of people's lives and that emphasises discipleship to Jesus in the whole of one's life is important in this context. It is important that church life does not inappropriately emphasise obligations and time commitments that place people in an unnecessarily challenging situation when they have to express their loyalty to the community of believers and their other societal commitments (sometimes tough choices are appropriate and unavoidable).

Absolute loyalty and self-surrender: One researcher commented that Japanese people have a desire to unite themselves with supernatural beings through self-surrender. The characteristics of the Samurai spirit, such as selflessness, fortitude, courage, resourcefulness, sense of camaraderie, and the spirit of self-sacrifice, can be understood as the outer manifestation of an inner cohesion between people and the supernatural [18]. However, Christianity demands absolute loyalty to one God and men are designated as sinners, which is alien to the Japanese worldview. The gospel is also demanding. It demands repentance, humility, obedience and regular religious practices and involvement in church community. (As often expressed currently in Japan, involvement in church community can mean engagement with a full programme of worship and other meetings on a Sunday which may be the only day in the week that people can take rest and enjoy family life). How can we appropriately challenge where necessary and adapt our practises where possible?

Disconnection from natural groups/communities: Confession of faith is not a solely individual decision in a communal culture like Japan. How can new Christians be connected to but not isolated from their natural groups (e.g. family, non-Christian circles) and regard them as a field of evangelism rather than a danger to or oppressing of their own faith and spiritual growth? It is still a very challenging topic. [9, 23]

The Real Challenges of Spiritual Resistance

Although we have engaged in an analysis of the sociological, cultural and theological reasons for slow church growth in Japan and also considered points where current church praxis may be weak, it is important to affirm that the spiritual battle is also real. OMF research indicates that compared to other East Asian countries, it takes many more spiritual conversations by believers in Japan to see someone respond in faith compared to many (but not all) other contexts. There is a spiritual reality that needs to be recognised and engaged, with prayer a key 'weapon' in the battle. Whether church planters are sufficiently aware and responsive to this reality is a pertinent question for us to consider. [24]

The Power of the Gospel

Finally although we have described challenges, barriers, weakness and slow gospel growth it is important to acknowledge that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Eph 3:20) and that the gospel is God's power for salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). The Lord Jesus will build His church (Matt 16:18) and we consider it a privilege to be co-labourers with Him. The Lord is greater than any problems we may have identified.

Areas we want to explore further in the listening project

Having identified the issues outlined above, we now want to consult with our partners in Japan and ask for their wisdom and input.

1. What do our partners think are the principles for effective church planting in Japan?
2. What do our partners think of the principles for effective church planting identified?
3. How do our partners think these principles can be implemented?
4. Do they share our analysis of the barriers and issues in Japan?
5. How are they addressing these problems?
6. What do they aspire to in church planting in the future?
7. How can OMF be a good partner to them (and others)?

List of resources read for this review

#	NAME OF RESOURCE	AUTHOR
1	40 Post-War Years in Japan (OMF's churches & Other denominations & Missions)	Hugh Trevor
2	A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches 01	Rev. Tim Mitchell
3	A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches 02	Orthodox Natural Church Development
4	Be The Church: Discipleship and Mission Made Simple: 10 Drawings – 10 Conversations	Caesar Kalinowski and Seth McBee
5	Center Church	Timothy Keller
6	Characteristics of Leaders Reproducing Churches in Japan [Theological Research Exchange Network https://www.tren.com/search.cfm (TREN ID: 006-1683)]	John Mehn

#	NAME OF RESOURCE	AUTHOR
7	Church as Movement	JR Woodward & Ben White
8	Church Multiplication Guide	George Patterson and Richard Scoggins
9	Church Growth and OMF in Japan	Hugh Trevor
10	Church Planting Masterclass	Newchurches.com / Send Network
11	Church Planting Movements	David Garrison
12	Church Planting Patterns in Japan (https://www.horao2020.net/documents/Hayama/Hayama1986.pdf)	Hayama Missionary Seminar 1986
13	Circle of Harmony: A Case Study in Popular Japanese Buddhism with Implications for Christian Mission (https://archive.org/details/circleofharmoniyc0000dale)	Kenneth J. Dale, with a chapter by Susumu Akahoshi
14	Community Formation in Contemporary Japanese Religions and the Implications for Missional Christianity (Missiology, vol. 36) (https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.abs.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001751550&site=ehost-live)	Michael J. Sherrill
15	Conversion Growth in Japanese Churches – an interim report 2017 (internal report)	OMF Japan
16	Covocational Church Planting	Brad Brisco
17	Determining the Present and Potential Effectiveness of Cell Church Components and Models for Missionary Church Planting in Japan with Reference to Three Interdenominational Mission Organizations [Theological Research Exchange Network https://www.tren.com/search.cfm (TREN ID: 023-0211)]	Patrick L. Hansen

