

Church Planting: A Historical Look by Mike Ruhl

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History was not popular in high school. It felt like rummaging through “old things” in the attic that were no longer relevant. Courses in American History and World History were taken out of duty rather than passionate interest. At the seminary, Church History, though important, was seldom the topic of late-night discussions. Yet historical perspective is a powerful force which impacts and informs both present and future.

Church planting has been happening for nearly twenty centuries. During this time, the rate of planting new churches has seen peaks and valleys; different kinds of churches have been planted; and the motivations, strategies and methodologies have swung like a missional pendulum. Church history provides a pertinent and insightful continuation of the exciting church planting story in the New Testament.

Church planting is one component in a broader mission agenda: the arrival and expansion of the Kingdom of God (the reign and rule of Jesus Christ in the hearts and lives of people) and the community of Word and Sacrament which results. Because church planting is descriptive (not prescriptive) of a much broader mission agenda, it includes evangelism, discipleship, social action, cultural engagement, community transformation, and more.

The work of church planting advocates is made more difficult by the fact that most saints in local congregations are unfamiliar with church planting and feel it is a new channel for kingdom expansion. They have no experience with it, nor even a faint recollection of how even their own congregation came into being. Church planting is not recognized as a practice as normal as prayer, preaching, youth ministry, and evangelism. Even the term “church planting” was not familiar to many as little as ten years ago!

It is always a risk to categorize, since over-simplification is usually not far behind. Yet there is value in gleaning from church history and sociology four main kinds of church planting.

1. **Pioneer Church Planting**, establishing churches in areas previously unreached by the gospel but now being evangelized and discipled, is undertaken wherever missionaries advance geographically.

2. **Replacement Church Planting**, establishing new churches in areas where churches had previously been planted but no longer exist due to persecution, change or decline, occurs wherever people groups are being re-evangelized.

3. **Ecclesiological Church Planting** is establishing more churches in areas where churches already exist, to express and embody distinctive doctrinal or ecclesiological convictions. Many Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostal churches were not planted in pioneer territory, nor to replace churches that had closed, but to provide opportunities to express deeply held doctrinal and ecclesiological convictions.

4. **Saturation Church Planting** is the practice of establishing more churches in areas where

churches already exist, to enhance the ability of these churches to engage in mission in these areas. The purpose is not to impact new areas, nor to recover lost ground, nor even to develop new kinds of churches, but simply to plant more churches in already churching areas. ■

For a deeper exploration of these thoughts, see *Church Planting—Laying Foundations* by Stuart Murray; Herald Press, 2001.