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Book Review: Planting Reproducing Churches by Elmer L. Towns

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BOOK REVIEW

Planting Reproducing Churches.

By Towns, Elmer L.

Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2018.

261pp.

US\$16.99.

Reviewed by David Thiessen who serves as the executive pastor at Mountain View Church in Fresno, California. He is a doctor of ministry student in church growth at the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University.

Elmer Towns' thesis for the book is: "God still uses the average man, with limited resources, against insurmountable obstacles, in unlikely circumstances, to build a church for the glory of God" (105).

The book is divided into three sections. Part One, "The Foundation of Reproducing Churches," explores the foundations for church planting in Jesus' commitment to build His church and the five expressions of the Great Commission. Various methods of successful church planting from around the world are explored including planting independent churches, agency church planting, and media (online) church planting. Chapter three in particular is devoted to the miraculous growth of Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea and its church planting efforts locally and globally. Chapter four focuses on the Great Commission, examining its five expressions in the Gospels and Acts in some detail and establishing it as the biblical mandate that

must drive the establishment of new churches. This section concludes with general principles for church planting and the characteristics of church planters—those with evangelistic gifts, a clear call, and leadership capacity.

Part Two focuses on various types of church planting. Particular attention is given to the more recent trend of multisite church planting. Seacoast Church in South Carolina is identified as “the first example of a multisite church in the United States” (119), and its approach is surveyed. House church planting is also evaluated and the well-known success of this model in China is highlighted. Surprisingly, the third ‘model’ of church planting to be examined is the church split. All three types of church planting models are evaluated with lists of advantages and disadvantages.

Part Three, “Tools for Successful Church Planting,” begins with the following definition of a church as “an assembly of professing followers of Jesus Christ; He lives in them, and they minister under the discipline of the Word of God. A church is organized to carry out the Great Commission by evangelism, teaching fellowship, worship, administering the ordinances, and reflecting the spiritual gift of ministry” (179). This definition is then unpacked in detail. The final chapter offers 46 practical steps for planting a church with a particular emphasis on choosing the right community to plant in, handling finances, and finding property for a permanent facility.

In terms of strengths, the author’s discussion of the Great Commission in its five biblical expressions (John 20:19-21; Mark 16:14-16; Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:46-50; Acts 1:6-9) is a highlight of this book. The priority of this disciple-making mandate for church planting is made clear, and it is followed by an interesting discussion of what is not included in the Great Commission, highlighting the freedom of expression that church planters have. For instance, “The Great Commission tells us to teach all new converts, but it doesn’t give us lesson plans or educational tools” (79).

Another strength of this book is the author’s ability to ask excellent questions regarding the future reproductive capacity and sustainability of various church planting models in Part Two of the book. Regarding

the multi-site model he asks, “What happens when the original pioneer dies or moves on? Will the second and third generations be able to carry on as effectively as the first generation?” (131). Imminently practical is the section on how to handle finances in the concluding chapter. Church planters are challenged to have a stewardship campaign in their first year, thereby teaching the whole church the importance of giving, commitment, and sacrifice right from the start (231).

The importance that the author places on house church planting is clear. It is highlighted throughout the book, and it is indisputably one of the major global church planting strategies being employed today. The unique contribution of house church planting is defended by highlighting its reproductive potential and its relevance across time and culture. As the author aptly states, “The house church is never out of style because a house was not conceived to be stylish. Also, the house church is never out of date because from the beginning people have needed a house to live in” (158). However, the author does not let his commitment to house church planting cloud his ability to evaluate its shortcomings. He includes a listing of seven weaknesses of house churches including a tendency towards lack of organization, doctrinal clarity, goals in ministry, and written standards for life and ministry (154-155).

What weakens the overall discussion of house church planting, unfortunately, is that the author’s definition of what constitutes a true house church is unclear. Another difficulty arises when numerous statistics about house churches are cited without a source, “Approximately 93 percent of the members lead out in spoken prayer...90% will read from the Bible...87% will spend time sharing their personal needs and experiences” (144). These seem to be very specific percentages, and one assumes they were generated by a survey, but the source of the data remains a mystery. A last critique of the book is that the trends of culture are sometimes too easily accepted as requiring adaptation by the church for the sake of mission.

All in all, *Planting Reproducing Churches* provides a variety of helpful insights from an experienced observer of global church planting across multiple decades. A quick read, it will be helpful for those considering church planting as a part of their future ministry.