

**Feb, 2018**

**Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016.**

I'm a skeptic when it comes to much of the literature on church planting, fresh expressions, new worshiping communities, the new monasticism, and the like. Stefan Paas has helped me understand why and overcome some of that skepticism.

The motivation for all of these alternatives to the 'old' churches is thoroughly examined. Paas tells a richly nuanced story that covers most of the church's history, from New Testament times to the present. Let me give you fair warning. This is not an easy read. It is seriously academic in its style – thoroughly researched, extensively footnoted, and carefully argued. But it is a rewarding and enlightening read.

As for efforts over the last 50 years to plant new churches, Paas is concerned that many of these efforts are distorted in their understanding of the Gospel and deluded in their reliance on planning and control. The distortion comes from their reliance on Anglo-Saxon evangelicalism for their theological foundations, especially as formulated in the United States. This version of the Gospel emphasizes individual conversion, a personal experience of faith, a high view of the Bible, and a desire for the gospel to have an impact on society. It's theology of the church and its central role in mission and evangelism is missing or weak. It's simply a gathering/association of like-minded saved individuals. This ignores or rejects a long tradition of seeing the church as the corporate body of Christ. This way of thinking sees those gathering as more serious and dedicated Christians, often separating from churches that they think are too compromised with the culture and complacent in mission.

The delusion comes from their reliance on modern models of social and organizational control that promise numerical growth and success. To read these approaches into the records of the early church is simply wrong. In addition, many of their claims of success have no empirical evidence to back them up. They are based on wishful thinking rather than careful research.

Paas thinks the church has two primary tasks – witnessing and discipling. We witness to the Good News that redemption has happened in and through the person and mission of Jesus Christ. In the strength of this reality, the church works with people to foster good discipleship so that participants in Christ's mission can truly embody their claims about the life made possible in and through him. This community is the primary locus for the continuing presence of the Holy Trinity in the world, continuing their mission of sowing seeds of the Commonwealth of God in all the different contexts it encounters.

The church in secularizing Europe, the context from which Paas is writing, faces unprecedented indifference and resistance. It's worth quoting Paas on this reality:

*Christianity is no longer the moral and spiritual conscience of European society; increasingly, it has become their repressed memory. Objections against Christianity are carried out by strong institutions, in particular the mass media and the education system. It is generally thought that central Christian doctrines have become implausible in an age of science. Traditional religion is often considered as an option for immature, dependent people, who are afraid to face life as it*

*is. Moreover, Europeans also object to traditional Christian ethics, especially in the area of sexuality. (189)*

Paas makes special mention of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's helpful analyses of this secularizing process.

To face this reality with confidence and humility, Pass argues, the church needs to develop experimental, innovative ways of witnessing to the Gospel and forming participants in the Commonwealth of God. It needs to leave the comfortable confines of its traditional frames and forms of witnessing and discipling and engage with a world the church has never encountered before. This new shape of mission is not susceptible to detailed planning with a symphony score for guaranteed growth. Rather, it's about inviting the church to become entrepreneurial in participating the redemptive work that God is doing in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit to heal God's creation and in imagining how they can make a more conscious and constructive contribution to that mission.

A decade ago, Brentwood resisted attempts to close it down and pass its resources on to a new church plant. Over the past 10 years, it has adapted to its context with an innovative vision of engaging in dialogue with the spiritualities of jazz musicians. Many of them have chosen to stay free of traditional and institutionalized religion, connecting instead with a fascinating mix of spiritualities. In our conversations with them, we have found much of what Pass describes in his summary of the European context. We witness to how Jesus Christ is active in their musicking and invite them to join us in efforts to expand the justice, kindness, and humility that marks the Commonwealth of God. What has emerged, in the Spirit's wisdom, is a broadening network of people who are being touched by a coherent reconciling orthodoxy (cf our summary at <http://brentwoodpc.ca/brentwooddeclaration>) with an invitation to find meaning and significance in the community of disciples of Jesus Christ that is the church.