

“Church Planting Movements” Church Planting Movements: The Next Wave?

by David Garrison

The year was 1985. Two significant events took place at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. The first occurred when Anglican missions researcher David Barrett relocated his Kenya-based *World Christian Encyclopedia* research center to the Foreign Mission Board’s headquarters in Richmond, Virginia. Then president of the FMB, Keith Parks, asked Barrett to help Southern Baptists assess how they were doing in their pursuit of their “Bold Mission Thrust” goal of reaching everyone on earth with the gospel by the year 2000.

Barrett’s response was sweet and sour. “The Foreign Mission Board is doing far better than most Great Commission agencies,” he said “but they will never reach their goal if they continue their current course of action.” Parks was intrigued. Barrett went on to explain that, despite record numbers of new missionaries, Southern Baptists were not even touching a huge sector of the world’s population that Barrett referred to as “World A.”

Barrett went on to describe World A in the context of a tri-partite world. “Viewed from the vantage point of the Great Commission,” he said, “the earth can be broken into one of three worlds.” World C was the portion of the world that professed the Christian religion; just over 30%. World B was the portion of the planet that might be called evangelized, in that it had access to the gospel (through missionaries, Scriptures, scattered churches, etc.), but had not yet accepted the Christian faith as its own. World A was that portion of the world’s population without Christians or a viable Christian witness. Despite Southern Baptist and other evangelical agencies sending sizeable numbers of missionaries to foreign fields, virtually none of these were going to World A.

“World A is hostile to residential missionaries,” Barrett explained. Its governments and societies are either Communist or atheist, or Islamic or simply anti-Western.” These factors conspired to keep nearly 1.3 billion lost and unevangelized souls beyond the reach of the gospel. If the Church was going to fulfill its great commission, it would have to find innovative ways to penetrate these untouched corners of the world.

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In 1988, Garrison earned a Ph.D. in historical theology from the University of Chicago. He has taught missions and Christian studies at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Hong Kong Baptist University. His latest book is entitled Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World (Midlothian: WIGTake Resources, 2004). His previous books include The Nonresidential Missionary (MARC, 1990), Something New Under the Sun (IMB, 1998), and the booklet Church Planting Movements (IMB, 2000).

As Parks and other FMB leaders pondered the realities of World A, it took surprisingly little time for them to put together a new initiative aimed penetrating these restricted-access nations. This was the second significant event that occurred in 1985: the formation of Cooperative Services International (CSI), a division within the Foreign Mission Board charged with developing and implementing innovative strategies that would penetrate World A with a nontraditional missionary presence.

In 1985, placing missionaries behind the iron, bamboo, and crescent curtains seemed a lofty enough goal. After all, no missionaries were being allowed into such countries as China, the Soviet Union, and Saudi Arabia. To achieve this aim, FMB missionaries shed their missionary identity and took on the guise of tentmakers as teachers, business persons, and consultants. To their delight, they often found that this was quite enough to gain access to even the most foreboding of countries.

However, these CSI missionaries soon grew restless with mere Christian presence. By 1987, they began a new program that set its sights much higher than mere residence. The vision was nothing less than the urgent evangelization of a people group living within a restricted access World A nation. The new program was called the Nonresidential Missionary (NRM) Program, and though housed within CSI, it had an uneasy relationship with the residential tentmakers who had preceded them into a number of closed countries.

Nonresidential Missionaries pushed for aggressive and far-reaching evangelization efforts, even if it threatened tentmaker residence. NRMs observed that Western tentmakers residing in a World A country were often so highly restricted that they had few opportunities for effective evangelism. CSI's tentmakers, on the other hand, viewed these itinerating gospel agitators as virtual spies who jeopardized tentmaker residence which depended on

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transparency and good relations with local authorities. A few of these early tentmakers jibed that NRM stood for "Not Really Missionaries." NRMs countered that they would rather be Non-residential Missionaries than Non-missionary residentials, a not-so-veiled allusion to the sparse harvest gleaned through tentmaking.

By 1992, CSI tentmakers and NRMs had penetrated much of World A with both presence and gospel proclamation. A six-month internal study of their effectiveness revealed that the initial aim of presence had already given way to widespread evangelization through the production and distribution of new Bible translations, *Jesus Film* versions, and radio broadcasts. However, within a couple of years even the lofty goal of evangelization was being surpassed as a number of beachhead churches were planted among people groups for the first time in history.

