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Book Review: Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age

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Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age

Reviewed by Daryl Thompson

Stetzer, Ed. Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003. 365 pp. \$27.99

This book is written with the objective of involving people in and equipping people for church planting in the twenty-first century. It seeks to provide the understanding necessary to plant biblically faithful churches in the ever changing postmodern world of North America. Therefore, it is not simply another book on church planting. Rather it is a well done presentation on church planting challenges and principles for today. It attempts to get the reader to view church planting as a missionary would when entering a new culture.

Four sources provide the basis of the book: a study of six hundred denominational church planters, a study of one hundred church plants reaching postmoderns, the author's personal experience in planting two churches, and current literature about the emerging postmodern church.

Stetzer is well qualified to write this book. He planted two churches himself and helped to revitalize numerous others. He authored two other books and co-authored four others addressing issues related to church planting and growth in a postmodern era. He earned both M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from Southern Seminary as well as a M.A.R. degree from Liberty University and a D.Min. degree from Beeson Divinity School. He has been a seminary professor and has trained pastors and church planters on five continents. He presently serves as the missiologist and senior director of the Center for Missional Research at the North American Mission Board for the Southern Baptist Convention. He is regarded as one of the foremost experts in the field of church planting in North America.

The book is an overview or introduction to the field of

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church planting in North America in the 21st century. The material is presented in six parts. The first is titled 'Basics of Church Planting' and addresses the topics of a missional mind set and the biblical basis of church planting. It begins where the subject needs to begin with a justification for church planting in North America. The author proposes that biblical church planting focuses on growing the kingdom of God and developing healthy churches with new converts (4), not on stealing members from nearby churches. New churches are most effective at doing this. Research is quoted which shows that churches under three years of age win an average of ten people to Christ per year for every one hundred church members. Churches three to fifteen years of age win an average of five people per year and churches over fifteen years of age win an average of three people per year (6). Attention is given to missional theology and thinking which results in faithfulness to the gospel and contextualization of the gospel message. A good overview is made of the commissions given by Jesus to make disciples and of the New Testament record of church planting in the books of Acts.

The second is titled 'Basics of New Church Life' and focuses on the church planter, the church structure, planter-pastor leadership and lay leaders. Qualities to look for in a church planter are presented. It is recommended that church planter candidates use an assessment tool to help in identifying these qualities. No specific church structure is recommended. Rather church plants are advised to "structure themselves for growth because the New Testament teaches that the church exists to evangelize the world, grow the body of Christ, and extend the kingdom of God" (86). Suggestions are made concerning the planter-pastor's weekly schedule. It should be an expression of ministry priorities (90). Time can be divided into four sections: visitation, sermon preparation, administration, and meetings. The importance of lay leaders is also discussed.

The third is titled 'Understanding Cultures and Models'. It covers the differences in various generations, the unique aspects of the emerging postmodern generation, the issue of being culturally relevant, and of various ministry models that are working well. A well done but very general outline is offered for the various generational groups in North America. Helpful distinctions are made between modernism and postmodernism (118, 120). The point is made that postmoderns have no universal worldview (110). Instead they may have any of a series of worldviews. The author stresses that all people need to be reached with the gospel, even postmoderns. The current pattern of church in North America is not reaching them (130). He notes

that the models which are most successful in one generation often prove less effective in reaching the next (136). A helpful list of traits of churches that are ministering successfully to post-moderns is presented (137). The unique features of African American and ethnic church planting are also highlighted.

Part four is titled 'Church Planting Nuts and Bolts'. Here Stetzer deals with choosing a focus group, doing evangelism, developing a core group, utilizing small groups, finding and handling finances, and choosing a name and a logo. He advocates that the church planter select a focus group, suggesting why and how to do it. An excellent presentation is made on evangelizing postmoderns. He emphasizes that effective approaches in reaching postmoderns will view evangelism as a process rather than an event. He offers the "Stetzer Evangelism Journey" (192) as a model of a process. The importance of a core group and ideas on how a core group can be developed are included. Small groups are presented as essential (211) to the health of any church. Also included is brief but very helpful information on fund raising and on choosing a church name and logo.

Part five is titled 'Starting Off Right'. Stetzer deals with the practical matters of finding a meeting place, getting attention, determining when to launch, and the accompanying subjects of worship, preaching, assimilation, growth, and children. Factors to consider in choosing a location are presented. The church planter wants to make the most of media opportunities to make people aware of the new church. Ideas and things to think of relating to announcing the launch of the church are included. The discussion on worship and preaching in the new church is very good. Stetzer advocates that the purpose of the worship service is "to enable believers to encounter God" and "to allow unbelievers to observe the divine-human encounter and to yearn for their own personal relationship with God" (267). Preaching should be expositional (276) that is it should convey accurately the meaning and intent of the Bible. The discussion on various assimilation and discipleship strategies is balanced and helpful. The material on maintaining the new church's direction and vision is also especially good.

Part six is the final section. Stetzer speaks to the next stage issues of congregational formation, churches planting churches, and church planting movements. The discussion on what is involved in becoming a legally and administratively recognizable unit is succinct and to the point. His passion is revealed when he talks about the church plant reaching the point where it plants another church. He is disappointed when a gifted church planter

has not “mothered” a second church after three years (320). The book concludes with a short discussion on church planting movements. The reader is left with the challenge to plant churches. Stetzer believes that there is “no greater task than evangelizing and congregationalizing North America” (336). The planting of a new church “is always a miracle” (331)!

This is an excellent book on church planting in the culture of North America today. Its strengths are fourfold. First of all it is biblical in its outlook and approach. It considers all of the issues from the perspective of what does the Bible say first. Second, it is broad in its scope. It covers all of the areas that a church planter would need to know. It does so without going into such depth that one becomes lost in the details. Third, it is up-to-date. It understands where people are at in present day North America and what must be done to reach these people. Fourth, it is practical. You will be able to use what you learn when you close the cover.

The book may be criticized for not going into depth on the various church planting topics which are addressed. However, Stetzer did not want to do so. He refers his readers to a companion Web site, www.newchurches.com, for additional information.

I was a typically naïve young pastor who stepped into a church planting situation without the wisdom offered by this book. My experience would have been different had I known these things beforehand. Unfortunately the church that I spent four years seeking to establish died several years after I left.

I would heartily recommend this book to all who are interested in church planting, to all pastors because they need to be interested in church planting, and to all church leaders because the information covered pertains to effective ministry in every church in North America today. This book is one of the foremost works on this subject available today.

Reviewer

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