

# A DECADE OF EXPERIMENTATION? REDESIGNING CHURCH FOR POST-CHRISTENDOM

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## Notes

1 New Jersey Remembers the Pope's Visit.

<http://www.nj.com/popepage/>

2 Email the Pope.

<http://www.nj.com/popepage/email.html>

3 Laura Italiano, "Gimme that Online Religion." *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jan/Feb 1996, Vol. 34 No. 5, p. 36.

4 Virtual Jerusalem.com.

<http://www.virtualjerusalem.com/>

5 Kotel Kam.

<http://kotelkam.com/free.htm>

6 Bonnie Rothman Morris, "Surfing Their Way to the Holy Land." *The New York Times* on the Web, 28 January 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/01/circuits/articles/28jeru.html> (accessed 28 January 1999)

7 Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship.

<http://www.tacf.org/>

8 The First Church of Cyberspace.

<http://www.godweb.org/>

9 The WebChurch – The WorldWide Virtual Church from Scotland.

<http://www.webchurch.org>

10 The Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua.

<http://www.dogchurch.org/>

11 OLC email post, sent Wed, 3 Jun 1998 09:06:20, subject: watching and reading

ON A RECENT TRANSATLANTIC FLIGHT I WATCHED *THE SIXTH DAY*, AN ADVENTURE SET IN A WORLD WHERE HUMAN CLONING WAS PRACTISED, ALBEIT ILLEGALLY.

How far we are from such a world is uncertain, but debates about scientific procedures such as cloning technology and the ethical implications of its diverse applications are reminders, if any were needed, of the rapidly changing, complex and challenging culture of the twenty-first century. This is the context within which we are to incarnate and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the final years of the last century, the Decade of Evangelism, numerous evangelistic strategies were developed. Most were ineffective. Those that worked best were low-key initiatives rather than high-profile activities, rooted in friendship rather than programmes, encouraging dialogue and discovery rather than requiring quick decisions. Although churches continued to decline and the overall evangelistic impact was limited, important missiological lessons were learned. Hopefully, future mission strategies will build on these foundations and become increasingly holistic, humble, flexible, relational and contextual.

In this decade also church planting became respectable. Previously, even though most denominations began as church planting movements, many regarded it as sectarian, ecumenically disruptive, competitive and threatening. But in the 1990s bishops advocated church planting, denominations endorsed it in national mission strategies, theological colleges trained practitioners for it, advocates set goals for it, and (almost) all spoke well of it. However, the number of churches planted by the year 2000 was no more than in previous decades (though spread more widely across denominations). Despite an initial burst of activity, the practice of church planting declined sharply in the final years of the decade.

But, as with evangelism, the unrealistic expectations and relative failure of recent church planting strategies should not obscure important lessons that have been learned. Perhaps the most important is that cloning inherited models of church simply will not do.

Church planting, despite recent disappointments, remains a critical component in the development of a missional response to our culture. But it is only worth investing in creative, experimental, contextual and diverse church planting. Replicating churches that are failing to engage with contemporary society is counter-productive and will hinder effective mission. The issue is not how many churches we plant but what kinds of churches we dare to imagine. ►



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► Church planting is not the only response to a changing and complex culture. Nor is it inimical to the renewal and development of existing churches. What is needed is a symbiotic relationship between inherited and emerging expressions of church: the old needs the inspiration, challenge and pioneering spirit of the new; the new needs the accumulated wisdom, stability and discernment of the old. New ways of being church and new forms of mission will be most effective if they are not disconnected from existing churches and institutions – not just for the sake of accountability but so that the creativity, mistakes, discoveries and joys of what emerges can impact those churches too.

Why is creative church planting so vital?

- Because the church in Britain is declining and in serious trouble.
- Because post-modernity and post-Christendom present mission challenges we have not faced before.
- Because the cultural changes taking place are so significant and rapid that only church planting is flexible enough to develop appropriate responses.
- Because the radical changes needed in church life are too threatening for most churches unless they are pioneered elsewhere first.
- Because our culture is plural and different kinds of churches are needed.
- Because existing denominations, whatever their concern to develop missional congregations, will not achieve this without the catalysing effect of church planting.
- Because those with the capacity and imagination to plant new forms of church will be stifled, frustrated and damaged by the resistance they face if they try to work within existing congregations.

