CHURCH PLANTING IN A SECULAR CONTEXT

RESEARCH PROGRAM

J.H. Bavinck Chair for Church Planting and Church Renewal in a Secular Context

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0. Introduction

The J.H. Bavinck Chair aims at training and research in missionary community formation (‘church planting’) in a secularized environment. New missionary community formation is inspired by a series of experiences connected with being church in a secular or post-Christian society. According to some observers, the church in Western Europe deals with the most serious crisis since its origin (cf. Heitink 2008). In Western Europe, churches hardly succeed to reach non-believers or adherents of other religions for the Christian faith. They only reach a limited (and shrinking) segment of society. They are burdened with traditional forms and structures that
are not always functional in a late-modern society, and they have trouble to find necessary innovations that would help them to approach these problems.

At the same time there are practices and examples of innovation, showing small-scale countertrends. Secular Europe is a unique context for the future of the Christian tradition. It has been called a ‘laboratory’ of church forms capable of flourishing in a post-Christian society (Jenkins 2007). It may be expected that these lessons will be learnt first and foremost in the ‘creative margin’ of the church (Noort et al. 2008). In new communities, so it is expected, there is more space for experiment and for new contextualizations of the Christian faith. Although relatively few people are actively involved in church planting in Europe, its impact can therefore be much larger. The JHB-Chair directs itself towards research in those communities, from a missiological point of view.

Many churches in Europe see that new ways are needed, and they have embarked on new church formation, as ‘laboratories of innovation’. Today we have reached the relatively unique stage in which church planting is no longer a feature of free churches. Older denominations, and even (former) state churches, have begun to plant new churches. The dramatic (future) implosion of mainline churches in Europe has released new resources, furthering the cause of church planting. Across Northwestern Europe the church is changing. Denominations become more pluralistic, controversies between evangelicals and ecumenicals have become more relative, everywhere a broader vision of mission is emerging, creating a beginning consensus about Christian mission between parties that used to be divided on exactly this issue. An increasing stream of young, enthusiastic pioneers has set its eyes on Europe as the new ‘mission field’. New churches emerge, sometimes with surprising practices, combining viewpoints and actions that used to be irreconcilable. Fascinating contextual forms of worship and community are being developed. International networks are growing, where theological knowledge, and practical experience, are being exchanged. Perhaps we are on our way to a European Christianity that will be smaller, more vital, entrepreneurial, and more attractive.

Against this background a crucial agenda emerges, in which the JHB-Chair is involved:

1. Stimulating and coaching new initiatives.
2. Training of missionary pioneers in Europe.
3. Collecting knowledge, experiences, best practices of missionary church formation in secular Europe.
4. Ecclesiological, missiological and social-scientific reflection on these practices.
5. Missiological reflection on the conditions that influence this, as for instance, secularity.
1. Typology

In this research program church planting is approached as an innovating practice, driven by missionary motives. In a recent Dutch publication this was defined as ‘missionary community formation’ (Noort et al. 2008). This means: community formation as a result of (successful) mission (mission → community formation), and community formation that is directed towards the goal of innovating mission (community formation → mission). In both situations there is a close connection between ‘mission’ and ‘church’, but their relationship differs. In the first case we could think of classic plantatio ecclesiae (1.1). In the second case, our focus is church planting as it has been developed in Western countries during the 20th century, as a conscious strategy to improve the missionary effectiveness of the church (1.2-1.4).

1.1. Plantatio ecclesiae
The term ‘church planting’ is derived from Latin plantatio ecclesiae: gathering new believers in a community that will be instituted as a church within a certain time-span. Currently, this motive is strongly present in some encyclicals issued after the Second Vatican Council, like Ad Gentes (1965) and Redemptoris Missio (1990). Also in Reformed and evangelical missiological reflection this motive appears prominently since the 17th (Voetius) and the 19th centuries. This classic ‘planting of the church’ has its background in colonial missions, and it is determined strongly by confessional and juridical motives. Although in classic mission theory it is usually related to areas or peoples where no churches are present, it has also appeared in missiological reflection on the West. One cause for this is the increasing secularization of the West, creating areas and people without much institutional Christian presence. Another cause is the experience of evangelism in the secular West, making it clear that new believers have a hard time to become involved in existing churches.