#	NAME OF RESOURCE	AUTHOR
18	Developing a Contextualized Church as a Bridge to Christianity in Japan	Mitsuo Fukuda
19	DiscipleShift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples	Jim Putman, Bob Harrington, Robert Coleman
20	Leadership: the Church in Japan and the Missionary (https://www.horao2020.net/documents/Hayama/Hayama1995.pdf)	Hayama Missionary Seminar 1995
21	Matching the Church Planter's Role with the Church Planting Model (https://missionexus.org/matching-the-church-planters-role-with-the-church-planting-model/)	Craig Ott
22	Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?	Roland Allen, Lesslie Newbigin (Foreword)
23	Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations	edited by Warrick Farah
24	Multiplying Churches in Japanese Soil	John Mehn
25	Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches	Christian A. Schwarz
26	OMF Japan History (Unpublished)	OMF Japan
27	Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens	Neil Cole
28	Paul's Missionary Methods: In his time and ours	edited by Plummer and Terry
29	Selecting a Church Planting Model That Works (https://doi.org/10.1177/009182969402200305)	Tom A Steffen
30	The Essence of Church – results of OMF International internal discussions about on this topic	OMF International
31	The Japan Church Planters' Manual	OMF Japan

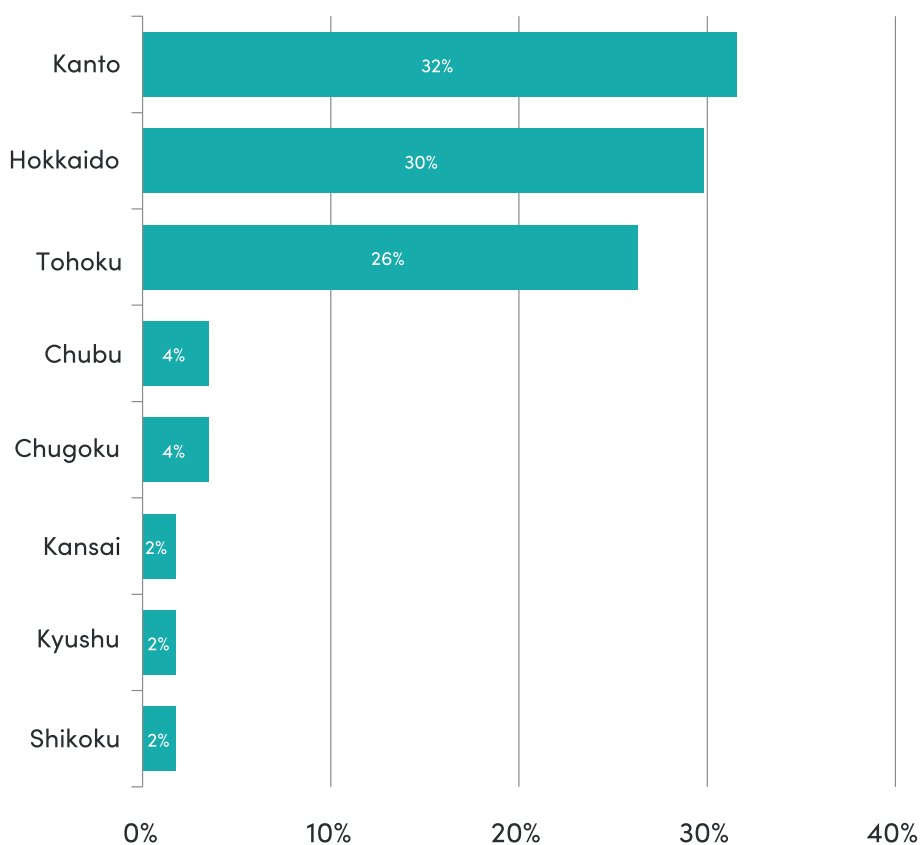
#	NAME OF RESOURCE	AUTHOR
32	The Wheel Model	Frank Schnattner
33	Theology of Culture in a Japanese Context – A Believers' Church Perspective (Princeton Theological Monograph)	Atsuyoshi Fujiwara
34	Train and Multiply Materials	OMS
35	Urban Plant Life – Church Planting Conference Talks	Timothy Keller
36	教会実務を神学する (Thinking Theologically about Church Administration)	山崎龍一 (Yamazaki Ryouichi)
37	データブック 日本宣教のこれからが見えてくる—キリスト教の30年後を読む (Databook: Revealing the Future of Mission in Japan – the Next 30 years of Christianity)	第6回日本伝道会議「日本宣教170→200プロジェクト」編著 (Japan Congress on Evangelism working group 170 to 200 – Editors)
38	人口減少時代の宗教の危機と対応—キリスト教はいかに対応するのか (The Crisis and Response of Religions in an Era of Declining Population –How Christianity responds?)	勝本正実 (Katsumoto Masami)
39	恵みの風に帆をはって—ペトロ岐部と187殉教者物語 (The Wind of Grace in Our Sails – The Story of Peter Kibe and 187 Martyrs)	『まるちれす』編纂委員会 (Maruchiresu Editorial Committee)
40	教会成長読本 (Church Growth)	大橋秀夫 (Ohashi Hideo)
41	福岡開拓の恵み (The Blessings of Church Planting in Fukuoka)	福岡聖書教会 (Fukuoka Bible Church)
42	野生のキリスト教 自生 直結 増殖する神の民 (Wild Christianity – Naturally Growing, Directly Connected and Multiplying People of God)	福田充男 (Mitsuo Fukuda)