We can take some encouragement from the ecclesiological renewal that began in the 1990s. Seeker-sensitive churches, youth churches, cell churches, children's churches, alt. worship and other models pushed boundaries, engaged with different aspects of our culture, restored biblical emphases, took risks and offered insights that impacted other churches that did not go fully down these roads. But these experiments are just the start of what needs to become a broad-based and multi-faceted movement.

The 1990s were a Decade of Evangelism. Perhaps the present decade (or realistically until 2025) should become a Decade of Experimentation.

The issue is not how many churches we plant but what kinds of churches we dare to imagine.

What is necessary for such experimentation? First, freedom to fail. Church culture is not characterised by readiness to take risks or honesty in admitting that initiatives have failed. Creative church planting requires a culture of risk-taking, supportive accountability, careful evaluation and acceptance that not every new church will work. This is one of the core values of Urban Expression, a church planting initiative in East London: it needs to become the norm.

Second, refusal to adopt pre-packaged quick-fix solutions. The enthusiasm with which the latest transatlantic or domestic strategy is hailed as “the” way to do church signals desperation, gullibility, captivity to consumer culture and failure to take seriously our diverse mission context. Even effective strategies only work in limited segments of a plural society. What we need are not methods we can clone but careful listening and cultural exegesis, local and contextual approaches, and patience.

Third, grappling with the implications of post-Christendom. Most attention recently has been on post-modernity and developing responses to this elusive and complex aspect of our culture. But the demise of Christendom is at least as significant as the disintegration of modernity. In “Christian Europe” the church was central, influential, conventional, institutional and static. This position deeply impacted its theology, its ethics, its biblical interpretation, its understanding of mission, and its own identity and role within society. But this position has changed in post-Christendom, and much that has been familiar needs to be re-imagined and redesigned. Among other things we have to learn what it means to be a church on the margins rather than in the centre, to operate as a movement rather than an institution, and to become unconventional and surprising rather than predictable.

Are we willing to take risks? The challenges ahead are significant but there are signs of hope. The widespread recent endorsement of church planting, the experience gained and the availability of trained church planters give many British denominations advantages. Visits to Sweden and Holland earlier this year to train church planters in denominations that had not planted a church in the past 40 years underscored the significance of this. Can we learn from the successes and failures of the 1990s, invest energy again in church planting, release and support church planters while we can still draw on the expertise that has developed, and initiate new strategies that are more creative and longer-term?

And there are already new initiatives all over the country<sup>1</sup> many small and in marginal communities; some

intentional, others accidental; some with clear strategies, others tentative and organic; some mission-oriented, others peopled by refugees from churches. Networks are emerging to support and nurture such initiatives. Some will flourish and fade. Some will never thrive. But some may contain seeds of the future, clues to new ways of being church in a changing world.

These new ways of being church will not, of course, be totally new. Whether church planters realise it or not, they will draw on the accumulated wisdom of missionaries and congregations through the centuries, who responded to previous cultural changes with courage and creativity. Hopefully, they will seek inspiration and insight, not in obsolete Christendom practices or the soon-to-be-obsolete mega-church cathedrals of modernity, but in contexts where, like today, the church engaged in mission from the margins, as a powerless community, as one voice among others in a plural culture.

Such as?

- The pre-Christendom missionary movement to Europe and North Africa<sup>2</sup>;
- The Nestorian missionary movement in Asia, which encountered religious pluralism beyond anything European Christendom knew<sup>3</sup>;
- The Celtic missionary movement on the fringes of Christendom<sup>4</sup>;
- The Anabaptist missionary movement that offered a powerful critique of and alternative to the Christendom system<sup>5</sup>;

Post-Christendom is a new and challenging missionary environment. We have not been this way before, so cloning will not help. But creative church planting will – especially if church planters draw on neglected but newly potent aspects of the past as they design the churches of the future. ■

#### Notes

1 The stories of a handful of these are told in Stuart Murray & Anne Wilkinson-Hayes: *Hope from the Margins* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2000).

2 See, for example, Alan Kreider: *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1995).

3 See, for example, Samuel Hugh Moffett: *A History of Christianity in Asia Volume I* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998).

4 See, for example, Finney, John: *Recovering the Past* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996).

5 For more information, contact the UK Anabaptist Network (14 Shepherds Hill, London N6 5AQ; an@menno.org.uk).