By 1994, Nonresidential Missionaries were flowing in and out of so many post-Communist countries that the "nonresidential" tag no longer seemed to fit. Thus, NRMs came to be known as Strategy Coordinators. Their vision was no longer limited to evangelization. Expanding their efforts to include training national partners, CSI's Strategy Coordinators focused more and more on church planting. However, their goal of planting churches was soon eclipsed by something that none of the early founders of CSI had ever imagined.

In Autumn 1994 God "raised the bar" higher than any had dreamed possible. It was the time of year when missionaries send in their annual reports to agency headquarters. Missionaries are busy people and rarely enthusiastic about stopping long enough to tell how many new believers were baptized, how many new churches were started, or how many unreached

people groups they had introduced to the gospel. Each year these reports typically show modest growth in each of these key areas.

But this year was different. The report from Strategy Coordinators David and Jan Watson serving in India made an incredible claim. Their report listed nearly a hundred cities, towns, and villages with new churches and thousands of new believers.

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The words stung, but David held his tongue. "Come and see," he said.

Later that year, a survey team headed by Watson's supervisor arrived in India to investigate. Together they visited Lucknow, Patna, Delhi, Varanasi, and numerous smaller Indian towns and villages that David had listed in his report. The supervisor later commented, "I personally went in very doubtful, but we were wrong. Everywhere we went it was exactly as Watson had reported. God was doing something amazing there."

Amazing—and difficult to believe. It was around that time that the words of Habakkuk 1:5 took on a new relevance. "Look to the nations, watch and be utterly amazed for I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told."

A year later, a report from Southeast Asia described a similar eruption of new churches. The following year missionaries serving in Latin America witnessed the same sort of spontaneous multiplication of hundreds of new churches. That same year two more such reports came in from China. Around that time, we began to refer to these amazing phenomena as *Church Planting Movements*.

The reports keep coming. As he promised, God is doing something extraordinary *in our day*. As he draws a lost world to himself, Church Planting Movements appear to be the *way* he is doing it. What began as a small trickle of reports a few years ago has now grown into a steady stream of previously unreached people groups pouring into God's Kingdom.

In East Asia, a missionary reported: "I launched my three-year plan in November, 2000. My vision was to see 200 new churches started among my people group over the next three years. But four months later, we had already reached that goal. After only six months, we had already seen 360 churches planted and more than 10,000 new believers baptized! Now I'm asking God to enlarge my vision."

During the decade of the 1990s, Christians in a Latin American country overcame relentless government persecution to grow from 235 churches to more than 4,000 churches with more than 30,000 converts awaiting baptism.

A pastor in Western Europe wrote: "Last year my wife and I started 15 new house churches. As we left for a six-month stateside assignment, 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."

A missionary strategist in Africa reported: "It took us 30 years to plant four churches in this country. We've started 65 new churches in the last nine months."

In Southeast Asia, a missionary strategist began working with three small house churches of 85 members in 1993. Just seven years later, membership had swollen to more than 90,000 baptized believers worshipping in 920 new churches.

A missionary strategist assigned to a North Indian people group found just 28 churches among them in 1989.

By the year 2000, a Church Planting Movement had erupted catapulting the number of churches to more than 4,500 with an estimated 300,000 baptized believers.

Over the past decade, literally millions of new believers have entered Christ's Kingdom through Church Planting Movements. The next challenge was to understand *how* God was at work in these movements.

In August 1998, nearly a dozen Strategy Coordinators and mission



researchers who had experienced Church Planting Movements gathered for discussions near Richmond, Virginia. Before the year was over, a second group of Church Planting Movement practitioners met in Singapore. The purpose of both meetings was the same: *to understand Church Planting Movements*. Together, the participants crafted a working definition of a Church Planting Movement and then began listing the characteristics that were present in each of the movements they had seen.

Debate was lively and energy ran high as the strategists and researchers shuffled between three or four whiteboards with scribbled lists of qualities, characteristics, and obstacles.

Examining what God was doing was a heady experience. God surprised them in that many things they had long held to be essential were strangely absent from *his* Church Planting Movements, while other elements clearly present in

each Church Planting Movement were so obvious they were nearly overlooked.

Out of these intense sessions with real Church Planting Movement practitioners, came a 60-page booklet published in January 2000 under the title *Church Planting Movements*. During the first year that the booklet was in print, it spread quickly around the world and was locally translated into more than 20 languages.