1.2. Church Planting
In the 20th century a new use of the term ‘church planting’ came up, especially by missionary organizations and denominations from the United States. Here, church planting is not merely the consequence of (successful) evangelism, but it is also a strategy for a more successful evangelism. Under the influence of American Protestant missions this approach of church planting has spread itself around the world. Strategic church planting has been inspired to a large extent by the Church Growth Movement, that emerged in the 1960s in the United States (Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner). The backbone of this approach is the claim that planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic strategy (‘evangelism’ defined as winning new Christians and enfold them into a congregation). Key words are ‘growth’ and ‘multiplication’. Its emphasis is on numerical growth of believers and churches, and its main goal is to find empirically founded strategies to further this growth. In Europe this approach has found its way, especially in the free churches (e.g. through DAWN). This movement has a strong evangelistic drive, but is light on ecclesiology and contextualization. If these issues are discussed at all, their
focus is on simplifying ecclesiastical structures and doctrines in order to promote growth (cf. already Allen 1927; Comiskey 2009). When these discussions are connected with theological analysis, as an attempt to reach beyond institutional deformations in traditional ecclesiology, this approach leads to a more ecclesio-critical discourse, with links to practices mentioned below.

1.3. Fresh Expressions of Church
After 2004 the term *Fresh Expressions of Church* became popular in England, as a label for combined missionary initiatives by Anglicans and Methodists. Partly, this initiative is a response to previous programs of church planting in the 1980s and 1990s (with mixed, but generally somewhat disappointing results – Lings&Murray 2003). A new approach was decided, with an emphasis on ‘flexibility’ and ‘variety’. This movement is located in the context of an existing church body, renewing itself in its creative margin. Its aim is the emergence of a large spectrum of church forms, capable of relating to a fragmented society. These initiatives are ‘primarily’ directed towards people who do not yet belong to a church. From an ecclesiological perspective the FE-project has been defined as a ‘mixed economy of church’ (Rowan Williams). Also in Germany (EKD) this model has found its followers (Bartels et al. 2006). Clearly, there is much more stress here on contextualization and innovation. Moreover, its embedding in the national church and its support by denominational leaders is interesting from a European perspective. The FE-initiative is meant to play a role in an old state church, trying to renew itself. It is not a movement of free churches alongside older churches.

1.4. Emerging Church
Behind the name ‘emerging church’ (used generically and not as a brand) a wide variety of very different initiatives can be found. The JHB-program is interested primarily in those initiatives that have a missionary goal. Point of departure in the EC-movement is the culture of postmodernity. This culture, it is said, is so different than that of modernity (including most older churches), that radically new forms of Christian community are needed. The name ‘emerging’ reflects a determination to refuse large-scale strategies and blueprints. Church should ‘emerge’ from the context, whenever a missionary initiative is launched. Whatever is ‘church’ should be defined very tolerantly, since the EC-movement is characterized by a theological criticism against modern dichotomies, like ‘public vs. private’, and ‘sacral vs. secular’). Therefore, a ‘missionary’ initiative does not need to be evangelistic, but it may include the start of an art café, where Christians and non-Christians share their lives and inspirations. The EC-movement will consciously look for invisible borders, resulting from rigid thinking about church and culture, that need to be crossed. The most innovative projects may be found here, as well as those initiatives that can be theologically explained only with some difficulty, since EC rejects many theological borderlines, and ‘borrows’ from different traditions, in a postmodern way. Also one can find here the most ecclesio-critical currents, resisting everything that is considered as cultural baggage from the past.
For study, reflection and research all these practices of missionary community formation are important. To be clear: they overlap, interact, and inspire each other!

2. Secularization

Although historically different, these various motives for church planting are mutually connected in practice. This is especially true in a late-modern, secularized society. In this research program we discuss missionary community formation within the context of this type of society.

Secularization is an umbrella term, denoting the effects of modernization on religion and its social forms. Thus, the word ‘secularization’ is used in at least five different ways (Casanova 1994; Dobbelaere 2002; Taylor 2007).

1. As a term for societal differentiation. Secularization is a process in which sectors of society, like politics, education and arts, are removed from ecclesiastical control, legitimizing themselves by non-religious reasons. Hence, religion instead of a moral perspective and a shared discourse for all society, becomes a ‘religious’ sector within society, with its own discourse, institutions and legitimations.

2. This leads to a second meaning of the word, viz. secularization as privatization of religion. Because religion is restricted to one societal sector, individuals and groups can no longer live their lives under a religious flag. The social significance of religion will therefore be limited to private territory, like the family of some associations.

3. The word ‘secularization’ is also used to denote the adaptation of religious organizations to modernity. Sometimes this is called ‘internal’ or ‘organizational’ secularization. Churches adapt in various ways. The organize themselves as denominations, install bureaucratic systems, adopt the language of efficiency and rationality, they look for effective strategies in order to reach their targets, and become mirror-images of other sectors in society, such as politics or businesses.

