

## **21<sup>st</sup>-Century Church Planting in Western Europe: an Anabaptist perspective**

*Stuart Murray Williams founded Urban Expression in 1997, an Anabaptist-oriented mission agency involved in church planting, community organising, social enterprises and other initiatives in poor urban communities*

### **Anabaptist church planting**

One of the practices which distinguished sixteenth-century Anabaptists from the Protestant Reformers – and which infuriated the Reformers – was church planting. While the Reformers concentrated on reforming existing churches, converting Catholic parishes into Protestant parishes, in which (according to their convictions) the gospel was properly preached and the sacraments properly administered, the Anabaptists became convinced that such reform was inadequate and that it was crucial to establish new churches. These new churches would be free from state control, entered on the basis of believers' baptism, communities in which there was a commitment to discipleship and openness to church discipline, multi-voiced congregations that were not dominated by priests or pastors, communities that shared their resources freely and renounced all forms of violence.

There were a couple of abortive early attempts to convert parish churches into Anabaptist congregations, under the leadership of Balthasar Hubmaier, first in Waldshut and then in Nicosburg. But these did not survive for long and thereafter Anabaptists abandoned this approach. Instead, they planted hundreds of new churches in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands. Most were relatively small, and opposition meant that they mostly met in secret and only occasionally had freedom to meet more openly or in larger numbers. They were not uniform and correspondence between these churches reveals significantly different practices and convictions. Relationships between these churches varied from great warmth to sharp disagreement and mutual excommunication. Some were charismatic, stirred by visions, and enjoying exuberant worship. Some were more sober, devoted to Bible reading, prayer, and ethical reflection. Those who fled to Moravia to escape persecution formed communities that shared a common purse (perhaps initially as a counsel of necessity on the journey there but then as a practice they believed was biblically mandated). They supported missionaries who travelled all over Europe planting new churches. However, there were core convictions and practices in these congregations that differentiated them from the state churches and justified the authorities' conclusion that this was a coherent – and very troubling – movement.

Church planting in the sixteenth century was costly. The expectation of suffering ran through the movement and was presented in the writings of their leaders as a sign that they were the true church (just as the persecuting practices of the Catholics and Protestants indicated that they were not). Those who planted and led these churches were especially vulnerable, subject to arrest, imprisonment, loss of property, torture, and execution. But the missionary zeal of the first-generation Anabaptists, and their conviction that restitution, rather than reformation, was needed if the church was to recapture authentic New Testament ecclesiology, ensured that this practice was at the heart of the movement for many years.

In common with many other renewal movements, the passion of the first generation gradually gave way to efforts to consolidate the movement. The missionary zeal abated (although there were exceptions) and their attention was increasingly focused on pastoral care, doctrinal and

ecclesial conformity, and survival in a hostile environment. The apostolic and evangelistic leadership of the early years was succeeded by the ministry of bishops, pastors, and teachers. Flight to escape persecution, underground existence to avoid notice, and agreements with the authorities to refrain from evangelising in return for toleration all sapped the strength of the movement and precluded further church planting in the regions in which Anabaptism first emerged.

As Anabaptist communities moved further east when their places of refuge became unsafe, and eventually to North America to find somewhere to practise their faith without fear of persecution, churches were planted to serve these communities. Few of these, however, were missional in intent or effective in reaching out to others. Only in more recent decades has the practice of church planting become more intentional and more missional, initially elsewhere in the world, and then in North America and Europe as it became clear that church planting and evangelism was necessary in these regions as the realities of post-Christendom became apparent. Anabaptist mission agencies have not always engaged in church planting, choosing to focus on other aspects of mission and wary of cultural imposition. But enough church planting has taken place to ensure that the Anabaptist community is now global with much of its strength in areas with little or no historic Anabaptist presence.

### **Church planting today**

Nearly five centuries on from the birth of the Anabaptist movement, church planting in Western Europe is much less costly than it was in the sixteenth century, although this practice is still controversial and still infuriates some denominational leaders, who regard it as an unhelpful dilution of limited resources, a hindrance to ecumenical relationships, or an opportunity for empire building and sectarianism. But these are now minority voices in a context where most denominations have endorsed church planting as a significant aspect of mission in post-Christendom societies.

