

Church Planting Movements

Excerpts from the book by David Garrison

From every corner of the globe the reports are coming in. Only a few at first, but now more and more frequently, reinforcing one another with their startling accounts of hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands coming to faith in Christ, forming into churches and spreading their new-found faith.

Southeast Asia

When a strategy coordinator began his assignment in 1993, there were only three churches and 85 believers among a population of more than 7 million lost souls. Four years later there were more than 550 churches and nearly 55,000 believers.

India

One elderly man who came to Christ in a Church Planting Movement planted 42 churches in his first year as a believer.

North Africa

In his weekly Friday sermon, an Arab Muslim cleric complained that more than 10,000 Muslims living in the surrounding mountains had apostatized from Islam and become Christians.

City in China

Over a four-year period (1993-1997), more than 20,000 people came to faith in Christ, resulting in more than 500 new churches.

Western Europe

A missionary in Europe reports, "Last year (1998), my wife and I started 15 new church cell groups. As we left for a six-month stateside assignment last July, we wondered what we'd find when we returned. It's wild! We can verify at least 30 churches now, but I believe that it could be two or even three times that many."

Ethiopia

A missionary strategist commented, "It took us 30 years to plant four churches in this country. We've started 65 cell churches in the last nine months."

Every region of the world now pulsates with some kind of Church Planting Movement. Sometimes we see only the numbers, but often they are accompanied by lively descriptions such as this recently received e-mail message: "All of our cell churches have lay pastors/leaders because we turn over the work so fast that the missionary seldom leads as many as two or three Bible studies before God raises at least one leader. The new leader seems to be both saved and called to lead at the same time, so we baptize him and give him a Bible. After the new believers/leaders are baptized, they are so 'on fire' that we simply cannot hold them back. They fan out all over the country starting Bible studies, and a few weeks later we begin to get word back how many have started. It's the craziest thing we ever saw! We did not start it and we couldn't stop it if we tried."

What is a Church Planting Movement?

In 1998, the International Mission Board's Overseas Leadership Team adopted a vision statement: We will facilitate the lost coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ by beginning and nurturing Church Planting Movements among all peoples. This vision statement guides the work of nearly 5,000 IMB missionaries serving in more than 150 countries around the world.

So, what is a Church Planting Movement? A simple, concise definition of a Church Planting Movement is a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment.

There are several key components to this definition. The first is rapid. As a movement, a Church Planting Movement occurs with rapid increases in new church starts. Saturation church planting over decades and even centuries is good, but doesn't qualify as a Church Planting Movement.

Secondly, there is multiplicative increase. This means that the increase in churches is not simply incremental growth - adding a few churches every year or so. Instead, it compounds with two churches becoming four, four churches becoming eight to 10 and so forth. Multiplicative increase is only possible when new churches are being started by the churches themselves - rather than by professional church planters or missionaries.

Finally they are indigenous churches. This means they are generated from within rather than from without. This is not to say that the gospel is able to spring up intuitively within a people group. The gospel always enters a people group from the outside; this is the task of the missionary. However, in a church planting movement, the momentum quickly becomes indigenous, so that the initiative and drive of the movement comes from within the people group rather than from outsiders.

So why is a Church Planting Movement so special? Because it seems to hold forth the greatest potential for the largest number of lost individuals glorifying God by coming into new life in Christ and entering into communities of faith.

Ten Universal Elements

After surveying Church Planting Movements around the world, we found at least 10 elements present in every one of them. While it may be possible to have a Church Planting Movement without them, we have yet to see this occur. Any missionary intent on seeing a Church Planting Movement should consider these 10 elements.

1. Prayer

Prayer has been fundamental to every Church Planting Movement we have observed. Prayer typically provides the first pillar in a strategy coordinator's master plan for reaching his or her people group. However, it is the vitality of prayer in the missionary's personal life that leads to its imitation in the life of the new church and its leaders. By revealing from the beginning the source of his power in prayer, the missionary effectively gives away the greatest resource he brings to the assignment. This sharing of the power source is critical to the transfer of vision and momentum from the missionary to the new local Christian leadership.

2. Abundant gospel sowing

We have yet to see a Church Planting Movement emerge where evangelism is rare or absent. Every Church Planting Movement is accompanied by abundant sowing of the gospel. The law of the harvest applies well: "If you sow abundantly you will also reap abundantly." In Church Planting Movements, hundreds and even thousands of individuals are hearing the claims that Jesus Christ has on their lives. This sowing often relies heavily upon mass media evangelism, but it always includes personal evangelism with vivid testimonies to the life-changing power of the gospel. The converse to the law of the harvest is also true. Wherever governments or societal forces have managed to intimidate and stifle Christian witness, Church Planting Movements have been effectively eliminated.

