

BOOK REVIEW

Cockayne, Joshua and Foulger, Will (eds). 2024. *New Churches: A Theology*

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Reviewed by Dejan Aždajić

In many church contexts today, “new church” can trigger enthusiasm or defensiveness, evoking missionary energy while also raising fears of fragmentation, consumerism, or ecclesial amnesia. This edited collection refuses to begin from the usual battle lines. Cockayne and Foulger name three polarities that often distort the conversation: the gap between practitioners and theologians, the perceived opposition between inherited and new churches, and the rivalry sometimes assumed between planting and pioneering. Their aim is not to force consensus, but to foster a more truthful and theologically informed exchange. Their central insistence is that theology is not an add-on to starting new churches, because the Church is “theological” in its very being, called into existence by God, ordered by God’s self-revelation, and sustained by grace. The Church is not first a set of techniques later seeking doctrinal justification, but a community formed by God, whose practices, mission, and hopes already presuppose claims about God and the world.

The editors therefore address two audiences tempted to mistrust one another (practitioners who fear theology slows action and reflective critics wary of novelty and self-deception) and warn against two corresponding pathologies: activism hardened into technique and reflection drifting into detachment. The volume argues that theology must stay close to practice and remain open to theological correction, since new ecclesial ventures can teach the wider Church by stripping away inherited assumptions and making convictions visible. Its four parts and nineteen chapters repeatedly return to basic questions: What is the Church when mission is framed as *missio Dei*? Who is acting when churches are “planted”? What counts as “success” if the primary agent is the Holy Spirit? How do polity, funding, training systems, and cultural assumptions quietly harden into theological commitments? While missiology, praxis, context, and ecclesiology cannot be neatly separated, the sequence still moves from divine agency through formation and leadership into contextual

studies and toward ecclesiological synthesis, less a sustained argument than a staged conversation exposing how much ecclesiology is already embedded in what often passes for “strategy”.

Part One establishes the book’s theological claim: church planting is not the Church’s self-generated project but participation in the missional life of the Triune God. Mark Collinson refuses to treat *missio Dei* as a slogan, asking whether planters live as if mission is first God’s work, which the Church joins and which exceeds its structures. He contrasts ecclesial imaginations that either centre the Church as God’s primary instrument or locate it within a larger divine action and warns that legal frameworks and inherited polity can domesticate innovation, therefore he concludes that forms must remain reformable and responsive to the Spirit. Powley argues that method is never neutral. Planning, leadership structures, team composition, and strategy carry implied theology and cannot be spiritualized away, yet method must not become the measure of faithfulness, since the Spirit’s work cannot be assessed by numerical growth or visible impact. The remaining chapters deepen the same concern from complementary angles. Cockayne offers a trinitarian corrective, reframing planting as participation in Christ’s communion with the Father through the Spirit, so that planters are witnesses and participants, not creators, of ecclesial reality. Miller emphasizes narrative and theodramatic practices over information transfer. Butler holds together human responsibility and the Spirit’s primacy without heroic leadership or denial of labour. Honey, drawing on Aquinas, commends humility, receptivity, and openness to being helped and changed, making tangible the claim that theology forms character.

Part Two turns to praxis, training, leadership, and theological method. Ayokunle insists that planting must learn from world Christianity and indigenous theologies rather than treating Western frameworks as the default measure of good practice. Wier shows how planting and pioneering have moved into mainstream planning and that they cannot be understood apart from patterns of funding, deployment, and accountability. Selvaratnam frames planting as craft through apprenticeship, prioritising embodied communal formation over transferable competencies and managerial technique. Audu and Butt close the section by drawing on community organizing and pressing new churches to develop public practices of leadership and cultural engagement resilient under social pressure without collapsing into activism. Part Three treats contexts as sites of learning rather than templates. Bradbury commends small, simple, slow communities and challenges scale-driven accounts of success. Hodgett highlights play, creativity, and co-creation as integral to relational formation. Squirrel stresses learning through contrast rather than idealization. Wallace’s chapter on Anglo-Catholic planting foregrounds tradition and sacramental identity while probing how new initiatives relate to inherited ecclesial forms. Part Four presses the ecclesiological question of what is being planted. The contributors

warn that planting can slide into reproducing a culture, style, or aesthetic, with mission language masking deeper distortions. Williams offers a hopeful realism, alert to institutional constraints and to fresh growth without contempt for inherited patterns. Ross refuses triumphalism in distilled reflections from practice. Hall and Searle ask what we want to plant, proposing a dissenting ecclesiology that interrogates assumptions about success, reproduction, and discipleship. Moynagh revisits planting and pioneering by mapping pathways of emergence and the assumptions they carry about culture, formation, and belonging. Valentine closes with Romans 16, grounding ecclesial imagination in a Pauline vision of movement, diversity, and leadership patterns that resist uniformity.

As with many edited collections, the book's strength is also its limitation. It offers no single, tightly argued ecclesiological system, but a multi-voiced conversation whose coherence lies in shared instincts: resist polarization, avoid simplistic contrasts between old and new, name tensions between planting and pioneering without turning them into warfare, and ground mission in God's agency, the Spirit's work and the formation of communities in worship, discipleship, and ethical life. It repeatedly challenges the temptation to treat church planting as a mechanism for solving institutional decline, reframing it instead as a theological and pastoral vocation requiring patience, humility, and discernment as much as innovation. The internal divisions sometimes overlap, and some readers may wish for a stronger synthesizing conclusion that states more explicitly what a theology of new churches must include. Even so, the book is a significant and timely contribution. It offers neither quick solutions nor self-congratulation for the planting movement. Instead, it presses searching questions about God's agency, the Church's identity, and the spiritual posture required to begin new communities without turning them into monuments to human will. At its best, it shows that theology is not detached but essential, if new churches are to be not merely new but genuinely ecclesial, gospel-shaped, and sustained by the life of the Triune God.

About the Reviewer

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