

## 6 CHURCH PLANTING

### Olive Rogers

The term 'church planting' is in popular use at present. We must be careful in its use, for church planting is not within the ability of the missionary. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ said, 'I will build my church.' We cannot say, 'X mission needs to plant 30 churches in Y area in the next year,' or 'I am going out to do church planting.' But, having said that, there are a few things to be considered concerning the planting of self propagating churches.

#### **Planting a self propagating church**

Church planting is not done in a vacuum. The term itself suggests growth; ie a 'supra-natural' new life has to take root in the soil of a totally alien culture. This is true of the individual convert, and of a new church. Paul used another agricultural metaphor—that of a 'graft'. There has to be a new plant growth within the medium of the old natural tree.

Before starting this work, then, the church planter must have convictions about the pagan religious beliefs and customs of the people he is working among. Religion and culture are inextricably joined, and cannot be separated. Therefore, should anything of the old culture be carried over into the new? If so, how much? How far can concepts within the religion be used as a vehicle through which to convey spiritual truths concerning Christ and the way of salvation? This requires a thorough study of the religion and its customs. The church planter will have to form convictions on these matters which will influence his approach. He must ask:

1 Is it a totally Satanic religion in all its concepts and therefore unredeemable, with the result that converts must be taught to carry nothing over into their new life in Christ? H Kraemer is among those who would answer 'Yes'.

2 Is it a pre-Christian religion in which there is some element of self-disclosure of God which may somehow have prepared the people to receive

the truth? If so, where is the bridge over which to cross? Don Richardson argues the case for a positive answer in *Eternity in their Hearts*.

3 Is it the outcome of human efforts to find God and resolve the basic issues of life? If so, there must be some good in it, but it is inadequate since Christ is the only answer. Some Indian Christian theologians argue this line in respect of Hinduism, notably Dhanjibai Fakirbhai.

4 Or is it a mixture of all these in differing degrees, but made more complex by the inherent sinfulness and depravity of man?

Whether the missionary works among primitive animistic tribals in Africa, in a superstitious continental RC setting or a spiritist South American RC culture, in a predominantly Hindu area, a cosmopolitan urban twentieth-century non-religious society or an inner-city, multi-cultural population, the problem is basically the same. Where does he start? With what convictions does he work? He is a co-worker with God, but if a church is to take root and grow it must be culturally acceptable. If the religion and culture are inextricably joined, should any of the culture remain? If so, what can be preserved and transformed? Should believers be de-culturalized? If so, to what extent? Virtually all customs perform important functions within the culture, therefore if they are removed it is necessary to replace them with something equally meaningful in the Christian context. To leave a void means that in time the people will revert to their old ways. Moreover, how can the message be contextualized so that communication of the gospel reaches their friends of other faiths with a clear message of the truth?

Having preached the gospel with clarity, as a result of which converts are made and a small church is beginning to take root, the church planter must expect opposition. This will come on two levels:

1 Sociological. The converts will become social outcastes, perhaps the target of physical attacks and persecution.

2 Spiritual. If the new convert or church is planted in a hitherto unchallenged 'spiritual realm', attacks of evil spirits must be anticipated. Their hold on that person or persons has been broken, and oppression—spiritual and social—will combine in an effort to regain possession of him or destroy the effectiveness of the new church. I have experienced both these things in India. The spiritual powers of darkness are not to be taken lightly.

After the initial outright attacks have subsided, more subtle opposition will emerge in two ways: syncretistic culture and subtle forms of diluting spiritual truth.

The new church walks a tight-rope. It must not be de-culturalized to the extent that it is unable to identify with the local people. Nor should it be so adapted that any distinctive quality of life is hard to be found and

therefore it fails to be 'salt and light' and a source of attraction to the spiritually dissatisfied.

