As the overcrowded and under–maintained bus slowed to pick up a passenger on the rural Asian road, an older woman stepped out of the bushes. The bus struck her and knocked her 20 feet, killing her instantly. A small boy and girl, probably her grandchildren, fell on her body weeping. Curtis Sergeant, a strategy coordinator for the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, witnessed this from the back of the bus. He was with a national friend and they were about five hours into their ten-hour journey across the province that was to be his new mission field.

Sergeant was pained, but having spent years in less developed countries, had seen such accidents before. But what happened in the next few minutes shook him and caused him to grieve in his heart.

It wasn’t even that the bus driver spit on the body and cursed the grandmother for denting his bus. Sergeant, too far back to be able to exit to offer assistance, said to his companion, “You have to tell the bus driver to stop.” “Why?” the friend puzzled. “Because those children there are all alone, and someone needs to do something to help them.” Then his companion spoke the truth about the people in this mission field that caused even this veteran missionary to question God’s wisdom in sending him there. “Everyone on this bus has enough troubles of their own.” So the bus rumbled down the road.

Anger welled up inside him. “Lord, why did you send me to this place of heartless, evil people?” And the answer, spoken to his heart, came back: “That’s why I sent you. The people have no hope, no purpose, nothing to give. I sent you so that they would.” Sergeant sighs as he tells the story today, “People’s hearts were hopeless.”

This incident took place in 1991. For the next five years, Sergeant worked strategically in this province, and saw his efforts wonderfully blessed by God as a great church planting movement began in this area. A Church-Planting Movement is sometimes defined as “a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment.”

Even though this was a restricted-access country, much was brought together by God in the province to cause exponential growth of churches over the next several years. An important factor was the structure of the local churches themselves that facilitated multiplication. Sergeant and others who would join him in this movement also intentionally and tactically used short–term mission teams to kindle the fire.

How fast and momentous was the growth of this church-planting movement? To grasp the enormity of the task, picture a population the size of New York City, or if you’d rather, Kentucky plus Oregon. What happened over a few years was that a significant, Holy Spirit–powered, church–planting movement caught fire. It was kindled to an important degree by short–term missionaries. Sergeant looked around five years after God used him to begin the work, saw that he was no longer needed...
there, and went on to his next calling. That was far from the end of the story, however.

According to David Garrison in his book, *Church Planting Movements*, Sergeant began with only three house churches numbering 85 members. To his knowledge, although there were a few government-sanctioned churches that they avoided, there were no other followers of Jesus in the province. The first year, six churches were planted. The next year, they started 17, then 50. Sergeant remained until 1996. By the time he left, the province had about 8,000 followers of Jesus. God’s blessing on the national church’s growth had taken them to every county in the province, all five ethnic groups, and were beginning to saturate the entire province. The rest of the team from the Southern Baptist IMB was gone by 1998. By that time, there were 550 house churches, numbering more than 55,000 believers in the province. Map A shows the growth between 1993 and 1998. Each dot represents a church. By 2001, it is estimated that there were 900 churches with nearly 100,000 believers worshipped in them. By 2005, as seen in Map B, one might wonder if there was any area left without a church within walking distance. This all took place in a country that if not closed to the gospel, certainly had a government that was hostile to non-sanctioned churches.

What factors and actions led to that growth, and to the further exponential growth continuing to this day? Sergeant lists several:

- **Short-Term Volunteers**: Because the province and its people groups included so few Christians, an important church-planting tactic was to use short-term missionaries recruited from other countries. Although they did not speak the predominant language of the province, they were able to speak a shared language with many people in the county seats. These short-term missionaries came from several different countries. They appeared as if they were from the same general ethnic group as the population, and so did not draw attention to themselves because of their low profile.

- **A Person of Peace**: First, they would seek out a person of peace in each new community. That person may or may not have been a believer initially, but could help facilitate a house church. The first church then began with an emphasis on discipleship. Then Sergeant would connect with leaders and tie them into a network of other house churches.

- **The Significant Advantage of Short-Term Missionaries**: There was no temptation to develop dependence on outsiders, because they knew the visitors wouldn’t be there that long. “After all, Paul was essentially a short-term missionary,” Sergeant reminds us. “Except for longer stays in Corinth and Ephesus, he was not ministering anywhere very long.”

- **Training the Trainers**: Sergeant led the short-termers to spend much of their time training nationals who would in turn train others. The nationals would be trained in a central location. When they left to return to their own town or a new village, they would then train others. The locals absorbed the training, sponge-like, because they knew from the beginning that it was their own individual and community responsibility to obey Christ’s commands and impart those to others. Picture the urgency on the faces of the national believers as they responded to the training. Sergeant shares how training, leadership and spiritual growth are all tied in together. “The heavenly economy is different from the earthly economy. As I am faithful in leading others, He will reveal more of himself to me. It’s all based on giving, not on protecting what I have. Keeping people from leading is the last thing you want to do. Everyone is a contributor, not just a consumer. Prayer, Bible study, life in the Body, persecution and suffering.” We’ll talk more about exactly how new believers were prepared for sharing their faith in a moment.