#	NAME OF RESOURCE	AUTHOR
43	閉鎖感からの脱却 日本の宣教神学 (Escape from the Feeling of Entrapment: Japanese Missiology)	山口勝政 (Yamaguchi Katsumasa)
44	無牧の教会に対するサポートシステムの構築 (The Establishment of Supporting Systems for Churches without Pastors)(https://muboku.org/assets/doc/paper15109.pdf)	栗崎 路(Kurisaki Ayumi)
45	JMR 調査レポート2018年度(Japan Mission Research Analysis Report 2018) (https://www.tci.ac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/JMR_report_2018.pdf)	東京基督教大学 国際宣教センタ ー(FCC) 日本宣教リサ ーチ (Tokyo Christian University Faith & Culture Centre Japan Mission Research)
46	日本宣教論 (Japanese Missiology)	後藤牧人 (Gotou Makito)
47	"Are We Accelerating or Inhibiting Movements to Christ," Mission Frontiers (Sep-Oct 2020). https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/are-we-accelerating-or-inhibiting-movements-to-christ1	Bob Goodmann

Appendix 2: Demographic data

1. 90 percent of respondents had been involved in a church plant – unsurprisingly, missionaries were more likely to have been involved than pastors
2. On average, respondents had been involved in three church plants – although this rose to just over four for the most successful leaders
3. Where were these church plants located?

