Calling for a New Paradigm in Mobilization and Ministry to the Unreached

Most of us have long thought starting a church was the first step and shortest path to reaching a people. We were wrong.

Donald McGavran addressed this directly in his (under-circulated) 1981 Perspectives Reader article: A Church for Every People: Plain Talk about a Difficult Subject.¹

In my words, McGavran:
• observed that peoples are reached through groups, not evangelism of individuals.
• showed that “traditional” church planting hinders such movements, and
• stated (twice, for emphasis) that 90% of missionaries use this traditional approach.

In technical terms the traditional method described by McGavran uses extraction evangelism to form conglomerate congregations:
• A missionary family or team witnesses to many scattered individuals, and
• draws those who respond (often without their family)
• to fellowship together (as strangers to one another, gathered by and around the missionaries).

Such traditional church planting generally:
• fights against existing social structures—winning individuals away from their families, and
• patches these individuals, torn from their families, into new, unstable, “foreign” social structures.

This is problematic because
• most unreached people groups perceive Christianity as a threat to their identity as a people, and
• therefore have a deep-seated fear of losing their children to this “dangerous” outside influence (much as Western believers might fear “losing” their children to cults such as Mormonism).

Traditional church planting drives unreached peoples toward being more fearful, and thus movements develop most freely where:
• there has been the least traditional church planting, and
• words and practices perceived by locals as “Christian” (such as “church” and “baptism”) are not introduced by outsiders but left for the Holy Spirit to speak about to local believers in His time.

Many missionaries have been allowed to naively assume that planting churches is the natural first step toward a church planting movement. However McGavran’s article makes it clear that:
• Not only are movements not a natural result of traditional church planting;
• but traditional church planting (as described above) is a major hindrance to movements.

Clarification:
• The “people movements” which inspired McGavran’s article generally:
  • involved group decisions to embrace Christianity,
  • required later foundational biblical instruction, and
  • did not spread easily beyond a single people.

¹ MultMove.net/church-every-people
See my adaptation of McGavran’s article, with modern terminology and perspective: MultMove.net/movement-every-people
• By contrast, today’s Church Planting and Disciple-Making Movements (CPM/DMM):
  • are grounded in discussion of the Bible and obedience to the God of the Bible,
  • tend to multiply farther, more spontaneously and more heterogeneously, and
  • often result in “spontaneous multiplication of movements” among other peoples.

Both forms of movement (people movements and church planting movements):
• work with and spread within existing social structures—winning families and strengthening existing relationships around the Bible,
• result in blessing families (fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham), and
• generally lead whole peoples to become open to God’s blessing through the “obedience of faith.”

Winter and McGavran both perceived that:
• One defining characteristic of unreached peoples is widespread fear of losing their children to Christianity (as they perceive Christianity through their experience, their history of crusaders and colonialism and portrayal of Christianity in the global media, etc.).
• This fear is only overcome through indigenous movements blessing whole families in each people.

Movements are also the only way faith spreads faster than population growth.

In recent years many agencies have been training and urging their missionaries to pursue movements, yet strong influences perpetuate the traditional church planting model in mission field practice:
• an emphasis on where laborers are needed without attention to movements as how peoples are reached,
• lack of awareness that Satan isolates whole peoples from the gospel through their fear of Christianity,
• neglecting God’s emphasis on families in applying individualistic methods to collectivistic peoples,
• ignorance of movements as the biblical and historical means by which peoples become reached,
• lack of experience of movements among sending-base churches and believers,
• expectations placed on missionaries by national churches started through traditional church planting,
• the misunderstanding of traditional church planting as a positive step toward starting a movement,
• an assumption that more expatriates facilitates movements, \(^2\) and
• classification of peoples by % Christian/Evangelical rather than the presence/absence of a movement.

These and other factors perpetuate traditional church planting, such that:
• most missionaries trained to pursue movements revert to traditional church planting on the field, and
• the greatest resistance faced by movement catalysts is often from believers in traditional churches.

Conclusion

The time is long past for a clear shift in our mission and mobilization emphasis:
• from focusing first on where missionaries are needed (country x or people y),
• to guiding any “outsiders” who go to unreached ethne to:
  • let go of practices which inhibit movements (like traditional church planting).
  • find/train local apostolic agents (with gifting and openness to learn) in movement principles, and
  • teach them to listen to Jesus and follow Him\(^3\) in discipling existing relational networks.

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\(^2\) Jim Haney of the IMB reports: "The percentage of outsiders on CPM teams we have assessed has a negative correlation to the likelihood of starting a movement. That is, the higher the percentage of local leaders and believers, the higher the likelihood that a movement is underway or will develop."

\(^3\) John 10:27: My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.