The Jews of the Diaspora seem to have got it just about right. They were absorbed into the mainstream of society wherever they lived, yet they maintained a distinctive life of their own with their synagogues and rituals and this provided an attraction for those who were disillusioned with their pagan religion. These became 'God-fearers' and were taught the scriptures which had been translated into Greek, initially for the non-Hebrew-speaking Jews. They were a 'prepared people' who were ripe for 'harvest' when the Christian gospel eventually came. The Jewish Diaspora with their scriptures became the 'bridge' over which many of them crossed into new life in Christ.

This leads to another question. Is McGavran's idea of a 'people movement' good? The Western world is individualistic in outlook, and this has influenced theology and evangelism in this century. But is there something in the concept expressed in Acts 16:31 ('you and all your household')? Tribal society worldwide knows nothing of individualism. Nor does Eastern or Asian society. When, therefore, individuals are converted they find themselves isolated and thus vulnerable. They need a new society into which to go for emotional, physical and spiritual stability. McGavran suggested that people movements operating on the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) may create 'baptized pagans', as he calls them, but out of them a living church can be formed. He maintains that two-thirds of today's churches in Asia grew this way. Examples are the mass movements in Indonesia and Korea. Such mass conversions can be platforms for the true church planting, but in my experience they create enormous problems after two or three generations. It should be noted, however, that Paul did not delay in forming small churches wherever the word had taken root. He saw the need for a new society in which the converts could find a new identity, and realized that the church, the Body of Christ, is the answer to this need.

The Brethren interpret biblical ecclesiology in terms of autonomous but interdependent churches with multiple leadership. This structure is adaptable to all cultures, and political and religious climates, but we have to beware of what Stanley Jones calls 'the imprisonment of previous patterns' of either local or Western origin. The Holy Spirit must be allowed to develop the church as he guides and the missionary must be willing to be taught by him, and also learn from the national believers.

We agree that church planting is the work of the Spirit of God, but that does not preclude the need for strategy or goals, which must be clear. Paul had both. His goal was 'to preach where Christ is not known' (Rom 15:9). His strategy (always under the guidance of the Spirit) was to plant a church in each large city and use it as a stepping stone to go further,

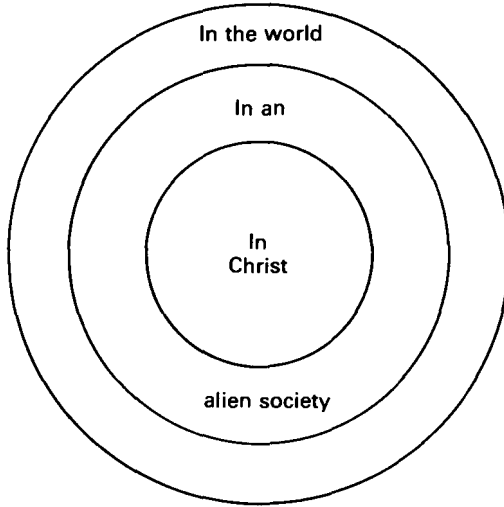
leaving the local believers to evangelize the immediate district in the vernacular language (Rom 15 etc). The Godavari Delta Mission missionaries in the Godavari district of India had a well-planned strategy. It worked. Today there are over 350 churches. This is perhaps one of the clearest examples of the value of HUP church planting with true converts. In much of the Third World there are many converts with overflowing enthusiasm, and there is what is called 'spontaneous evangelism'. In South India this is exciting. But this movement of the Holy Spirit must be built upon. These pockets of witness must be formed into churches, which can plant house groups, which in turn can become new churches. This has been the main source of church growth in South America. The missionary, together with the national believers, works out a strategy with realistic goals, being open to the movement of the Spirit of God. [See appendix for note on GDM strategy.]

### **Nurturing the self-propagating church**

The need for teaching basic Christian doctrines may still include—in backward areas—the need to teach reading skills, or even to reduce the language to writing. Such activities are usually pre-evangelistic. Once there are converts there is the need to teach the scriptures.