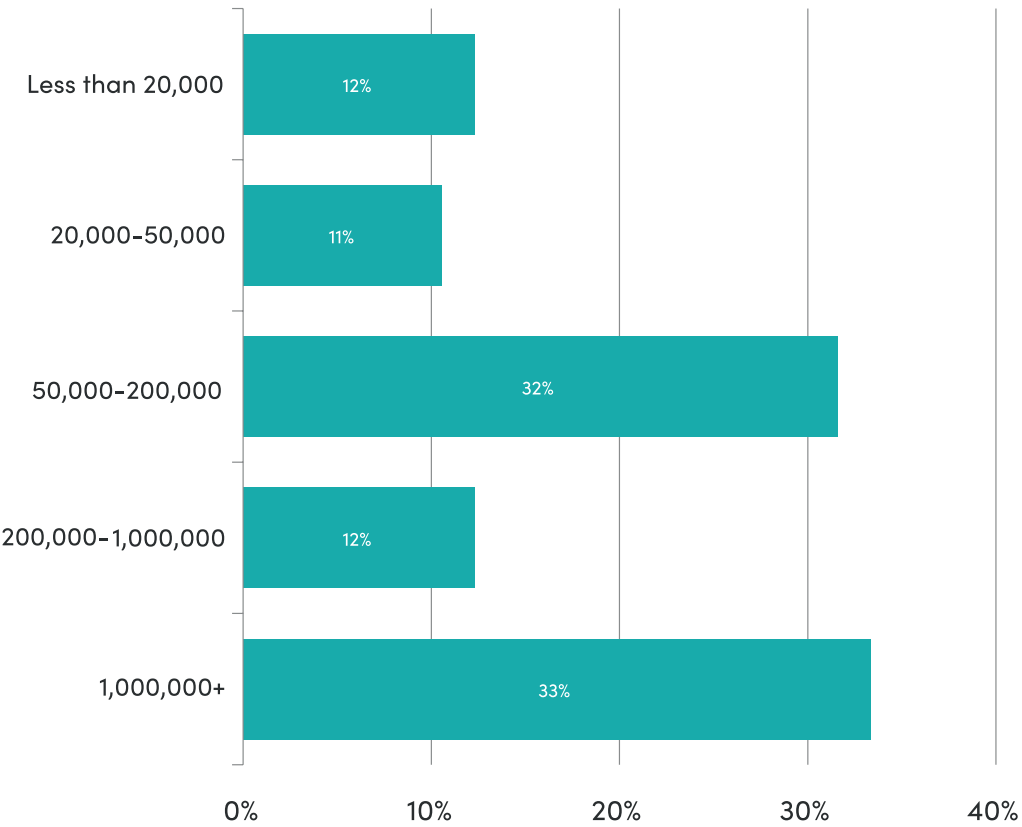
Church plants by location



The research sampled more participants in Kanto, Hokkaido, and Tohoku because these are the regions in which OMF is currently working and would like to explore partnerships.

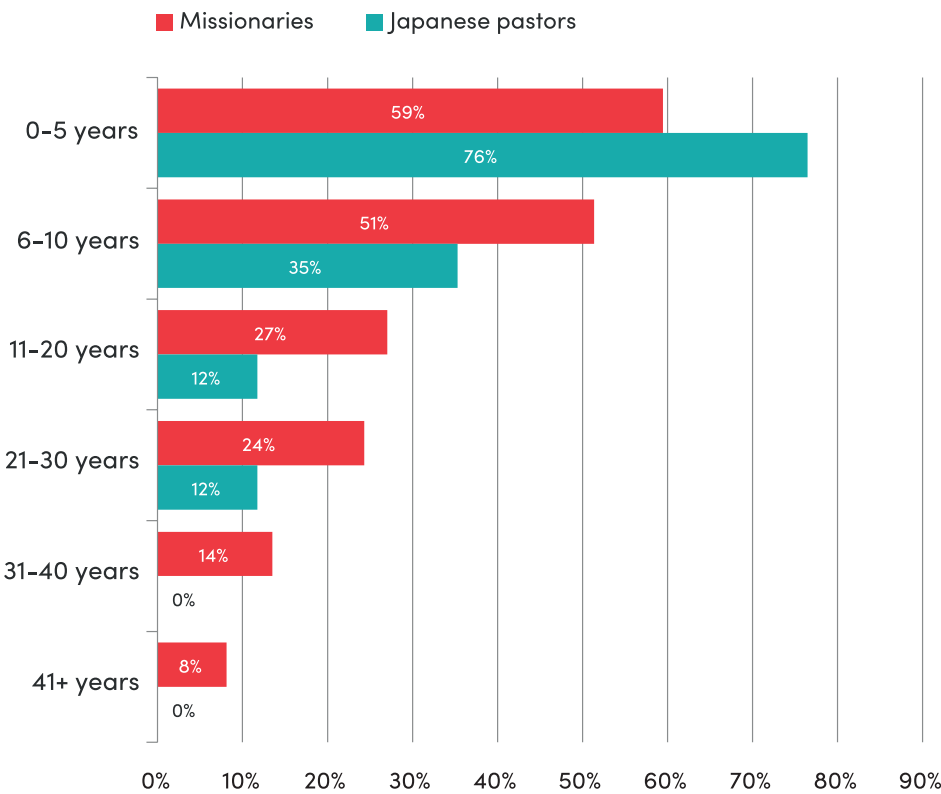
4. Population distribution of towns or cities where participants had planted churches:

