

When the World Is Changing

A Roundtable Review

James, Christopher. 2018.

Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice.

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ISBN: 978-0-19-067364-2

Keifert, Patrick, and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson. 2019.

How Change Comes to Your Church: A Guidebook for Church Innovations.

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

ISBN: 978-0-8028-7624-9

Taylor, Steve. 2019.

First Expressions: Innovation and the Mission of God.

London: SCM.

ISBN: 978-0-334-05847-2

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CHANGE IS NEITHER NOVEL nor avoidable for communities of faith. Quite the opposite is true: disruption creates the conditions for innovations in Christian thought and practice. To borrow language from J. R. R. Tolkien: “The world is changing” (Tolkien 2004, 1223). Spoken by Treebeard, a figure who embodies ancient and rooted wisdom, Tolkien’s diagnosis gives voice to communities of faith, those who serve them, and those who study them. And, as Gideon Lichfield observed in the wake of Covid-19, “There is no going back to normal” (Lichfield 2020).

The three works reviewed here represent different attempts to attend to a changing church when the world is changing. Even though these works share a fundamental concern, their authors employ different methods, units of analysis, and rhetorical structures to attend to the changes that confront communities of faith. This review introduces each work, notes its distinctive contribution to the study of ecclesial change, and concludes by discussing future horizons for ecclesiological inquiry when the world is changing.

Christopher James’s *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil* attends to the theology and practice that guides church-planting in Seattle, Washington.¹ Following his description of Seattle as a “future trending city,” James contends that attending to a cohort of church plants “yields practical wisdom for the US church as it seeks to faithfully engage with its emerging contexts” (4). Four movements develop James’s argument over seven chapters: chapters 1 and 2 introduce Seattle as a future-trending, post-Christian context. Based on his review of one hundred and five churches that were founded between 2001 and 2014, surveys submitted by fifty-seven pastors, and follow-up interviews with sixteen respondents, James identifies four different “paradigmatic ecclesial combinations”

1. The three works are reviewed in alphabetical order by author.

(62): the Great Commission Team, Household of the Spirit, New Community, and Neighborhood Incarnation. Chapters 3 and 4 provides an interdisciplinary review of different attempts to model church, noting how existing typologies provide interpretive lenses to examine the theology and practice of church planting. The lived theology of James's respondents, in turn, demonstrates the need for new practical ecclesiologies in order to engage the four paradigms he identifies. James takes a prescriptive turn in chapters 5 and 6, moving from what is to what ought to be based on his sociological-theological assessment. Taking cues from missional theology, James argues the Neighborhood Incarnation model is "contextually superior" (178), meriting "increased theological and practical consideration" (139). Following Richard Osmer's four-fold paradigm for practical theological inquiry, James also proposes new practices across the four typologies he identifies. Finally, James concludes in chapter 6 by describing the form(s) of practical wisdom that can enrich Christian witness on the edge of Christendom. James's work is methodologically innovative, combining theology and social theory to enrich scholarship and practice within a shifting cultural-ecclesial environment.

Patrick Keifert and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson's *How Change Comes to Your Church* is a guidebook for leaders who envision "transformational, missional change" in the communities they serve (24). At 154 pages and small enough to fit into a handbag, this collaborative work can be read in a single sitting. The work's purposeful brevity, however, should not obscure the hard-won wisdom that informs it. Drawn from three decades of combined ministry and consulting experience, the authors write as contextual savants, incorporating insights from ministry in multiple contexts and continents. Six chapters organize their description of the conditions and process that supports transformation. Following an antanagoge rhetorical structure, chapter 1, "What Needs to Change, and How?," introduces the problem that occasions their work: ministry leaders know the challenges they face require change, but "we" don't know how to achieve the change "we" envision. Writing with a subtle precision, Keifert and

Granberg-Michaelson consistently use the third person plural, as if to suggest a more capacious “we” provides a first step to understand this problem. Accordingly, chapter 2, “Making Space,” describes the personal and organizational space transformational change requires. Much as Gary Gunderson describes conflict and creativity in “boundary zones” as dyads of transformational change (Gunderson 2004), they observe how disruption can create organizational and spiritual space for new patterns and practices to emerge. Chapter 3, “Nurturing a Climate of Discernment,” attends to the inner-organizational processes that sustain change. Following Craig Dykstra’s account of pastoral and ecclesial imagination, they conclude meaningful change requires changing how decisions are made, which is itself an act of imagination. Chapters 4 and 5, “Dwelling in the Word” and “Sharing the Journey” turn to consider two interrelated modes of discovery that can promote change within communities of faith: (1) sustained communal reading of Scripture and (2) collective discernment of God’s missional call upon a congregation. When combined, these two modes invite communities to “trust the leadership of the Holy Spirit” (98) and “take the next steps in our shared pilgrimage toward missional transformation” (120). Finally, chapter 6, “Being Transformed: Practices for Missional Change,” describes the practices that enable communities to “find a useable past for a faithful future” (128).

Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson’s work offers companionship and literary salve for transition-weary pastors and communities of faith. As the authors conclude, change is inevitable for churches; they exist in ever-changing contexts and dynamic institutional settings. Nevertheless, time, trust-filled relationships, and the word and work of God can enliven the kind of transformational, missional change that is embedded in the Christian tradition.

“Innovation is nothing new,” writes Steve Taylor in *First Expressions* (3). Taylor’s work continues a decade of ecclesiological investigations by reexamining sites of ecclesial innovation in the United Kingdom eleven years later. This longitudinal approach leads Taylor to identify first expressions, representing “initial experiments in ecclesial innovation” (4), as a patterned process that

contributes to institutional change. Four moves organize his investigation over thirteen chapters: Part I introduces the methods and contextual centers that organize Taylor's longitudinal research, examining birth narratives for first expressions. Part II considers how patterns of organizational death and renewal reflect the adaptive process each innovation pursues. This section also includes Taylor's typology of four different approaches to ecclesial innovation: commerce, ecology, indigenous, and craft. Part III examines first expressions as an organizational innovation, noting the dual need for leadership to create a suitable holding environment as well as a nimble structure to sustain mission. Finally, part IV considers how first expressions offer an ambient witness, bodying forth the word and work of God in relation to a local setting and a broader ecclesial matrix of relations. When patterned by forms of governance and practice that incorporate first expressions into an ecclesial politic, first expressions may find the conditions to form and flourish. As Taylor concludes: "If the way of Jesus is reformation, then our institutions, including their structures of governance, can be converted" (230).

As an exploration of the practical theology of ecclesial innovation, Taylor's work is equal parts a descriptive and an imaginative inquiry. Written in a lyrical style that includes several stanzas of poetry to open each part, Taylor displays the "gift of poetic imagination" (124) that ecclesial innovation requires. Further, Taylor's longitudinal design advances ecclesiological inquiry, providing a template for future studies of change within communities of faith.

When read together, James's, Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson's, and Taylor's work display three different modes of inquiry amid the changes that confront communities of faith. Each work maps a shifting organizational landscape and discerns the requisite ecclesial, pastoral, and organizational responses. For James, a shifting cultural context need not diminish the possibility of mission-driven ecclesial engagement. Rather, contextually attentive approaches can form and flourish. For Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson, change comes to every community of faith. More than a crisis that is to be skirted, however, the challenges faith leaders face

invite discernment and missional transformation. For Taylor, first expressions are at once missional response to changes in a broader ecclesial environment and places of possibility for ecclesial innovation. Representing more than deviant expressions beyond the pale of institutionalized Christianity, first expressions contribute to the vitality of a broader ecclesial communion.

For scholars and practitioners in moments of cultural-ecclesial change, these books offer three insights about future horizons for ecclesiological inquiry: (1) Cultural-ecclesial change occurs within a dynamic ecclesial ecology. This ecclesial ecology, which includes traditional, nontraditional, and para traditional approaches to organize a common life, may nourish and sustain the forms of witness, education, and leadership that are able to adapt to changing environments. (2) The study of shifting communities of faith requires an interdisciplinary framework that attends to the precise point of contact between theology, practice, and interdisciplinary perspectives. Much like trying to hang a door, this task requires getting the hinges of an argument to line up in order for a rhetorical pin to fall through. (3) In so far as the Christian tradition may guide the form of response, it demonstrates the need for a new and emerging form of wisdom, one that emerges from local communities of faith and is also borne by a broader intellectual community.

The world *is* changing. For Tolkien, the change is more than speculation, it is imbibed, sensed, and touched. “I feel [change] in the water, a feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air,” Treebeard shares (Tolkien 2004, 1223). We similarly feel change in our communities. We see it on the news. We hear it in the trembling voices of parishioners. We perceive it in shifting vocations for religious leadership. Nevertheless, even when the world is change, the ancient and rooted wisdom that marks these three works may nourish imagination for a changing church.

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