

Book Review

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Church Planting: Laying Foundations, by Stuart Murray.
Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Pr., 2001.

Stuart Murray is Director of Church Planting and Evangelism at Spurgeon's College in London, England. He is involved in the Anabaptist Network, a growing ecumenical network of people in the United Kingdom drawn together in recent years around their common discovery of Anabaptist history and values. He writes out of a uniquely Anabaptist-Baptist orientation and has been involved in the planting of a church in East London, in the failed planting of another, and in recent teaching and consultative work on the topic of church planting. His perspective demonstrates the wisdom of experience sharpened by the scholarly discipline of asking deep questions.

This book explores the premises and methods of church planting and growth. Many of these models are advocated by the proponents of an evolving branch of evangelical theology given prominent expression in the Church Growth Movement (associated with the Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary). Proponents include Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner. Thus, at one level this book can be understood as a British-evangelical response to a British, dominantly Anglican cultural context; at another level, it is an ecumenical response to a North American evangelical vein of missiology.

This book is not another church planter's connect-the-dots manual. Murray's agenda is not to tell any Christian person or group exactly how to plant a church in a western context. Instead, he sets out to provide a critical survey of the topic, seeking a theological framework for the way forward. His historical-critical treatment tends to be even-handed, neither descending into mean-spirited attacks nor offering unqualified

praise of the strategies and gurus of previous how-to literature in this field.

Murray's stated intention is to write for practitioners, not theorists. He deems this undertaking necessary because the foundational and critical-reflective tasks have too often been ignored or left to expert theorists, so that people engaged in the activity of church planting have not been encouraged or taught to relate critically to their own projects.

Murray acknowledges and deals with common criticisms of the very idea of church planting. With care, he seeks to point out the strengths and limits of some of the various models that have come to the fore. He challenges the reader to recognize multiple shapes that a church plant may take, as well as multiple motivations that may (or may not) justify the enterprise in a given instance. Common planting principles and arguments for biblical foundation are assessed, and then reshaped or qualified when Murray perceives that they claim too much or are insufficient.

For Murray, the quality of a church plant is always more important than quantity. A chief measure of quality for Murray is contextual integrity; this demonstrates his commitment to

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contextualization as a key missiological lens for the twenty-first century. He thus confronts armchair blanket-strategies in postmodern fashion, arguing that every strategy should be shaped in relationship to the particular context and its discrete participants. Every local planting endeavor should aspire to be an indigenous expression of people seeking the reign of God in local forms. This approach allows new churches to emerge that are always more than replications of a parent missionary culture.

Murray is not interested in invoking the book of Acts or the life of Jesus in ahistorical fashion, as absolute grounds for church

planting in western, post-Christendom environs. Recognizing the broadly-supportive nature of the New Testament, Murray views church planting as only one missional form that faithful Christian discipleship should sometimes take in some situations, in light of

current realities. Murray is convinced that in responding to the theological foundations of *missio Dei* (mission of God), incarnation, and kingdom of God, Christians today are sometimes called to plant churches, and sometimes not! For example, sometimes perhaps existing churches should be replanted instead.

This book could have been improved by the addition of some real-life stories to provide anecdotal illustration and color, and to encourage the reader's attention when the analysis starts to feel overwhelming. Also, while rejecting the master-blueprint approach, Murray himself tends to remain too much in a strategic mindset. The book's tone assumes that all church planters regard themselves as strategists or experts in some sense of these words. It is also directed toward individuals, not groups. Murray seems unaware that some church-plant groups simply find one another and covenant in a local context, or result from a journey of group discovery or empowerment, without any master strategy or set of principles to guide the process. Refugee- and migrant-founded churches, and daughter churches that evolve out of a parent church community are other groups that are not strategically born but simply happen in God's providential freedom. Such groups who have no plan or expert leadership could benefit from this book as much as groups endowed with an excess of planning or leadership.