

Christopher B. James. *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 368 pages. \$34.95.

Forecasts of church decline coupled with the rise of the “nones” and the “spiritual, but not religious” are commonplace as concerned pastors, leaders, and parishioners lament the future of U.S. Christianity. However, practical theologian Christopher B. James offers a glimpse of ecclesial hope and rebirth in the midst of such funereal predictions. A revised and expanded version of his doctoral dissertation at Boston University, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice* is a mixed-method, qualitative and practical ecclesiological analysis of Seattle new church-starts founded since January 1, 2001 and active through 2014 (243). Based on compelling research that the city of Seattle functions as a religio-cultural trend-setter for the rest of the United States, James argues that the ecclesiological insights and practices of Seattle new church-starts helpfully predict what will spring forth across the United States. As such, he finds it critical to look within these communities of faith to mine them for their ecclesiological contributions—practical and theological—as well as to offer constructive proposals going forward.

The largest component of the data gathered is the 44-question “New Seattle Churches Survey,” of which he received 57 completed surveys out of the 105 churches identified (246). Found in appendix B, it addresses everything from women in ministry to self-reported church descriptions to estimated average sermon length. James supplemented the survey data with pastoral interviews, participant-observer field notes, church newsletters, and social media posts. Sociologists of religion and others who work at the nexus of religious studies, theology, and qualitative methods will be particularly interested in all of the appendices, which outline his research methodology, the survey instrument, and the pastoral interview questions.

The structure of James’ book is clear, compelling, and evinces a familiarity to those engaged with the work of Richard Osmer. Chapters 1 and 2 establish the descriptive dimension of the project. The first chapter situates Seattle as a trend-setting city in the context of an increasingly secular United States. The second chapter describes the churches involved in the study, including key “currents” and “patterns” discovered by the survey instrument. For example, nearly half of the churches indicate that Holy Communion is part of their worship “very often or always,” even though only 4 percent of respondents are in “classically sacramental traditions” (42). Chapter 3 functions as a literature review of various ecclesiological typologies, which segues smoothly into the fourth chapter where James develops his own “practical ecclesiologies” based on the qualitative research—the interpretive task. The strength of this book is that rather than working from established ecclesiological models in which to situate his data, James lets the data serve a leading role. His four models are as follows: Church as Great Commission Team, Church as Household of the Spirit, Church as New Community, and Church as Neighborhood Incarnation. James discusses understandings of identity, mission, and spirituality within each of these models.

Moving from interpretation to evaluation, in his fifth chapter James asks “what should be happening.” He takes each of the four models and analyzes them through the lens of missional theology with Lesslie Newbigin serving as his primary interlocuter. James argues for using a missiological lens because of its popularity for new church developers. While the “Neighborhood Incarnation” model was deemed the most missional of the four, James contends that each have their strengths and weaknesses. Chapter 6 moves into the constructive and pragmatic dimension of the project, in which James focuses on renewed *practice* rather than

doctrine. The chapter's concrete proposals are especially helpful for pastoral practitioners. For example, James elucidates wisdom given to "Household of the Spirit" churches. According to James, many of these churches are characterized by personal intimacy with God, and he proposes that worship leaders explore ways of "heightening worshipers' consciousness of fellow worshipers" (199). The final chapter offers ecclesiological metaphors that need further development, with suggested trajectories for both theologians and practitioners.

With the broad scope of the project and its methodological innovation, scholars of multiple disciplines will find this work helpful, including, but not limited to practical theology, sociology of religion, homiletics, liturgical studies, and missiology. Practitioners will likely be drawn toward the latter chapters in which James makes his practical constructive proposals. Overall, this book is well-conceived and executed. It deserves careful attention for classrooms, churches, and theological libraries.

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