

# **TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL**

## **Connecting Resources with Ministry**

### **Church Development Discussion Papers**

**TITLE:** Church Planting In A Postmodern Culture

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One of the fundamental challenges as we consider church planting in a postmodern culture is how to present the gospel in this context. What is good news in a post-Christian, post-modern society? If we are interested in planting churches that will not just redistribute existing church members but engage with those who are not already Christians, we must ask questions also about our evangelistic strategy.

First, an increasing number of people in our society do not know the gospel story at all. In the Christendom era, evangelists could assume their hearers knew the story and could concentrate on calling them to commit themselves to this story. Many familiar contemporary local church-based evangelistic strategies assume this. But we cannot make such an assumption today. Evangelism as explanation must precede evangelism as exhortation. Evangelism will mean starting much further back, telling the story in fresh ways, and giving people much longer to respond to its challenge.

It will also mean that living the gospel must be accompanied by telling the gospel: incarnation and proclamation will need to go hand in hand. In a culture where the gospel story is not known, faithful living needs explanation. Traditional "living the life" as a means of communicating the faith only works in Christendom where the Christian story is already known. If we are to engage in effective church planting in a postmodern, post-Christian society, we will need to recover the heritage of proclamation.

Second, a related issue is discerning the points at which the gospel connects with people in contemporary culture. For centuries in the West, evangelists have assumed that guilt and death are the two crucial points and have offered forgiveness and the hope of eternal life as the good news. But many today do not feel guilty and many are not particularly interested in life after death.

What are the felt needs, the longings, and the aspirations of our contemporaries? Suggestions have included alienation, loneliness, a search for meaning and purpose, interest in spirituality, and resources for this life rather than hope for the next.

But postmodernity is plural society, quite unlike the unitary society of Christendom and early modernity, and there will be many different answers to this question. A vital task for mission today is to listen. The gospel is rich and has the resources to meet all human needs. But we need to listen carefully to our postmodern and post-Christian culture: what are the questions to which the gospel is to answer? And, in order to listen, we need to build relationships outside the church. Do our members have such relationships? Effective church planting strategies depend on this.

Frankly, I am distressed by the number of church planters who don't listen to their local cultures. Listening to that culture does not mean diluting the gospel, but it does require a recognition that the New Testament is full of resources to help us connect with that culture.

Third, we do need to incarnate the gospel as well as proclaiming it – communally as well as individually. So we need to ask not only about the gospel we proclaim but also what kinds of churches we need to develop in order to live out this gospel. Church planting gives us an opportunity to reflect on this. Many of our churches are in decline because they are not engaging with contemporary issues, and people ignore them and do not find what they offer to be relevant or inspiring. A disturbing number of church members are leaving our churches each year. Participation in church life is becoming counter-cultural in a society that has also been described as "post-commitment". The renewed interest in spirituality in our society usually draws people in other directions rather than to our churches.

This situation invites us to respond in two ways – through church renewal and church planting. Church planting is not about establishing more churches of the kind we already have, especially when many of these are declining and are struggling to impact a changing culture. Nor is it about developing new churches that leave the existing churches untouched. The appropriate response to the challenges we face is both to plant new churches that engage creatively with this culture and to transform our existing churches into missionary congregations that contextualize the gospel in a postmodern culture.

Planting new churches offers a number of benefits. It provides us with opportunities to experiment, to be creative, to do things differently – without threatening existing congregations. Within most denominations and established congregations, there is an aversion to risk. If we try to introduce changes too quickly into many of our churches, we risk damaging them. But if we have church members who are eager to explore new forms of mission and church life, they will become frustrated if the pace is slow and the resistance is great. So church planting provides a place of ministry for the entrepreneurs among us.

Planting a new church allows us to develop new forms of mission and explore new ways of being church without encountering the same amount of opposition or needing to carry older congregations with us. Not all of these experiments will be successful. Those that fail are opportunities for learning important lessons.

Those that succeed and grow are models that can be replicated elsewhere. But in both cases – failure or success – the lessons learned from church planting can be

shared with older churches. These may then be willing to embrace some changes themselves (once they have seen how the new churches have operated) and take steps towards becoming missionary congregations. And in the meantime our more radical and creative leaders will be able to pioneer on behalf of the whole denomination. We need to find ways of releasing them so they may engage in these pioneering efforts.

Church planting has the capacity not only to increase the number of churches in a denomination but also to be a catalyst for renewal. In a changing culture, reflection on the task and shape of the church is a constant necessity. Planting a new church is a wonderful opportunity to engage in this process of reflection. Simply to plant another church of the same kind represents a missed opportunity for ecclesiological renewal and missiological creativity. In fact, I am more interested in the renewal of the church through church planting than I am in the number of new churches planted.

Stuart Murray is editor of *Anabaptism Today*, the journal of the London-based Anabaptist Network (including Mennonites, Brethren and others).

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