4. A fourth meaning of the word is dechurching or dechristianization. This is the process whereby less people are members of a church, and furthermore less people are involved in church activities or use the services of the church. Relatively, this aspect of secularization can be measured most easily.

5. The last meaning mentioned here is pluralization. Modern societies have much more diversity than traditional societies. Therefore people will be confronted daily with lots of others who think, believe and live differently (‘cognitive contagion’). This stimulates reflection on one’s own faith, that is increasingly understood as a choice and not as something self-evident. In a secular age, this means that churches have to deal with changed, ‘subjectivized’ people (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). We have left a culture of obligation and we have entered a culture of consumption (Davie 2007). This does not
mean that unbelief is inevitable (on the contrary), but it does mean that the motives for personal faith have changed, together with the style of people’s personal religion. Usually, this also affects the contents of belief.

It is important to see that ‘secularization’ in itself is not a normative word. It simply describes some social trends in modern societies. Some of the meanings of the word, as mentioned above, may be evaluated positively from a theological point of view. In this research program church planting in the modern West is discussed, on the one hand, as an example of secularization, and on the other hand as a response to secularization. Its emphasis on marketing, growth principles, rational strategies, and the like clearly define it as a modern phenomenon, something which could only emerge in a secular age (see meanings 1, 3 and 5). At the same time, many forms of church planting seek to resist aspects of secularization, like privatization and dechurching (meanings 2 and 4).

Thus, the title of this program - ‘Church Planting in a Secular Context’ – does not imply that church planting is a typical secular phenomenon in a traditional church or a traditional ecclesiastical assault on secularization. Reality is more complex than that. Church planting is a way of negotiating secular modernity by Christian churches. Of course, potential tensions raise their heads. They involve questions as to the mutual interaction of these five meanings of ‘secularization’. Does one aspect always lead to the others or can they be isolated, rejecting one dimension and embracing another? Research will have to show to what extent local missionary communities succeed in dealing with secularization’s dialectic in a creative and innovative way.

3. Research context

3.1. Faculty
Research into church planting by the JHB-Chair will be conducted within the Praxis Section of the theological faculty. This research program is summarized as follows:

Within the Praxis-program practical theologians, social scientists and ethicists conduct research into religious and moral practices, where a religious identity takes shape in a plural context. Religious plurality of ‘cultures’ is the point of departure in this program. This is materialized, for example, in research projects into the presence of religion in the media and in popular culture. The first subprogram focuses on religious communities. Attention is paid, for example, to community formation, immigrant churches, communication and transmission of faith. A second subprogram is still under construction. It will contain projects in the area of mental health care, religious care for people with a mental handicap, and the identity of health care institutions.

Within this research program the JHB-Chair takes its own missiological approach. This will take place primarily (but not exclusively) within a practical-theological framework. This implies a.o.
a dialogue between empirical data of new community formation and theological reflection of a normative nature. An important aspect of this research will consist of quantitative and qualitative empirical inquiries. For PhD-students this may require an extra training in social-scientific research skills.

3.2. Vision
The JHB-program has a missionary nature. Mission is the way in which Christianity crosses social, cultural, linguistic, and religious borderlines, involving itself in different contexts (Verstraelen et al. 1995). Sometimes this border-crossing will happen in an organized and scheduled way, but more often it will happen spontaneously. Despite all different currents and traditions in missiology, we can say that mission occurs from the conviction that Christianity has a unique contribution to this world, making it indispensible in every time and culture to define this contribution, and to dress it in social forms. Without this missionary dimension Christianity cannot be understood (Montgomery 2003). Missionary community formation originates in this border-crossing mentality of Christianity, whenever new groups of people respond to the Gospel. Also included is community formation that aims at building bridges between Christianity and new cultures / groups, or at finding new ways to influence society, will be included in this research program. The JHB-Chair studies the formation of this type of ‘border communities’ and their impact on secularized society.

3.3. Research Partners
In the Netherlands there is some occasional research into church planting at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Heverleen (Belgium), at the Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, and at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen. However, this research is limited, and it is not connected to a systematic program. Wherever this is possible, the JHB-Chair will cooperate with these institutions.

Internationally, more expertise is available. Currently (Feb. 2011), a cooperation with Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids (USA) is in construction (PhD’s, joint training).

The Chair is involved in the Europäische Institut für Gemeindegründung und Gemeindewachstum in Frankfurt (Germany).

Other international partners are being approached.

