

Church planting strategies and Anabaptist values

A British perspective

Stuart Murray

One of the practices that distinguished sixteenth-century Anabaptists from the Reformers—and which infuriated the Reformers—was church planting. While the Reformers concentrated on reforming existing churches, the Anabaptists became convinced that reform was inadequate and that it was crucial to establish new churches. These new churches would be believers churches rather than territorial churches, free from state control, and committed to mission. They would be churches characterized by multivoiced worship, the exercise of church discipline, mutual aid, truth telling, evangelism, and nonviolence.

Anabaptists planted hundreds of new churches. Although these new congregations shared fundamental values and convictions about the nature of the church, they were diverse in style and ethos. Some were communitarian, supporting missionaries who traveled across Europe planting new churches; some were charismatic, stirred by visions and enjoying exuberant worship; some were more sober, devoted to biblical study. Relationships among these churches varied; some were characterized by great warmth and some by sharp disagreement. Another feature these new churches shared was that they were unauthorized, and thus subject to persecution and closure. Church planters were in particular danger of arrest, imprisonment, torture, and execution. They regarded church planting as vital, but it was costly.

Nearly five centuries later church planting is less costly, but it may again be vital for the mission of God in western culture. The practice of church planting still infuriates some church leaders, who regard it as an unhelpful dilution of resources, a hindrance to ecumenical relationships, or an opportunity for empire building. But these are minority voices in a context where most denominations have endorsed church planting as a significant aspect of mission in a post-Christendom society.

But as people who subscribe to the values expressed in the tradition that emerged from the sixteenth-century Anabaptist church planting movement, how do we assess contemporary church planting initiatives? Can we endorse their values and strategies? Could we make contributions from the Anabaptist tradition that might enhance such initiatives? At the least, if we plant churches in contemporary society, will we do this distinctively because of the values of our Anabaptist heritage?

Different forms of church planting

We can identify four different forms of church planting:

Pioneer planting is the practice of establishing churches in areas previously unreached by the gospel but now being evangelized. Wherever missionaries have advanced geographically, this kind of church planting has occurred. This type of church planting is the least controversial among Christians.

Replacement planting refers to the practice of establishing churches in areas where churches had been planted but no longer exist, because of factors such as persecution or decline. Many regions where churches had flourished in previous generations now need to be re-evangelized. This too is widely accepted.

Sectarian planting refers to the practice of establishing more churches in areas where churches already exist in order to express and embody distinctive doctrinal, spiritual, or ecclesiological convictions. Although “sectarian” can be used sociologically without the negative overtones it often carries, this form of church planting is highly controversial.

Saturation planting refers to the practice of establishing more churches in areas where churches already exist in order to enhance the ability of the churches to engage in mission within these areas. The new churches may differ in certain ways from existing churches, but these differences tend to be pragmatic rather than ideological.

Sixteenth-century Anabaptist church planting was sectarian in the sense set out above. Although Anabaptists were deeply committed to evangelism and discipling new believers, they also planted new churches—not because there were too few churches in Europe, but because Anabaptists were dissatisfied with the kinds of churches around them.

Contemporary church planting

The contemporary western church planting movement appears to be concerned primarily with replacement and saturation church planting. New churches are planted to replace those that are closing and to increase the density of churches per capita of population. This movement is unusually ecumenical and cooperative, when compared to most previous church planting initiatives. Through interdenominational congresses, citywide

We should not underestimate the impact of the church planting movement on the development of a grassroots ecumenicity that promises to achieve more practical progress towards the unity of the church than decades of denominational consultations have produced.

strategic consultations, and local networking, proponents attempt to work together. Sectarian and competitive elements, though present, are not prominent. Discussion concentrates on the number and location of new churches needed, methods of accomplishing this goal, and practical concerns about finance, personnel, leadership, and accountability. Little is said about the kind of churches that will be planted beyond general phrases such as “living, growing, Christ-centered congregations.”¹

Church planters display positive features of this ecumenical spirit. If the goal is to see as many churches planted in as short a time as

possible, cooperation is vital and discussion about the kinds of churches to be planted may hinder this. And there may be other benefits. We should not underestimate the impact of the church planting movement on the development of a grassroots ecumenicity that promises to achieve more practical progress towards the unity of the church than decades of denominational consultations have produced.

But if church planting is not just about numbers, if it raises vital questions about the kinds of churches needed for the post-Christendom and postmodern environment of the third millennium C.E., if it invites creative thinking about the priorities of the church and the structures needed to facilitate these, then perhaps the lack of discussion about the kinds of churches being planted is too high a price a pay for this cooperation. While we will not want to encourage sectarian attitudes, we may be

concerned to reflect more carefully than many church planters do on questions of ecclesiology.

But the pressure to plant many churches quickly and the concern not to put cooperation at risk by asking too many questions about the kinds of churches being planted have hindered the church planting movement from generating many such theological insights. Most new churches are similar to existing churches. There has been some experimentation, but often this relates to evangelistic methods and styles of worship rather than engaging with deeper questions about the nature and purpose of the church. Such experimentation is rarely energized by theological debate and discovery.