What was abundantly clear was that God was raising the vision of Southern Baptists again and again. From an initial dissatisfaction with sending traditional missionaries only to countries that would grant missionary visas, God had led Southern Baptists to penetrate restricted countries with tentmakers. He then showed them that they could do even more by focusing on evangelization, even if it meant sacrificing residence to do it. As the first new churches were planted among unreached people groups, God was raising the bar yet again. When these churches began multiplying exponentially, the range of what was possible exceeded everyone's imaginations.

Today, more than a decade has passed since this new wave of Church Planting Movements began rapidly proliferating around the globe. The Southern Baptist International Mission Board (formerly Foreign Mission Board) is currently seeing more than half a million baptisms each year, the great majority of them resulting from Church Planting Movements. At present, the IMB is monitoring more than fifty locations around the world where variations of Church Planting Movements can be seen.

Consider the following examples:

India

- In Madhya Pradesh, a Church Planting Movement produces 4,000 new churches in less than seven years.
- In the decade of the 1990s, the Kui people of Orissa started nearly 1,000 new churches and another 1,000 new outreach

points. In 1999, they baptized more than 8,000 new believers. By 2001 they were starting a new church every 24 hours.

- In less than a decade, a Church Planting Movement among the Bhojpuri people resulted in more than 4,000 new churches and some 300,000 new believers.

Other Parts of Asia

- Church Planting Movement in Outer Mongolia produced more than 10,000 converts while a subsequent movement in Inner Mongolia results in some 50,000 new believers—all during the decade of the 1990s.
- Despite a Southeast Asian government's attempt to eliminate Christianity, one country has added more than 30,000 new believers in the past five years.

Africa and the Muslim World

- In eight months, 28 Ethiopian evangelists led 681 persons to Christ and started 83 new churches.
- Today, after years of resistance to the gospel, some 90,000 of Kenya's 600,000 Maasai are followers of Jesus Christ.
- After centuries of hostility to Christianity, Central Asian Muslims today are embracing the gospel. In Kazakhstan, the past decade has seen more than 13,000 Kazakhs come to faith worshipping in more than 300 new Kazakh churches.
- A movement in one Asian country has produced a large number of Muslim background believers in Jesus Christ worshipping in an estimated 10,000 contextualized churches.

Europe and the Americas

- A Church Planting Movement in one Latin American country increased the total number of churches from 129 to more than 2,600 in a decade, an increase of more than 1900 percent.
- In 1999, among the refugees of the Netherlands, Church Planting Movement practitioners

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reported 45 new church starts in a single year.

- In 1958, the Gypsies of Spain and France baptized 3,000 new believers, and by 1964 there were 10,000. By 1979 there were 30-40,000 church members with 150,000 attending worship.
- In 17 years, a Baptist church in North Carolina became the mother, grandmother and great grandmother to 42 churches from which sprang 125 ministers.
- In 20 years time, DOVE Christian Fellowship grew from three cell churches with 25 members to more than 80 cell church networks with more than 20,000 members on five continents.

China

- A Church Planting Movement in a northern Chinese province has seen 20,000 new believers and 500 new churches planted in less than five years.
- In Henan Province Christianity has exploded from less than a million to more than five million in only eight years.
- Chinese Christians in Qing'an County of Heilongjiang Province planted 236 new churches in a single month.
- In southern China a Church Planting Movement produced more than 90,000 baptized believers in 920 house churches in eight years.
- In 2002, one Church Planting Movement produced 15,000 new churches and 160,000 baptized believers in a single year.

This global proliferation of Church Planting Movements has prompted the author to broaden and deepen his study of these mighty acts of God. What can we learn from them? How is God at work in them? How can we align ourselves with His purposes.

Over the past decade, our understanding of Church Planting Movements

has continued to grow. We now have examples from a range of cultures and settings of how God has used common elements and approaches to propel these movements. We have also learned valuable lessons about what our role should be. While God is the author of every Church Planting Movement, he has allowed us to contribute to or confound these movements. We have learned all too well what it takes to poison a movement, causing it to die a quick or slow death.

These insights are the subject of a new book. In it, the author profiles nearly two dozen Church Planting Movements and dissects them to learn how we can better align ourselves with these works of God.

Are Church Planting Movements the last wave in the fulfillment of the Great Commission? As God continues to raise the bar of our expectations and vision, could there be even more remarkable harvests yet to unfold that "we would not believe, even if we were told?" **IJFM**

Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World (Midlothian: WIGTake Resources, 2004) is available at www.churchplantingmovements.com. Or through phone orders at: Toll-free phone: (888) 795-4434; toll-free fax: (888) 795-4471; other phone: (806) 795-4434; other fax: (806) 795-4471.