The non-Western method of learning is most often by rote. That introduces a danger. New believers learn facts, but find it hard to elicit principles. They can follow rules, but need a thinking mind to adapt principles to their own situation. The church in a culturally backward area will slavishly follow the teaching of their 'guru'—be he a missionary or a national pastor. The church in a cosmopolitan city will include nationals who have trained minds. It is good that a church constitution be worked out, for there is usually a fast moving population in the city and the first clear vision may soon be blurred. It is here in urban situations that the distinction between abiding principles for church life and changing patterns should be clearly defined. Nothing can replace the need for corporate prayer, witness and worship, and for sound Bible teaching. But socio-economic conditions will change and the methods will have to be revised from time to time.

Adult baptism is the cut-off point for the believer. Its meaning must be taught clearly to the new believer. Its cost will be real to him. He is leaving one society and entering another. The church must be ready to welcome him into their family, for from now on his life becomes more complicated. A diagram may help:



***In Christ:*** A fellowship with God and his people; a relationship of sonship; a place of renewal and support; a refuge.

***In an alien society:*** A community which could be hostile and will certainly be alien, but among which he must live.

***In the world:*** A place of evil, sinful practices to be avoided, but with a mission to reach out to those in the world.

Since the new believer has to live in the world he has to learn how to live out his Christian principles in a pagan society. The Old Testament has much to teach us about this. The people of God in the New Testament are described in Old Testament terminology (see 1 Pet 2:9). God's calling is always with a special purpose. Abraham received at his call a two-tier blessing. He was to be blessed and to be a means of blessing to all nations. The same is true of all believers. There is no injustice or partiality about election. God is not choosing one and rejecting another. He chooses those whom he has called to bear responsibility for others. This precludes any sense of pride. Just as Abraham had to be progressively de-culturalized so that he could relate increasingly to God and show his nature to those around, so the new believer has to be taught how to live Christianly among those whose culture is now alien to him. Similarly church gatherings must be culturally acceptable and the lives of believers attractive to unbelievers. David Burnett describes three types of Jews living about the time of Christ from which we may draw lessons:

1 Essenes: withdrawal from the social structures of life.

- 2 Zealots: political activists (today's liberation theologians!).
- 3 Pharisees: traditional legalists with an intense proselytizing programme.

The Brethren church-nurturing programme has tended to follow 1 and 3 in varying degrees. Jesus, however, rejected all three modes of life. He chose the way of the Suffering Servant, and this is the way that all believers should be taught. Only the Spirit of God can actualize this in their lives, but the church planter has to be their example. This is the only viable option for Christian living in this world. It is the mindset of Philippians 2, and it is costly in the extreme.

It calls for *incarnational service*. Churches don't just happen. They have to be worked at, and churches must learn that it is their responsibility to see other churches born from them. For this to happen, the believers must realize the purpose of their call—the privilege and responsibility of it. To fulfil this function the elders must continually be on the lookout for potential gift among the believers, and must maintain a steady training programme, as well as continuous outreach. Training is needed for evangelism, leadership and missionary, ie cross-cultural and even overseas, service. (There are some 15,000 non-Western overseas missionaries today.)

Alongside this, there must be teaching on giving, for the church should bear the responsibility of its own outreach and the support during training as well as actual service, of their missionaries.

Finally, the church is called 'to declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light'. Praise and worship is the main calling of the church, and this should not just be left to happen. Worship is the natural expression of adoration arising from the realization of the believer's new position in Christ. It is the highest form of corporate activity in the church. But it is also a special act of witness. This, therefore, must not only be acceptable to God, but it should also be culturally acceptable to the people for whom it is a witness. The teaching of the New Testament leaves it possible for corporate worship in the church to be carried out in ways which are devoid of ritual—simple enough for the youngest of believers and the most primitive of societies, yet with depths of understanding that can satisfy the profoundest intellect. No other religion contains such simple yet meaningful symbolism in corporate worship.