Church plants by population of town or city



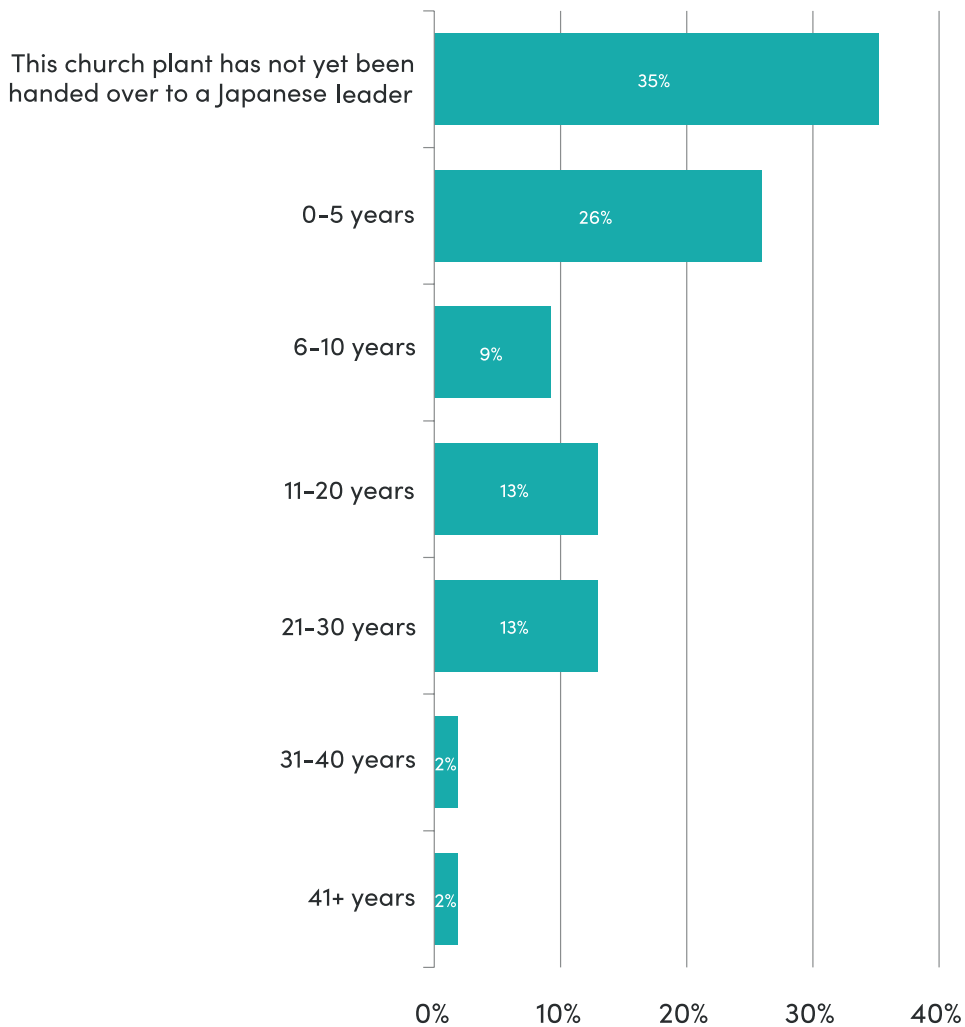
5. At what stages in life of the church plant respondents were involved:

At what point in the life of the church plant were participants involved?



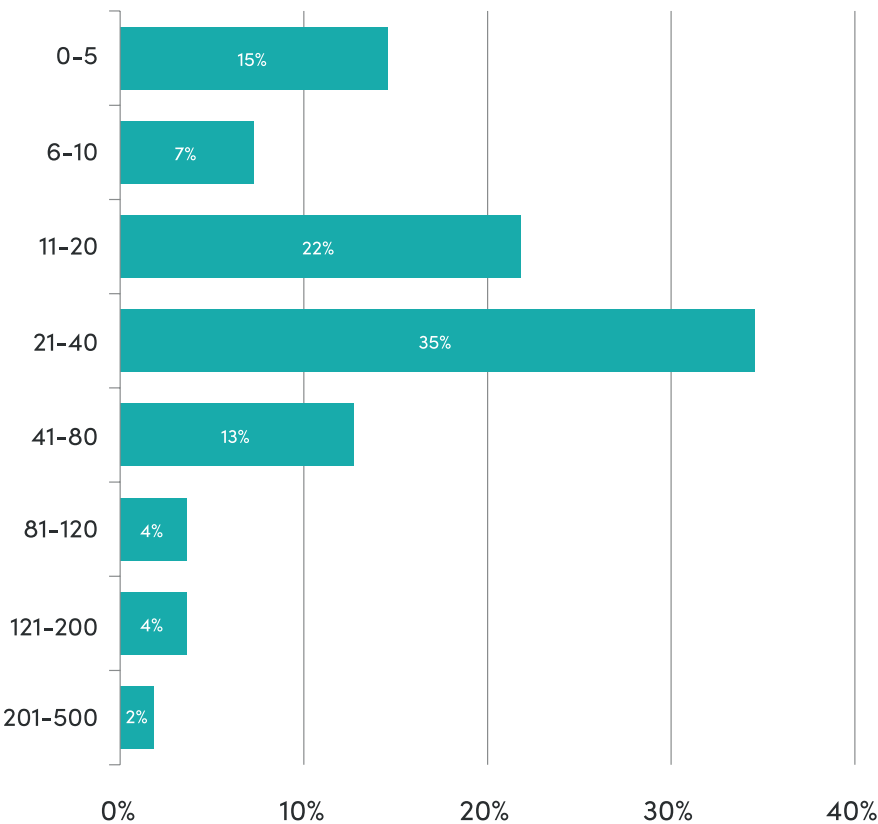
6. At what point in life of church plant churches were handed over to Japanese leader

At what point in the church's history was it handed over to a Japanese leader?



