

Church Planting Model from Rural North India

The first two years of work in North India revealed an area that had not had a church planted in more than twenty-five years. As the SC engaged the established institutional churches in the target area, he was able to encourage some of them to become actively involved in church planting once again. The churches took leadership in this and adopted the traditional confrontational approach which is widely used in India. The results were disastrous. During those first two years six evangelists and converts lost their lives. The programs came to a halt. It was proven, according to some, that churches could not be planted in the target area.

The SC, however, did not accept this. He began to study the situation in light of Scripture, and developed a new approach to church planting in restricted access environments. The model is based on the teachings of Jesus found in Matthew 28:16ff, commonly known as the Great Commission, and Luke 10, where Jesus sends out the seventy-two to prepare the way for his arrival in villages, towns, and cities in Palestine.

From the Great Commission it was learned that there are four stages in the planting of self-replicating churches. The first stage is that someone has to go. This is nothing new, but needed to be done in a different way to insure the safety of the evangelist, and that the results of the going would be a church.

It is at this point that the teachings in Luke had significant impact. Many had gone to North India over the past two hundred years with the purpose of planting churches. Few were successful. Most left discouraged. Some were killed. The area became known as the graveyard of missions. The traditional pattern of church planting had to be broken, and it was Luke who gave the SC the clue that led to a model which is succeeding.

In the traditional method of church planting the team would enter a village, proclaim their purpose, preach a sermon if possible, give out some tracts, and sell some literature and Bibles. Success was measured by how many tracts, pieces of literature, and Bibles were distributed. The results in church planting were dismal, at best.

From the model in Luke 10, a new group of church planters were trained. They would do no preaching. They would sell no literature. They would distribute no Bibles. They were trained to pray for a village. They were to ask God to lead them to the person of peace, and if that person were not found, to leave the village without sharing with anyone. In this way the village would not be impacted negatively by the Gospel, and evangelists would not be put into immediate risk by declaring their intentions.

What the evangelists do, however, is to seek the person of peace. A person of peace is the man or woman God has prepared to receive the Gospel. When they find that person, they are to invest themselves in that person and that person's natural network of family and friends. It is to be done quietly, and behind closed doors.

It is here that the SC received a new understanding of the second command of Jesus found in the Great Commission ~ make disciples. For most people, make disciples translates into discipleship programs designed for new believers. But if one is careful, one will realize that the command to make disciples precedes the command to baptize them in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The SC began to study the way in which Jesus made his disciples and discovered that the process of making a disciple is a process in relationship building. Jesus spend hours every day, and days every month, for almost three years before he asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am." It would have been a terribly long stretch for the disciples at the beginning of their relationship with Jesus to proclaim that He was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But after three years of relationship building, making disciples, it was a short step from love of a friend to faith in a Savior.

In most evangelism models, the target population are asked to make leaps of faith before they know a friend. But once they know an evangelist who is in love with Jesus, and that evangelist takes them on a road of discovery into a friendship with Jesus (making disciples), it is a small step from love of a friend to faith in a Savior. It was thought that this would be a long process. It has turned out to be just the opposite.

These steps are taken in community. Individuals are not baptized. Only when a man and his household have made the journey to faith through discipleship, is baptism granted to the whole household.

To date, all the new churches planted have begun with the baptism of a household of six or more. The advantages of this are obvious. A community of believers is the result.

After the baptism it is the evangelist's responsibility to teach the new converts everything Jesus has taught him. And following Paul's model, the evangelist is to appoint a pastor from among the converts before he moves on to the next village. An on-going relationship is established with a greater Christian community in order to train up this pastor and his congregation. As soon as possible they are asked to supply someone to train as an evangelist in order to carry on the work.

After reflecting on this model for the past two years, the SC has discovered that there are three essential ingredients that will result in a church planted. The first ingredient is a well trained evangelist whose first love is Jesus. It is through this person, who loves Jesus and can love others, that disciples are made.

But to truly love someone is to know them. And it is at this point that the second essential ingredient is found. For people to know Jesus they must study the Bible. The most important skill the evangelist possesses is the ability to teach God's word via whatever method required to share God's love with those with whom he has established a relationship.

The third essential ingredient is leadership training. If the evangelist does not train a person or persons to take over from him by the time he has to move to a new assignment, then all of the hard work will dissolve in a few generations at best, or a few months at worst.

Someone must go to make the disciples. True discipleship comes through knowledge gained from God's Word. And self-replicating churches come as a result of trained leadership. Do these three, and a church will always be established.

The SC involved with this work is currently running three separate projects to test the above model. The first involves a new indigenous mission organization that was willing to take a chance on something new and different. The second involves a mission group that mixes nationals and foreigners to plant churches. The third involves one of the traditional churches that has been in the area more than 125 years.

In the first project, the mission organization trains and sends evangelists according to the above model. Evangelists are fully supported. They are expected to work at least three to five villages at a time. This is in order to keep them from being seen as lazy by the men in the village. They do their work at night and travel during the day. As they establish groups, a young man is chosen to go for pastoral training. He is given three months of Bible training, three months of vocational training, and three months of field training with an evangelist. During this time he is supported by a small stipend. When his training is completed, he is given the tools of his new trade, and returns to his own village as pastor. Another employ of the mission has the responsibility for the new pastors' on going training, and tries to see him at least twice each month. This project started more than twenty churches last year. A women's training centre is being added this year.

The second project involves foreigners who are medical and health care experts. These experts open the doors in new areas. National evangelists trained in the above method follow behind the foreign teams to do the Bible Studies and plant churches. This group started four churches last year. It is limited by how fast the medical teams can move. Plans for next year include branching out from the medical teams, following the relationships of those who have already received Christ.

The third project involved an established traditional church. They were offered assistance in supporting church planters. They could not afford church planters due to the high costs of maintaining institutions and paying all the salaries of the pastors. The organization accepted the assistance, but rejected the above model in favor of the one they had been taught at Bible School. The results: discouraged evangelists who have been emotionally and physically abused, and no churches planted by the four teams in the last two years. The project has been terminated. But a new one has been offered if the church will let the SC train them in the new model, and if they will promise to follow it.

The SC involved in the above model and projects does everything on a two-year contract. Closure is built into every project so that failures can be graciously pruned. Successful projects are offered continuing support on an annually renewable basis. The renewals are not automatic. Reports and evaluations are made and discussed. Most continued contracts require the receiving organization to make changes in training techniques, target areas, or administrative practices. In this way, programs improve as new goals are set

It is hoped that this model will be of assistance to anyone who wishes to test it. It would be nice to know any successes or failures as a result of implementing this model.