### **Relating to the self propagating church**

If Christ became our example in incarnational service it is clear that this is the responsibility of the church planter insofar as it is possible. This involves not only an in-depth study of the language and culture as well as

the religion, but also identifying as far as possible with the people to whom he has been sent. Christ not only became man; he became a first-century Galilean Jew living in Palestine under Roman rule. He became an example of God-like living among an ungodly people under a harsh, foreign rule. He became a servant of all, for the sake of bringing the gospel to them. It cost him everything. It will be the same for the true church planter.

But there are physical and cultural limits. There is what has been called 'cultural fatigue'. This is particularly true for one who works in isolated conditions. He needs refreshment—spiritual, physical and emotional. There may be no place to find this. Nowhere to be alone, without people around everywhere. Nothing different to refresh the mind. What to do about the constant physical needs of the people surrounding him and the incessant spiritual demands of the church? Practical means must be found for necessary renewal.

How to balance the needs of his own family with those of the church? How to be an example of consistent Christian living at all times? What level should he and his family adopt? I found that a mission compound mitigated against identifying with the people. They accepted my right to be there, but I could not. But how far can, or should, an expatriate identify? I found a college lecturer or headmaster's standard of living seemed about right.

How to make the home available to all—Christians and non-Christians—without creating too much of a strain on family or self? How to preserve some modicum of privacy? How far to share material goods without being taken advantage of? The church planter must face all these and other occupational hazards as he seeks to establish churches for the Lord.

In some countries today there is a kind of reverse apartheid. No expatriate may hold office or be in any position of responsibility within the church. All must be done by nationals, for is it not a national church? This situation obtains in culturally advanced areas in the city. While the missionary can hardly resist this trend for himself he must seek to ensure that the church is truly cross-cultural. Expatriates and nationals should work together in a unique relationship, with the missionary not *under* national leadership, certainly not *above* it, but *within* it, as a member of the Body of Christ in a newly formed church.

There is no easy answer to any of these questions. Each individual needs to work out what is best and what he understands to be the way of the Lord for him in each situation. And as he seeks for tolerance and patience to bear with the failings of those who are newly the Lord's, let him remember that he too is a failing child of God, as they are.

## APPENDIX

**The Godaverri Delta Mission: a case study**

1 After many years of intensive evangelistic activity it was noted that the response came largely from one people group. Geographically, the area had been previously divided on comity lines with the Canadian Baptists who found the same response. Converts were outcasted, and so land was found for them to enable them to start life afresh in small groups further out from the village, even from the existing outcaste section. The small communities which thus arose are still called Christian *pettahs*. A new physical and cultural environment was created into which new converts could be assimilated.

2 The GDM concentrated their efforts on building up the few converts while continuing in evangelism among all sections of the Hindu community, but with little response. Another people group which was responding was the other section of the outcaste people. The American Lutheran church came right through the whole district and worked among these people with a good response. But since casteism is strong between sections of outcastes, these two groups would never mix. Thus Lutherans and Brethren worked side by side in the same villages and developed HUP churches.

3 The strategy used by GDM from the '20s to the early '50s was as follows:

3.1 Spiritually responsive and intelligent boys were spotted, educated and sent for teacher training. They were then sent to villages which showed interest and where a small Christian group was developing. Often being the only literate person, they became the sociological elder of the community and the potential church. Converted older people were taught to read the Bible and schools provided basic education for the children—all who would come, either Christian or Hindu. All converts came from the same section of outcaste families. After the time-honoured pattern of Hindu village life, a *panchayat* was formed of older Christian men who became both church elders and elders for the new community. The teacher was the pastor, responsible for teaching in the church.

3.2 Finance for the school work came from within the community, with the missionary organizing it. Women did lace work at home and were paid for this work. This was initiated by an early lady missionary who saw the need for the women to earn but realized the danger of children being left with heathen grandmothers if the mother was out working in the fields. This alternative work gave both income and the chance to train children



'Christianly' from their early days. The women were the most spiritually responsive. Income from this work was channelled back into the building of simple mud and wattle school rooms which became church buildings on Sundays, and also provided funds for the building of similarly simple homes for the schoolmaster sent to live, work and evangelize there.