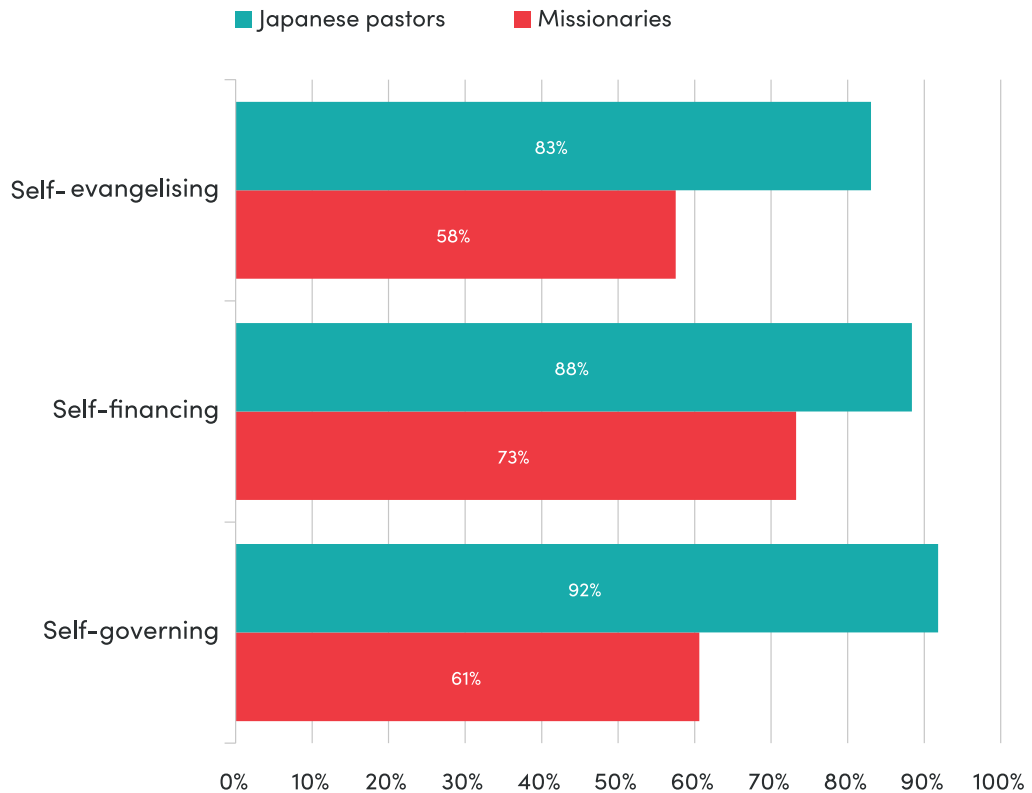
- 7. 88% of churches mentioned by respondents still exist today
- 8. How many people currently attend church plants:
 - a. Churches led by pastors tended to be larger – likely because churches led by pastors were older and better established

How many people currently attend this church?



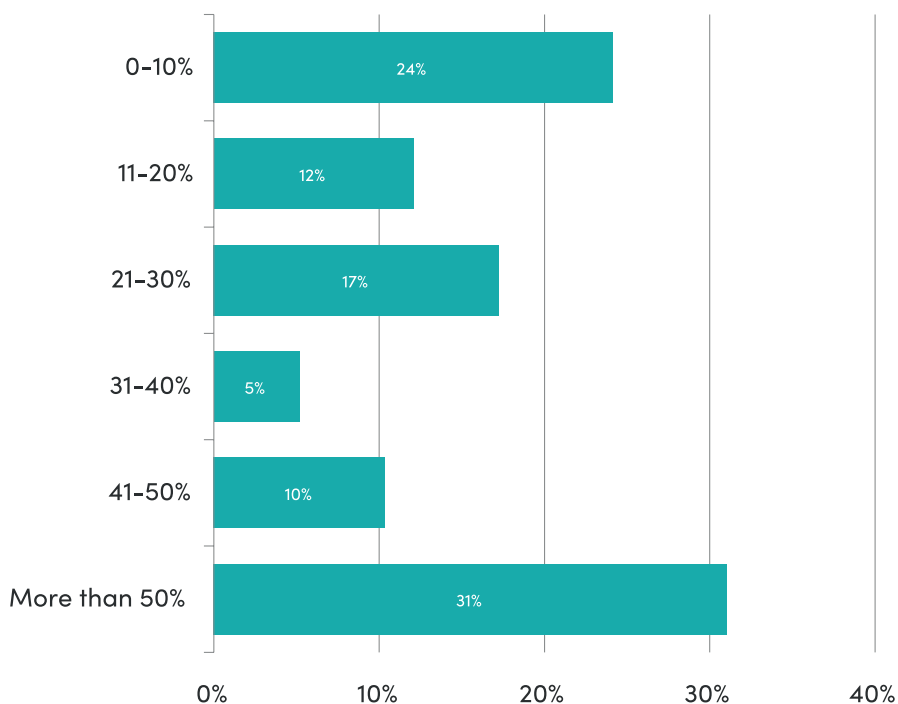
Unsurprisingly, churches that scored highest on our success metric also tended to be slightly larger.