Recognising that more churches and different kinds of churches are needed in contemporary culture, across Western Europe numerous church planting strategies are being implemented at national, regional and local levels. Training courses have been developed; coaching and mentoring processes have been established; significant funding has been provided; there is an expanding literature; the distinctive ministry of pioneers, evangelists, and church planters has been validated alongside that of pastors and teachers; and church planting is recognised as a component in the missional vocation of the church in western societies.<sup>1</sup> All over Western Europe new churches are being planted. Not all thrive or even survive – church planting is risky – and not enough are yet being planted to offset church closures in most places, but the practice of church planting is now well established and widely endorsed.

These developments are indications that in Western Europe the Christendom era is gradually giving way to post-Christendom. The Christendom era was dominated by pastors and teachers, with no apparent need for evangelists or church planters. It was assumed that there were enough churches and that the parish system ensured access for all. The relationship between gospel and culture had been negotiated centuries before and ecclesial practices were

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<sup>1</sup> Recent literature on church planting includes Stuart Murray: *Planting Churches: A Framework for Practitioners* (Paternoster, 2008); Stefan Paas: *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience* (Eerdmans, 2016); Michael Moynagh: *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (SCM Press, 2012); and Christopher James: *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

subject to only minor variations. No wonder the temerity of the early Anabaptists, who rejected the Christendom synthesis as flawed and deeply damaging to the integrity of the Christian faith, questioned the relationship between gospel and culture, and planted new churches that ignored parish boundaries, was so unwelcome to the upholders of the sacral society that was Christendom. And no wonder that church planting is now firmly back on the agenda. Church planting comes into its own when questions of gospel and culture are back on the table, in times of cultural transition, and when the church rediscovers its missional vocation.

In recent years there has also been increasing creativity as thousands of churches have been planted with features that distinguish them from older churches in the hope of engaging with a wider range of people in a complex and changing culture. The terms ‘emerging church’, ‘new ways of being church’, and ‘fresh expressions of church’ have highlighted these developments. Although the impact and sustainability of these experimental initiatives has been mixed, they are important reminders that church planting is not about simply replicating existing forms of church but about ecclesial and missional creativity in an evolving and diverse culture. Church planting offers opportunities for fresh reflection on the relationship between the gospel and the surrounding culture (or subcultures) and ongoing ecclesial renewal for the sake of missional effectiveness. As one of the early handbooks of church planting in Britain insisted: ‘Creative church planting that discovers new ways of being the Body of Christ in a changing world will help keep the sinews of our denominations supple and more able to respond sensitively and vigorously to the as yet unforeseen challenges of tomorrow’s world...New churches, and the fresh theological insights that they generate, counter the tendency to ecclesiological ossification that turns structures into strictures.’<sup>2</sup>

Although church planters draw on various traditions for resources, a surprising number have found inspiration and guidance in the Anabaptist tradition, despite the contextual differences between the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries. This is especially the case in relation to the more creative and experimental forms of church planting. Few are explicitly Anabaptist or choose to use this terminology, but many welcome insights from the Anabaptist tradition once they encounter these. Mainstream denominations have also welcomed some Anabaptist perspectives on these developments, as evidenced by comments identified as coming from an Anabaptist source in the influential Anglican *Mission-Shaped Church* report and the commissioning of an explicitly Anabaptist critique of the emerging church scene by the ecumenical body, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary church planting in Western Europe is unusually ecumenical and co-operative (when compared to most previous church planting initiatives). Through congresses, citywide consultations, and local networking, attempts are made to work together. Though sectarian and competitive elements are present, these are not prominent. Discussion concentrates on the number and location of new churches needed, methods of accomplishing this goal, and practical concerns about finance, personnel, leadership, and accountability. But little is said about the kinds of churches that will be planted beyond generic phrases such as ‘living, growing, Christ-centred congregations.’