Anabaptist contributions to ecclesiology

Is it possible to ask questions about the kinds of churches being planted without jeopardizing the unity and cooperation that has characterized recent church planting initiatives? Might those who trace their spiritual roots to the Anabaptist sectarian church planting movement of nearly five centuries ago have some contributions to make on these issues? Is there an Anabaptist way of planting churches? Are there Anabaptist values that can help us discriminate among the many church planting strategies currently on offer?

Anabaptists might encourage church planters to remember that church planting is not just about *more* churches. It is about the renewal of the church and the development of new ways of being church that are biblically rooted and contextually appropriate.

Perhaps the fundamental Anabaptist contribution to contemporary church planting initiatives is simply to encourage deeper and more radical reflection on the kinds of churches that should be planted. Whether or not all of these churches ultimately embody values and practices that Anabaptists would endorse, they will be healthier and more likely to engage effectively in mission and ministry if they have emerged from a process of questioning about the kind of churches they should be.

There is evidence that those who most strongly opposed Anabaptist principles and practices in the sixteenth century were nevertheless stimulated by this irritating movement to think more

deeply about the nature of the church than they would otherwise have done.

In the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists reminded the Reformers that reformation was not just about theology, but included issues of ecclesiology. Today, Anabaptists might encourage church planters to remember that church planting is not just about *more* churches. It is about the renewal of the church and the development of new ways of being church that are biblically rooted and contextually appropriate. Engagement with biblical teaching and careful reflection on the cultural context within which new churches are being planted take time and may result in fewer churches being planted. But those that are planted will have more secure foundations and greater potential for sustainable witness.

By way of illustration, here are a few questions that I as a British church planting strategist suggest the Anabaptist tradition might pose for contemporary church planters:

- What understanding of the nature and purpose of the church undergirds your church planting strategy and expectations?
- What principles will you build into the new church in relation to leadership, accountability, and church discipline?
- Through whom will you expect the Holy Spirit to speak and direct the church?
- What expression of the gospel and what forms of evangelism are appropriate for encouraging radical discipleship rather than need-oriented congregations?
- What missiological principles will undergird your practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper?
- How large and how quickly can the new church grow without jeopardizing its community life? Is numerical church growth always a sign of health?
- In what ways will this new church be "good news to the poor"? How might the challenging but liberating principles of Jubilee and *koinonia* be applied?
- Will the focus of this new church be on the church or the kingdom of God? How will a church-centered mentality be averted?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of owning a

church building and of planning towards this?

- How might issues of peace and justice be built into the foundation of the new church rather than being tacked on at a later stage?

So an Anabaptist contribution to the contemporary church planting movement might be to urge deeper reflection on the nature and ethos of the churches being planted. Mennonite and Brethren church planters may be encouraged to draw more explicitly on their own roots in order to establish churches that are as radical in contemporary society as the Anabaptist churches were in the sixteenth century. Church planters working in other denominations may be invited to consider Anabaptist perspectives on church and mission as they explore new ways of being church in a changing culture.

Anabaptist contributions to church planting strategy

But the Anabaptist tradition might also offer helpful perspectives on church planting strategies, as well as on the kinds of churches being planted. There is evidence in Britain that church planting has slowed down as churches with the resources and energy to plant a “daughter” church discover that this is a major investment and not one to be repeated often. There is evidence, too, that few new churches are being planted where the church is weak, especially in inner city areas.

Are there ways of planting churches that will make an impact in areas with the greatest social needs and lowest church membership? Are there ways to start new congregations that will enable churches to sustain a church planting strategy over a long period without the drain on their personnel and finances that “mother-daughter” church planting involves?

No one method will suit every situation, but an alternative way of planting a new church is to use a small, self-funding team. Quite small churches can initiate such church planting ventures, larger churches can send out several teams, or teams can be built with members from several churches. The teams may operate financially on a “faith” basis, praying for the resources they need, or some members of the team can be released and supported financially for pioneer evangelism and pastoral ministry through

shared finances with team members who are in paid employment. Urban Expression, a church planting initiative in London, operates in this way and is rooted in Anabaptist values.²

This method is not new; it has an honorable history that includes the apostolic teams of the New Testament, the Celtic

Simple living and economic sharing... have the potential to release the resources needed for teams of church planters. Community living can release significant finance for mission.

missionary monks who re-evangelized Britain after the collapse of the Roman Empire, and the pioneering work of many missionary organizations. It is also a method deeply congruous with Anabaptist values. Unlike the Reformers, who operated with a one-person ministry model and insisted that all ministry must be parish-based, the Anabaptists recognized people with itinerant ministries and released them, individually and in teams, to evangelize and plant churches. If congregations are to be established in areas

where churches are weak but mission opportunities are great, similar flexibility and radical simplicity will be needed.