3.4. Practitioners as partners
The JHB-Chair participates in the Werkgemeenschap Missionaire Gemeenschapsvorming (Working Community of Missionary Community Formation) in the Netherlands. In this partnership all Dutch denominations and organizations involved in church planting, are working together.
4. Research areas and themes

4.1. Overview
In the research program three groups of questions are defined:
1. From the classic practice of *plantatio ecclesiae* actual questions can be derived pertaining to ecclesiology and missiology (4.2).
2. From the practice of *church planting* questions emerge as to growth (evangelism) and multiplication (4.3).
3. From the practices of *Fresh Expressions* and *emerging church* a number of questions appear regarding ecclesiological innovation (4.4).

In these clusters two fields of interest must be respected. On the one hand questions emerging from a critical-constructive scientific perspective need to be asked (‘what’ and ‘why’). On the other hand it is important to meet the needs of practitioners. Generally they are more interested in questions regarding methodology and improvement of current practices (‘how’).

4.2. Systematic-theological, historical, and missiological research in mission and ecclesiology
The JHB-Chair stimulates research into church planting from the perspective of missionary ecclesiology. The emphasis here lies on a systematic reflection on three groups of questions:
1. Questions emerging from the connection between ‘church’ and ‘mission’. Here we can think of contributions to wider discussions about mission, Kingdom of God, and church, as have been conducted after the Second World War. Out of this discussion different paradigms have appeared, casually labeled as ‘ecumenical’ and ‘evangelical’. However, in our post-ideological times there are many studies looking for connections between these two paradigms. Fundamental missiological discussions can be conducted as to the motives behind church planting, and the meaning and nature of church planting as a missionary movement in secularized Europe.
2. Questions emerging from the connection between ‘church’ and ‘context’. Western peoples have different ideas about ‘community’ than their ancestors. What does it mean to be ‘church’ in such a context? A wide current of literature has been published in this area, discussing ‘networks’, ‘liquid communities’, and the like. For church planting it is extremely relevant to think further about the ecclesiological relevance of such cultural shifts. They pose the question what is ‘church’ in secular Europe.
3. Questions emerging from the connection between ‘mission’ and ecclesiological issues. It must be expected that there is a need in new church plants to ‘fill’ our ecclesiological
concepts (again) with missionary thinking and practice. Research can contribute to this. We may think of studies into missionary homiletics and liturgy, but also discussions of changes in our concepts of God, ‘blended’ ecclesiologies, and the like.

4.3. Practical-theological research into growth and multiplication
In this area research is primarily driven by questions about church growth and church multiplication. Its focus is on gathering and interpreting empirical data, and designing practical strategies and models for church growth and multiplication. This can happen within various theoretical frameworks, like that of religious market theory. Many books about church planting assume that multiplication of ‘supply’ expands religious ‘demand’. More churches means more Christians. Here a vast field can be explored of claims that can be empirically tested. This may lead to workable models of church growth and church planting movements in secular Europe. Eventually, this research must lead to an answer to the question under which conditions truly missionary church growth and church multiplication are possible in secular Europe.

4.4. Practical-theological research into innovation
It is expected that new churches allow more room for experimentation and contextualization of the Christian faith. Although relatively few people are actively involved in church planting in Europe, they may affect many more. Also in this area there have been many claims that can be tested by empirical research in Europe. It has been said that within church plants there are more opportunities for new forms of leadership, gifts of women and teenagers, experimental liturgies, and so forth. Research in this area focuses on the question if and how church plants are really ‘laboratories’ of innovation, and under which conditions lessons that have been learnt here can be applied in older churches. This research can happen within the theoretical framework of de-institutionalization: planting new churches will make structures less solid and thus create possibilities of renewal. Eventually, this research should lead to an answer to the question which shape ‘church’ will assume in secular Europe.

Information

The current Chair holder is Stefan Paas (1969). He is an experienced lecturer, researcher, evangelist and church planter. Dr. Paas received his PhD in Utrecht University with a dissertation on Old Testament exegesis. After this he published several books on evangelism and missionary church formation. Dr. Paas is involved in various networks of church planters and missiologists throughout Europe. Currently, he is writing a book on ‘Christian Mission in Post-Christian Europe’.
All serious proposals and ideas will be dealt with seriously. Research proposals that have been accepted will be supervised by Stefan Paas. If a research project is a joint operation between the VU University and other Universities, supervision will be shared by mutual agreement.

Questions, suggestions, ideas, proposals can be sent to Stefan Paas (s.paas@vu.nl). Proposals for joint research or other forms of cooperation will be welcome.

References