3.3 Teachers gathered each month in a given village to receive pay cheques (mostly government, once the schools were recognized, but with extra mission pay added—a government rule). At this gathering, problems in the communities and churches were discussed, and advice was given. Twice a year during school holidays, teachers gathered for 4–10 day Bible schools. Much regular Bible teaching was given by gifted teachers over the years. What was taught was preached to the growing HUP churches. Women teachers were added to the staff and contributed a lot to the work among women and children. Regular Sunday schools with graduated lessons worked out centrally and inter-church competitions meant a steady flow of young converts into the church.

Field elders, paid by the missionaries, acted as 'trouble-shooters' to assist teachers in problems or disciplinary situations. Their authority was accepted by all, and they were without exception believers of high spiritual calibre. They both supported and corrected the teachers. Where there was a dedicated, faithful, high-principled teacher backed up by a competent and godly wife, there, even today, a strong church remains.

3.4 Field conventions for Bible teaching were held annually and were times of great encouragement and indeed excitement for scattered, small HUP groups. Since Hindu caste infrastructure was never broken, marriages were arranged at such times. Evangelistic meetings were held, for the need for personal conversion was the basis of all teaching. All arrangements were made and expenses paid by the self propagating church which sent one collection per month to the missionary centre for use in payment of field elders' salaries, repairs to buildings and convention expenses. A sense of distinct identity had grown up over the years. 5,000 or more people attended the conventions, camping in palmyra leaf shelters erected for the occasion.

3.5 From the beginning, indigenous hymns with Indian lyric music was used in hymnology. New hymns were written for most conventions. In the very early days, high caste converts wrote many fine hymns with great depth of meaning, but the language was too 'high' for the average believer. Today, simpler but effective Telegu lyrics are used. At gatherings, the Indian custom of women sitting on one side and men on the other was followed. Local dress for men continued to be used, and no Western overtones came into the church. Women Bible teachers and elders' wives

were encouraged and Bible schools were held specially for them. Some very fine Bible teachers—both men and women—arose. Evangelistic outreach has always been a great feature of the church, and Hindu converts have been made, though not too many have been absorbed into the churches. Just a few churches have risen above the HUP status. One church, run by caste convert widows, is a very fine church today, fully transcaste, run by those women who call the preachers for Sundays, pay their expenses and annually run a women's Bible school. For this school, the women bring in all the food required and pay for all expenses, including gifts for missionary speakers. Other areas have followed the same pattern.

#### 4 The strategy used by GDM from 1958.

4.1 In 1958 all the schools had to be handed over to the government and the teachers were subsequently moved from place to place. This was partly a move designed to break down the fast growing Christian community. Some churches did suffer through lost leadership, but by this time most had well taught and experienced elders and leaders. New methods were devised. From time to time, conventions for the whole mission were held and are still being held. Up to 20,000 may attend.

4.2 Villages are now declining. Young people, now often graduates, go to the city for work. No longer are there missionaries, field elders or mission schools. Today, some 150 evangelists with their wives (often simple couples) faithfully carry on the care of the churches and evangelistic outreach, planting still more churches. All are supported from a fund centrally operated (and, I fear, very poorly supported).

4.3 Four couples have gone to the Koyya tribes people, an illiterate people group. Today there are many converts and a number of schools. Telegu is being taught in government schools, a Bible school is run for young people, and they have their own elders and evangelists. This is a fine example of cross-cultural evangelism which has taken root after many years of outreach.

4.4 Young people in the cities are involved in 'spontaneous evangelism' and small house churches are to be found everywhere in a city like Hyderabad. They are tireless and enthusiastic in witnessing, and cross-cultural churches of Telegu speakers are gradually being formed, often under the leadership of one outstanding person. This self propagating movement is very widespread and very exciting. Today in these city house churches the two sections of the outcaste are worshipping and fellowshipping together and even intermarrying—at last!