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart Christine & Martin Robinson: *Planting Tomorrow’s Churches Today* (Oxford: Monarch, 1992), p54.

<sup>3</sup> *Mission-shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004) and Stuart Murray: *Changing Mission: learning from the newer churches* (London: CTBI, 2006). An early resource on church planting written from an explicitly Anabaptist perspective was David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman: *Creating Communities of the Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988).

There are very positive features of this ecumenical spirit among church planters. If the goal is to see as many churches planted in as short a time as possible, co-operation is essential and detailed discussion about the kinds of churches to be planted may hinder this. And there may be other benefits. We should not underestimate the impact of the church planting movement on the development of a grass-roots ecumenicity that promises to achieve more practical progress towards the unity of the church than decades of denominational consultations.

But, if church planting is not just about numbers, if it raises vital questions about the kinds of churches needed for the post-Christendom and post-modern cultures of the third millennium, if it invites creative thinking about the priorities of the church and the structures needed to facilitate these, then perhaps the lack of discussion about the kinds of churches being planted is too high a price to pay for this co-operation. The pressure to plant many churches quickly, and the concern not to risk co-operation by asking too many questions about the kinds of churches being planted, have hindered the church planting movement from generating many theological insights. Most new churches are still very similar to existing churches. There has been some creativity, but often this is limited to evangelistic methods and styles of worship, rather than engaging with deeper questions about the nature and purpose of the church. Such experimentation is rarely energised by theological debate and discovery.

Another very significant feature of contemporary church planting in many parts of Western Europe is the emergence of thousands of mono-ethnic churches, especially those with roots in Africa. Many of these have grown rapidly but, despite their deep desire to impact people beyond their own diaspora communities, most have remained mono-ethnic. Many have also imported into Europe assumptions and practices western missionaries exported in earlier generations. These legacies of Christendom and colonialism are unhelpful in post-Christendom contexts. The presence and witness of these churches in a secular and post-secular Europe is potentially transformative if European churches can find ways of partnering with these churches and learning from each other. Might the trenchant Anabaptist critique of Christendom, combined with post-colonial perspectives, be a helpful resource in such conversations?

### **Contemporary Anabaptist perspectives on church planting**

Is it possible to ask questions about the kinds of churches being planted without jeopardising the unity and co-operation that has characterised recent church planting initiatives? Might those who trace their spiritual roots to the Anabaptist church planting movement of nearly five centuries ago have some contributions to make on these issues? Is there an Anabaptist way of planting churches? Are there Anabaptist values that can help us discriminate among the many church planting strategies currently on offer?

Church planting sits at the intersection of missiology and ecclesiology, and it may be that it is on ecclesial issues that the Anabaptist tradition can make some contributions to contemporary church planting. In the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists insisted that reformation was not just about theology, but included issues of ecclesiology. Today, Anabaptists might encourage church planters in all denominations to remember that church planting is not just about *more* churches. It is about the renewal of the church and the development of expressions of church that are biblically rooted and contextually appropriate. Careful and ongoing reflection on the cultural contexts within which new churches are being planted and deep engagement with biblical teaching takes time and may result in fewer churches being planted. But those that are planted will have more secure foundations and greater potential for sustainable witness.

By way of illustration, here are a few questions that I as a British church planting strategist suggest the Anabaptist tradition might pose for contemporary church planters:

- What understanding of the nature and purpose of the church undergirds our church planting strategy and expectations? If church planting is not an end in itself, what are these new churches for and how will that shape them? Will the focus of this new church be on the church or on the kingdom of God? How will a church-centred mentality be averted?
- What principles and practices will we build into the new church in relation to leadership, accountability, mutual support, and church discipline? It was on these issues that the early Anabaptists parted company with their contemporaries, convinced that these were as vital to healthy churches as proper preaching and administration of the sacraments. How will the new church handle conflict and develop processes for reconciliation?
- How will the new church balance the missional imperative of being culturally attuned within its context with the need also to be counter-cultural, challenging norms and expectations?
- What practices will we introduce to build and nurture community? Will we move beyond institutional notions of ‘membership’ and insipid expressions of ‘fellowship’ to genuine friendships? What role will hospitality and the sharing of meals play in this?
- Through whom will we expect the Holy Spirit to speak and direct the church? Many new churches are unhelpfully dependent on the church planter. Early Anabaptists rejected this kind of mono-voiced leadership and advocated the formation of communities in which it was expected that God might speak through any and all of the members.
- With what hermeneutic will the church engage with the Scriptures? Is this an opportunity to embrace a thoroughly Christocentric approach in which the life and teachings of Jesus are prioritised and taken seriously?
- What expression of the gospel and what forms of evangelism are appropriate if we want to encourage radical discipleship rather than need-orientated congregations? Traditional and guilt-based gospel presentations too often fail to challenge or empower those who respond to live under the lordship of Christ and take seriously the teachings of Jesus. If the death and resurrection of Jesus is disconnected from his life and teaching, discipleship can also be disconnected from conversion experiences. Anabaptists have persistently challenged this ‘cheap grace’ approach.
- What missional and ecclesial principles will undergird our practice of baptism and the Lord’s Supper? In order not to threaten ecumenical cooperation, differences of opinion on these matters are often minimised or excluded from consideration. And it may be true that infant baptism today does not have the same significance as it had in the sixteenth century. But church planting offers opportunities to recover what Anabaptists regard as the biblical practice of baptising believers. It may also provoke fresh thinking on the sharing of bread and wine – who can oversee this, who can participate, how does this strengthen the bonds between members as well as being a celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and what are the advantages of restoring this to the context of a real meal?
- How large and how quickly can the new church grow without jeopardising its community life? Is numerical church growth always a sign of health? It is arguable that some aspects of New Testament ecclesiology are difficult, or even impossible, to practise once a church exceeds a certain number. Others respond that large churches can counter this by dividing into many smaller communities for some purposes. In situations of relatively rapid growth, this may be an issue that church planters need to consider at an early stage.

- Are there ways of planting churches that will make an impact in areas with the greatest social needs and lowest church membership? Much church planting in recent years has been in more affluent areas, exacerbating the existing imbalance between church life in these and poorer areas. Might the Anabaptist vision, rooted in a movement that flourished mainly among the poor and powerless, inspire church planters to prioritise communities with greater social challenges, even if this means new churches will grow less quickly and be less likely to be financially sustainable? For the past three decades I have been involved in a mission agency, *Urban Expression*, that is rooted in Anabaptist values and prioritises poor urban communities.<sup>4</sup>
- In what ways will a new church be ‘good news to the poor’? How might the challenging but liberating biblical principles of Jubilee and *koinonia* be applied? Simply planting churches in poorer communities will not be helpful unless those involved recognise that the gospel has consequences in the areas of economics and social justice.
- How might issues of peace and justice be built into the foundation of a new church rather than being tacked on at a later stage? Those aspects of the gospel emphasised in the early days of a new church tend to be those regarded as most important in the coming years. It is possible to challenge these priorities later, of course, but this can be contentious and may not always be successful. The early Anabaptists self-identified as a people of peace who had renounced violence in all its forms. Might contemporary church planters do the same? In a conflicted and violent world, might ‘peace churches’ be really good news?

So an Anabaptist contribution to the contemporary church planting movement in Western Europe might be to urge deeper reflection on the nature and ethos of the churches being planted. In Britain, after many years of choosing not to plant explicitly Anabaptist churches, in 2020 we decided to change this policy. *The Incarnate Network* is a project of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network, encouraging and supporting pioneers to plant churches with Anabaptist convictions and practices.<sup>5</sup> As a resource, we have produced a book, *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Churches*.<sup>6</sup> This is a very small and young initiative but represents our conviction that Anabaptist missiology and ecclesiology has a contribution to make to post-Christendom church life.

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.urbanexpression.org.uk](http://www.urbanexpression.org.uk).

<sup>5</sup> <https://amnetwork.uk/incarnate/>.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Murray: *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 2024).