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

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CHRISTOPHER JAMES, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR of Evangelism and Missional Christianity at the University of Dubuque Theological School, embarked on what some may call an impossible endeavor, to search for the future of the church in one of the least likely places, Seattle, Washington—epicenter for the religiously unaffiliated (1). The result of his quest is perhaps even more surprising. The churches he researched (new churches) in this none-zone of the Pacific Northwest were found to be “relatively small and institutionally weak by comparison to their Christendom predecessors, but they are also a vital, diverse, and engaged cohort” (241). Furthermore, this “future trending city of Seattle” (237), and the new churches located there and examined in this study, have something to teach the established church about being the church in all its ecclesial forms.

Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice, is a missiological journey to explore the relationship between a church and its neighborhood—how a new church understands its identity within, and relationship to, its context. After making a case for his project in the Introduction, James introduces his readers to the city of Seattle in chapter 1 and proposes that it can serve as “a serviceable proxy for the urban US context in the coming years” (13). Seattle it seems, is “a harbinger of urban religion in the future” (13). James then lays out his methodology, data, and survey results in chapter 2, describing the “religious ecology” of the Seattle area through multiple demographic details, patterns, and currents (chapter 2).

In chapter 3 James makes the case for his use of modeling to analyze these new churches individually and to compare them to one another. An overview of the ways modeling typology has helped the church study and understand congregations sets the stage for chapter 4 of *Church Planting*, where James lays out four new models of practical ecclesiology that emerged from his research: Church as Great Commission Team, Church as Household of the Spirit, Church as New Community, and Church as Neighborhood Incarnation. James differentiates between each of the four models by analyzing them with the three same characteristics: mission, spirituality, and identity.

Chapter 5 explores the four models through a missional theological lens to discern “the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each in order to promote increasingly faithful ecclesial forms of Christian witness” (139). This lens is particularly important to the project as it makes the case for studying churches in context. He states (quoting missiologist David Bosch) “Thus the church-in-mission is, primarily the local church everywhere in the world” (147). James spends chapter 6 analyzing the models in light of what he calls renewing practice to provide “concrete steps that practitioners in each of the four models can take to minimize the characteristic weaknesses of their models and amplify their unique strengths” (184), with an eye for “increasing its potency for faithful and vital Christian witness” (183).

James wraps up his thorough work in the final chapter where he shares with readers his own practical wisdom for the whole church that emerged from his work “in the field” (206). These five gems—embracing one’s local identity, cultivating spiritualities, witness and formation, hospitality, and discovering vitality in a diverse ecclesial ecology—are explored and critiqued across the four models with the goal to deepen each model’s impact and presence as church. He ends each section with a summary titled “Implications for Leaders,” containing insights for both theologians and practitioners.

James does not hold back in his preference for the Neighborhood Incarnation model in the Seattle area (and by extension other comparable post-Christian contexts), while at the same time does not reject the others. He calls for a “‘mixed economy’ of ecclesial expressions” (183) to witness to the many and “multiple dimensions of the nature of the church” (183). While all models are needed for a diverse church witness, the Neighborhood Incarnation model’s priority on community, inclusivity, and hospitality is “especially well suited” (182) for the Seattle context and other urban areas like it.

Church Planting is not what one would call a light read, but well worth the time in whole or in part, with a little something for everyone. Data, process, and research specifics are clearly laid out for those interested in formal inquiry, including three appendices with research methodology, survey parameters, and interview protocols. For Seattle fans the book provides a peek into the gifts of this city as a predictor of urban life in other areas and its implications for learning from a context’s religious ecology. As a missiologist, James’s chapter on missional theological assessment was particularly engaging, exploring the nature of church itself, starting with an overview of missional theology and its implications for the four new church models. And finally, for those readers that like to jump straight to learnings and application, well, chapter 7 might just be for you.

However, the contributions this book makes to the field is not limited to the summary of James’s findings, or even its implications

for starting and forming new churches. While the results and learnings are interesting in and of themselves, the value comes from the interpretation James offers and its implications for the church at large. There is no perfect model, or even one preferred model for true witness of the Gospel. The church needs a diversity of ecclesial forms and interpretations. The hope for the future of the church does not reside in finding the one way of being church, but recognizing that all church forms have a place and responsibility to engage in ongoing theological reflection and evaluation grounded in its nature, context, purpose and gifts. “Inasmuch as Seattle offers the US church a glimpse into its future, there are grounds not only for hope but also enthusiasm,” James offers (240). In *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, Christopher James fulfils his goal to teach the established church what it means to be church, learn as church, and live as church as the church moves into the future in all its locals.