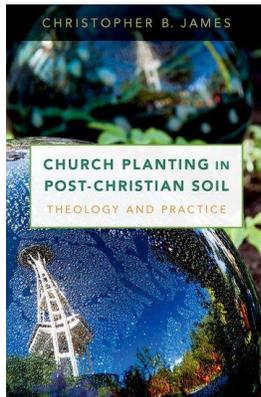


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**Christopher B James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.**

Christopher B James has planned and served a rich banquet of nourishing wisdom about what it takes to be a faithful church in our secularizing society. I use the banquet imagery intentionally. A lot of stuff out there about the church today is more of a smorgasbord of platitudes and possibilities that arise from what the authors wish might be, rather than what is unfolding in actual situations. That may seem harsh, but make your own assessments after reading James. And you really should read him.

In planning the menu for this banquet, James chose a particular range of items to serve in a sequence designed to nourish our imaginations – new church plants in Seattle, WA. He studied deeply the nutritional values of 57 new churches founded between 2001 and 2014 in a city that James considers the frontier of secularization in the United States. Four secularizing trends are particularly advanced in the ‘None’ zone that is Seattle. By ‘None,’ James is referring to the fact that more people in Seattle claim to have no religion than anywhere else in the US. The four trends are urbanization, technological culture, progressive social values, and a post-Christian society. For many, these trends are producing a social fabric plagued by isolation, dehumanization, relativism, and pluralism. The new church plants James has studied in depth are responding in various ways to these emerging social realities, offering their various takes on the Gospel as alternative ways of seeing and being in the world.

After a clear and concise presentation of a broad range of the best thinking on Gospel, church, and mission, he developed his own robust taxonomy for distinguishing these new churches into four types – Great Commission Teams, Household of the Spirit, New Community, and Neighbourhood Incarnation. GCTs typically have deep Evangelical roots and seek to connect for conversion. HSs usually have Charismatic or Pentecostal roots and seek to draw their participants into the enthusiasm of the Spirit at work in the world. NCs tend to have mainline denominational roots and have a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity and mystery in their framing of the Christian faith as they encounter their neighbours. NIs draw on an intriguing mix of all these approaches but keep their focus on being a blessing in their immediate geographic neighbourhoods. As a practical ecclesologist, James finds the NIs most promising as a model of participating in God’s mission in and for the world. As an astute /observer scholar, he makes clear that none of the churches surveyed fit into an ideal type and all show signs of greater or lesser mixing of the types as the Spirit leads them into their missions.

As is usually the case with these book notes, that very brief summary comes nowhere near doing justice to James’ astute and provocative dive into these church planting dynamics. You really have to read the book to get the full nourishment the banquet.

At first glance, this book has little to do with Brentwood. We're not a church plant. We've been going since the mid-1950s. But we're in midst of a 'renovation' in our worship, learning, fellowship, and service, along with the facilities and finances that serve to nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ. We have many lessons to learn from the new church plants James has analyzed.

Here are some of the differences. We're not meeting in community centres, living rooms, coffee shops, or movie theatres. We've got facilities that are paid for and are reasonable to maintain. We're not made up primarily of millennials keen to find a different way of being church or exploring what church might mean. We're a multi-generational, multi-ethnic (17 different countries of origin) community of followers of Jesus, the Creator's Christ, learning what it means to be missional in a rapidly-expanding urban neighbourhood in Canada's most secular urban region. 40,000 new neighbours will move to within a 30-minute walk of us in the next 20 years! We don't live in Seattle. We mission in Greater Vancouver. Close as we are geographically, the religious culture and topography is still very different in Canada. We practice compassion, seek prosperity, and design safety differently up here. That said, the globalizing influence of social media is eroding some of the differences. Of particular concern to us are the ways in which the dogmatic and coercive groups among American Evangelicals are becoming the public face of Christianity to so many, especially the "Nones." That's the misrepresentation of Jesus they are rejecting, and rightly so.

Our current focus on missional friends at Brentwood is different as well. Most of them don't live in the neighbourhood. They are the jazz musicians and fans in the Greater Vancouver region. They form a distinct and closely connected community. They generously accept our invitation to worship with us, to use our space for practicing and performing, to engage in conversations in a variety of settings about how they see the transcendent at work in their music, and to listen to us as we catch glimpses of the reconciling grace of Jesus Christ at work our musicking together.

As mentioned above, there is a lot in this book from which we can learn as we seek to gain a hearing for the grace of Jesus Christ among the competing voices claiming to know the purpose of life in this city whose welfare we are seeking to serve. I was particularly struck by the centrality James ascribes to hospitality in any form of missional faithfulness. That is a gift Brentwood has long enjoyed and that we are cultivating in diligence and prayer. This quote from James' last chapter, where he draws out the practical implications of his rich banquet of research and reflections, captures something of what the Spirit is nourishing in and through Brentwood:

*Much like a cornerstone squares a building, hospitality brings the ecclesial dimensions of mission, spirituality, and identity into proper alignment. Hospitality disciplines mission to take shape as a simultaneous proactive and noncoercive activity. The spirituality that naturally accompanies a robust practice of hospitality is one that seeks God in the midst the other and the ordinary. The forms of ecclesial identity born of hospitable practice locate the church in its proper solidarity with the world and its diversity without collapsing the church into the world. Far from being a strategic mission gimmick, hospitality orients missional ecclesio-praxis. (227)*

If someone were to ask me to recommend the books that provided the deepest and broadest understanding of the possibilities for and barriers to faithful church plantings and renovations, this one, along with Stefan Paas' *Church Planting in the Secular West* (noted in Feb 2018), are the two I'd encourage them to dig into first and use as a test for all the rest.