What kind of gifts and training would church planting team members need? How would teams be funded? To whom would they be accountable? These and other practical questions will need to be carefully considered if this is to be recovered as an effective strategy for planting new churches. The Anabaptist tradition offers models and practices that may be helpful, although they will need to be adapted to the contemporary situation. Among these is recognition of apostolic ministry that is different from a settled ministry. Denominations that want not only to engage in church planting but to become missionary movements would do well to look afresh at the neglected apostolic ministry that has been recovered by several church planting movements, including sixteenth-century Anabaptism. Anabaptism also emphasized simple living and economic sharing, which have the potential to release the resources needed for teams of church planters. Community living can release significant finance for mission, as our teams in London have discovered. And Anabaptism has a long tradition of accountability in relationships, which could offer guidelines for the oversight of contemporary church planting teams.

Small teams are a riskier form of church planting than methods where a large team is used and a “mother” church exercises supervision. But an advantage of this method of church planting is that the team has greater freedom and incentive to be creative. Operating in relatively unchurched areas encourages reflection on why churches have not been established or have not flourished there. Perhaps the relative rarity of this method of church planting is a further reason for the lack of ecclesiological creativity among church planters. What emerges may or may not be Anabaptist, but this method of church planting has strategic importance if church planting is going to reach beyond suburbia to make an impact on many levels of society.

If we are to plant Anabaptist churches, we must return finally to the question of definition. What are Anabaptist churches? If they were anything like the Anabaptist churches planted in the sixteenth century, they would certainly not be uniform.

What about Anabaptist churches?

A question the UK Anabaptist Network has often been asked is whether we plan to plant Anabaptist churches in Britain. We have given various responses: that the network is too loosely-knit and diverse to be an organization capable of implementing such a policy, that our main concern is to provide resources for Christians who are and remain members of existing local churches, that Anabaptism as such is not a denomination and so it is not easy to know what an

Anabaptist church would look like. Rather than planting new churches and adding another denomination to the already crowded ecumenical scene, our hope has been that Anabaptist values might contribute to the reformation and renewal of Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and many other kinds of churches.

Christians from these traditions are already drawing on Anabaptist perspectives. Some churches are developing new patterns of worship, new styles of leadership, new commitments to peace witness, new understandings of community, and new forms of mission as a result of their interaction with Anabaptist ideas and values. Why plant new churches rather than working for renewal?

This was the question Anabaptists faced in the sixteenth century. We need not agree with their answer, and our response in a different context need not be the same as theirs. They faced monolithic Catholic or Protestant state church systems, where reformation and renewal were slow and fraught with difficulties. We face a bewildering array of churches and denominations, many of which are believers churches and have already, wittingly or unwittingly, been influenced by the Anabaptist tradition. Encouraging further engagement with this tradition may be the most sensible course of action.

But is this a defensible position? Anabaptism was a church planting movement. Can we recover and advocate Anabaptist perspectives without planting new churches? The early Anabaptists were convinced that church planting was crucial if they were to build the kinds of communities they believed were envisaged by Jesus. The state churches were not prepared to face certain issues. Are there questions that most churches today will not address? What are the sticking points? How radical can the renewal of existing church structures be?

Perhaps this is not an either/or choice. It may be possible for the network to continue providing resources for existing churches while also planting new churches. In an environment where new churches are being planted by many denominations, it may be appropriate to establish new churches that embody Anabaptist values. These can both contribute to the contemporary concern for replacement and saturation church planting and provide opportunities to explore what a contemporary British Anabaptist church might look like. Creative interaction between these new churches and longer-established churches that are drawing on Anabaptist ideas could be mutually beneficial. The new churches may be free to experiment in ways that would be unrealistic in existing churches. The older churches have traditions of their own that will enrich and guide emerging churches.

But if we are to plant Anabaptist churches, we must return finally to the question of definition. What are Anabaptist churches? It is easier to say what Anabaptist churches would not be. They would not be attempts to restore some mythical sixteenth-century congregational pattern. They would not necessarily be modeled on contemporary churches that have

historic Anabaptist roots, though they would surely draw on the experience of these. And, if they were anything like the Anabaptist churches planted in the sixteenth century, they would certainly not be uniform.

All we have done thus far is to attempt to summarize the core values at the heart of the Anabaptist movement in the UK.³ Our hope is that these values, rather than any strategy or methodology, may be helpful to existing churches and church planters in Britain as they grapple with the challenges of contemporary culture. And perhaps this is the primary contribution of Anabaptism to church planting: to underscore the significance of values rather than techniques, quality rather than quantity, relationships rather than programs.

Notes

¹From the mission statement of the UK Challenge 2000 movement.

²For details, visit the web site: www.urbanexpression.org.uk.

³For these core values and more information about the UK Anabaptist Network, visit the web site: www.anabaptistnetwork.com.

About the author

Stuart Murray works as a consultant and trainer with emphasis on church planting. An associate lecturer at Spurgeon's College in London, he is also involved in the Anabaptist Network, a growing ecumenical network of people in the UK drawn together around their common discovery of Anabaptist history and values. In 2001, Herald Press published his book, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*.