To what extent (0-100%) were church plants self-governing, self-financing, and self-evangelising?



9. Three in ten participants (31 percent) estimated that more than half of their congregations had come to faith through their church:

What percentage of the congregation would you estimate came to faith through the church?

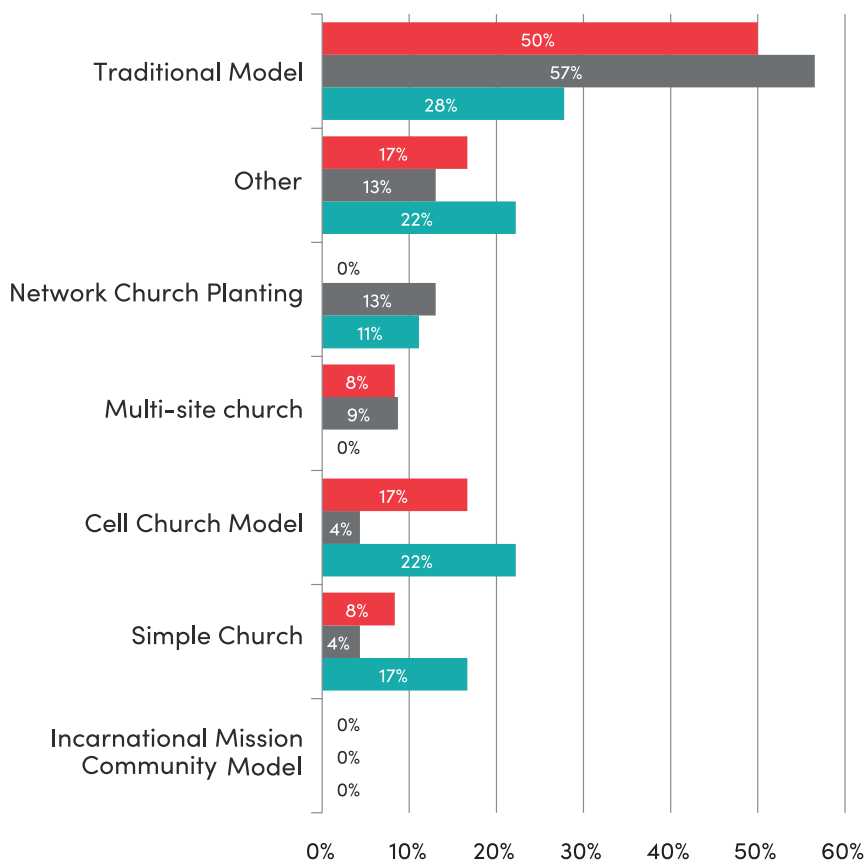


Pastors were slightly more likely than missionaries (39 percent, as compared to 26 percent) to estimate that more than half of the congregation had come to faith through the church.

10. Church planters in large cities were less dependent on the traditional model:

Which of these models best represent your church plant?

■ Population less than 50,000 ■ Population 50,000–1,000,000 ■ Population 1,000,000+



Appendix 3: Limitations of specific church-planting models

In open-answer responses, participants also discussed the limitations of some church-planting models. Crucially, the fact that participants mentioned limitations for a given model does not mean that this model was necessarily worse than any other; cell churches, for example, were one of the models that respondents considered most effective. Instead, this section is intended to provide more information on the weaknesses of models that participants happened to discuss, while leaving open the possibility that other models had weaknesses of their own.

With regard to **cell churches**, respondents noted that this model required planters to have a core of leaders to take responsibility for each of the cell churches. In some cases, they added, this could lead to conflict between pastors and cell church leaders. Other participants thought that cell churches could work less well in rural settings, or observed that it could be hard for Japanese people to invite others into their homes.