3. Intentional Church Planting

In every Church Planting Movement, someone implemented a strategy of deliberate church planting before the movement got under way. There are several instances in which all the contextual elements were in place, but the missionaries lacked either the skill or the vision to lead a Church Planting Movement. However, once this ingredient was added to the mix, the results were remarkable. Churches don't just happen. There is evidence around the world of many thousands coming to Christ through a variety of means without the resulting development of multiple churches. In these situations, an intentional church-planting strategy might transform these evangelistic awakenings into full-blown Church Planting Movements.

4. Scriptural authority

Even among non-literate people groups, the Bible has been the guiding source for doctrine, church polity and life itself. While Church Planting Movements have occurred among peoples without the Bible translated into their own language, the majority had the Bible either orally or in written form in their heart language. In every instance, Scripture provided the rudder for the church's life, and its authority was unquestioned.

5. Local leadership

Missionaries involved in Church Planting Movements often speak of the self-discipline required to mentor church planters rather than do the job of church planting themselves. Once a missionary has established his

identity as the primary church planter or pastor, it's difficult for him ever to assume a back-seat profile again. This is not to say that missionaries have no role in church planting. On the contrary, local church planters receive their best training by watching how the missionary leads participative Bible studies with non-Christian seekers. Walking alongside local church planters is the first step in cultivating and establishing local leadership.

6. Lay leadership

Church Planting Movements are driven by lay leaders. These lay leaders are typically bi-vocational and come from the general profile of the people group being reached. In other words, if the people group is primarily non-literate, then the leadership shares this characteristic. If the people are primarily fishermen, so too are their lay leaders. As the movement unfolds, paid clergy often emerge. However, the majority-and-growth edge of the movement-continue to be led by lay or bi-vocational leaders.

This reliance upon lay leadership ensures the largest possible pool of potential church planters and cell church leaders. Dependence upon seminary-trained-or in non-literate societies, even educated-pastoral leaders means that the work will always face a leadership deficit.

7. Cell or house churches

Church buildings do appear in Church Planting Movements. However, the vast majority of the churches continue to be small, reproducible cell churches of 10-30 members meeting in homes or storefronts. There is a distinction between cell churches and house churches. Cell churches are linked to one another in some type of structured network. Often this network is linked to a larger, single church identity. The Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul, South Korea, is perhaps the most famous example of the cell-church model with more than 50,000 individual cells.

House churches may look the same as cell churches, but they generally are not organized under a single authority of hierarchy of authorities. As autonomous units, house churches may lack the unifying structure of cell churches, but they are typically more dynamic. Each has its advantages. Cell groups are easier to shape and guide toward doctrinal conformity, while house churches are less vulnerable to suppression by a hostile government. Both types of churches are common in Church Planting Movements, often appearing in the same movement.

8. Churches planting churches

In most Church Planting Movements, the first churches were planted by missionaries or by missionary-trained church planters. At some point, however, as the movements entered a multiplicative phase of reproduction, the churches themselves began planting new churches. In order for this to occur, church members have to believe that reproduction is natural and that no external aids are needed to start a new church. In Church Planting Movements, nothing deters the local believers from winning the lost and planting new cell churches themselves.

9. Rapid reproduction

Some have challenged the necessity of rapid reproduction for the life of the Church Planting Movement, but no one has questioned its evidence in every CPM. Most church planters involved in these movements contend that rapid reproduction is vital to the movement itself. They report that when reproduction rates slow down, the Church Planting Movement falters. Rapid reproduction communicates the urgency and importance of coming to faith in Christ. When rapid reproduction is taking place, you can be assured that the churches are unencumbered by nonessential elements and the laity are fully empowered to participate in this work of God.

10. Healthy churches

Church growth experts have written extensively in recent years about the marks of a church. Most agree that healthy churches should carry out the following five purposes: 1) worship, 2) evangelistic and missionary outreach, 3) education and discipleship, 4) ministry and 5) fellowship. In each of the Church Planting Movements we studied, these five core functions were evident.

A number of church planters have pointed out that when these five health indicators are strong, the church can't help but grow.

Over the past five years, in as few as five Church Planting Movements, nearly a quarter of a million lost souls have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Imagine 50 Church Planting Movements - or 500! The excitement, however, is not in the numbers, not even when we consider that these numbers represent individuals coming to new life in Christ. The greatest joy comes in being on mission with God in His redemptive plan for the nations - serving as His instruments in this unfolding miracle of salvation that is being extended to all peoples. It is for this joy that we press on.

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