Specifically, leaders commented that “Japanese homes are too small, and they’re not used to hosting”, that people attending cell churches can feel “bad about inconveniencing them”, and that opening their homes “forces people to be more brave than they want to be in telling [others] they’re a Christian”, and can worsen “interpersonal politics... between family members”. In general, one missionary reflected, “people need to be brave and vulnerable when opening up their homes”, which can be difficult when “there is great concern about what other people say about you in Japan”.

In discussing the limitations of **simple churches**, participants raised many of the same issues with hosting churches in homes. They also felt that, while simple churches could start quickly, they could disappear just as fast: as one missionary observed, “many of them are ‘now you see it, now you don’t’”. Other respondents mentioned that the informality of simple churches could clash with what they saw as a Japanese inclination to an “organisation mentality: buildings, rituals, etc.”, and that simple churches could be difficult for families. In the words of one missionary, “you can’t take [your] family into Starbucks, and there’s no worship, no childcare, so you end up doing half-church”. These problems, they suggested, could be solved by finding a building, but then “aren’t you going towards traditional church?”

Finally, some leaders also discussed issues with the **traditional model**. Participants thought that this model could focus on buildings and clergy to the exclusion of engaging with the community, and that traditional churches rarely reproduce. One pastor who had chosen a different church-planting model added that he would find this model tiring: “I couldn’t cope with that workload”, he said.

It seems that every model of church planting has some weaknesses that need to be taken into account along with their strengths, when choosing a church planting model for a given context.

Appendix 4: Core sample

While the analysis in the report above is based on both the “core sample” of missionaries, Japanese pastors, and other leaders and the “additional sample” of OMFers asked to participate in the research, OMF was interested to know how findings for just the core sample differed from the general findings described above.

To answer this question, we compared missionaries from the core sample with OMF missionaries from the additional sample. (We chose to only compare missionaries to missionaries because we were aware of the differences between how missionaries and pastors answered questions described above.)

In essence, findings for missionaries in the core sample closely paralleled findings for leaders who scored highly on our success metric.

Members of the core sample were comparatively less likely to be from the UK and more likely to be from the US. They were more likely to be involved relatively early in the life of church plants (i.e., in the first thirty years), and only equally likely to be involved thereafter.

Moreover, they tended to be involved in church plants which still existed today – 100 percent of church-plants in which missionaries in the core sample had served survived, as compared to just 81 percent for missionaries as a whole. They had led churches which were more self-financing (85 percent, as opposed to 73 percent for all missionaries) and more likely to have planted other churches – 47 percent of churches in which these missionaries had served had planted another church, as compared to 26 percent for all missionaries.

They tended to use a blend of church-planting models and were more inclined to mention spiritual resistance as a barrier to church-planting (50 percent versus 37 percent of all missionaries). They were also marginally less likely to favour the traditional model of church-planting (46 percent versus 59 percent).

Interestingly, missionaries in the core sample also valued different characteristics in other missionaries: they tended to say it was more important that missionaries had experience or training in church-planting, and less important that these missionaries had a high level of Japanese.

Like missionaries who scored highly on our success metric, missionaries in the core sample were more likely to emphasise the importance of shared vision and values in a partnership (this theme was mentioned by 87 percent, as compared to 69 percent of missionaries as a whole), and more likely to plant a church in the next five years (67 percent versus 51 percent of missionaries in the general sample).

Appendix 5: Definitions of church plant models

The survey used the following definitions to describe the church plant models mentioned in this report:

Traditional Model: A paid minister/missionary, emphasis on evangelism to attract people into the church building. Worship service is the focus for the life of the church.

Incarnational Mission Community Model: A church plant team takes significant time to understand the community they are reaching and build relationships. Public worship is not started until about 40+ people can gather. Context shapes the church style.

Network Church Planting: Several churches partner together to each plant a daughter church. The network enables mutual support, learning and prayer. Each church is responsible for its own plant.

Simple Church (House Church): Simple churches often led by lay people that meet in rental rooms, coffee shops, homes, etc. Can network with other similar churches but may not.

Cell Church: Cell churches are the focus of the church's life, but the cells also gather together regularly for worship. The church aims to reproduce through growth and multiplication of cells.

Searching for people of peace: Christians visit individual houses looking for "people of peace" who seem responsive to the gospel. Aim to start a simple church, visiting with them and coaching them to continue the work.

Multi-site church: One church meets in multiple locations for worship and other meetings with a shared staff team and budget.

Sending churches: A church trains and equips members for church planting. The sending church encourages its members to pray and then find a location for a new (simple) church in a nearby location and supports them in the work.



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