- **Start with Accountability**: Sergeant is often asked how the church’s theology could remain solid with such fast growth. He asserts that it has to do with the way the churches function. They have dual accountability. Every time the members get together they
are asked two questions: (1). Did you apply what you learned? (2). To whom have you passed this teaching, and how have they applied it? According to Sergeant, this keeps them tied to the Lord and accountable. Scripture is the authority, and there is a twin focus on right belief and right behavior in daily life. Both orthodoxy and orthopraxy (from the Greek “orthopraxia”), meaning correct action/activity) are important, whereas in more traditional churches we have become a bit skittish about questioning other believers about their conduct. “In movements that are this active, you don’t have to worry about orthodoxy, because it’s being constantly tested.” The network itself has very high accountability. The individuals are accountable to their local church. The church is then accountable to the district, which is accountable to the county leadership, which is further accountable at the province level.

• Duckling Discipleship: Another question that Sergeant often hears is, “What about leadership, with so few people formally trained, or even having been Christians very long?” His answer might cause a smile. “When you see a family of ducks crossing the road, only the first duckling is following the mother. The rest are following the duckling in front of them.” Sergeant explains. “None of us has achieved the full measure of the stature of Christ. Every one is mature enough to be a leader of another duckling. Follow me as I follow Christ.” That’s a lot of responsibility on new believers, but they seem up for it. “Each of us, including a brand new follower, is ready and responsible to lead others to Christ. Everything we receive, we have an obligation to pass on to others.”

The churches tended to be small. Seldom did a house church grow much larger than 30 members before it spun off a sister church. This splitting accomplished two beneficial results: it avoided attracting government attention, and it caused faster growth. A good summary of the structure of these house churches is to look at the acronym Sergeant developed, POUCH churches.

The POUCH Church
Is this a one–place, one–time kind of miracle by God for which we ought to sit back in wonder and praise Him? Or is it a wonderful miracle, plus a basket of lessons for us to apply? Dan Hitzhusen, International Vice President of the mission organization e3 Partners, offers a view into how short term mission groups have learned from this and continued the POUCH church idea. He says that short–term missionaries can be very effective in coming alongside nationals in church planting. While recognizing that sometimes poorly planned team efforts can do more harm than good, he lists several ways they can help when done right:

Short–term teams can open doors for nationals. Their very novelty can create interest. Some short–term missionaries explain, “We’re just the bait! Once the door is open, the nationals walk right in.”

Short–term teams can be used by nationals to plow up difficult ground with prayer. More than one short–term mission team has spent their time prayer–walking through unreached or difficult areas. Nationals are encouraged by the fact that someone would come from so far away to show love for their country. And God answers their prayers.

They can use their God–given gifts and talents. They can be used in evangelism, storytelling (even through translators), and sports ministries.

They can train. Perhaps most significantly for the province that experienced such wonderful growth, they can be a source of training for nationals. Although it was a country essentially closed to missions, Christian visitors were able to move in and out to help train the trainers. In the first year, four teams of 4–10 members came ten times. They trained nationals to plant 11 churches, strategically placed in different counties, in the first year. Was it really the trained nationals who were doing the work year after year? Hitzhusen offers a striking piece of evidence. Commenting on how inconspicuously Curtis Sergeant worked during his years there, he says, “When he left, probably only about 20 people in the province even knew his name!”

They can model POUCH Groups.
Believers (sometimes joined by seekers) can take part in these groups at home, and then become comfortable with the concept and the accountability involved as they help in church-planting. Ideally, each believer is involved in two groups: the one in which he or she is a participant, and a new one that he or she is starting. In a church-planting movement, much the same thing happens.

Sounds good, but in the fast-growing church-planting movement in Sergeant’s province, what really happened at ground level? How quickly were new believers expected to share their faith and even plant
chances? Immediately! As soon as someone came to 
Christ, Sergeant or one of his team members would say 
the following: “It is a great blessing to lead someone 
else to Christ. It is an even greater blessing to start 
a church. It is the greatest blessing to train others to 
start churches. I want you to have the greatest blessing, 
but let’s start with great blessing.” Then together, they 
would make a list of 100 friends and begin to role-play 
sharing the Gospel with five friends. Then they would 
pray and go and share with their five friends right away. 
After that new believer came to Christ, he or she would 
repeat the same phrases. Many wouldn’t really know 
how to plant a church yet, but they would learn over 
time as one duckling follows the other. One disciples 
another who may be only one step behind.

So then, could this be replicated? The evidence of growth 
like this in other areas that apply these strategies gives a 
resounding, Yes! Sergeant, now the Vice-President for 
Global Strategies with e3 Partners, has worked with the 
same system in other countries with results that evidence 
God’s blessing. E3 Partners has taken much of this, and 
worked with short-term teams to come alongside church 
planters in many other countries. In India, a mission called 
Light India has begun, whose purpose is to see thousands 
of new churches started in every state of India using this 
strategy. Curtis Sergeant has stated that heaven’s economy 
is different from the world’s economy. How about this: The 
average cost to train and provide materials to start each 
c new church in Light India is only $13.

E3 Partners has also combined the experience of POUCH 
churches with modern technology and media experience through their I Am 
Second ministry. Originally begun 
as an evangelistic effort in the 
Dallas/Ft. Worth Texas area in 
2008, it has gone world-wide as 
both an outreach and a training 
resource. I Am Second Groups 
are a version of POUCH churches, 
and include an Internet overlay. This 
resource has been a useful source 
of training for the church-planting 
movement. The visible face of 
the ministry is a website www. 
iamsecond.com, which has 
striking and unusual filmed 
testimonies by people, some 
well-known, others more 
like your next-door neigh-
bor. Bethany Hamilton, 
subject of the film Soul 
Surfer, shares her faith.

St. Louis Rams quarterback Sam Bradford is on it, as is 
Texas Ranger Josh Hamilton talking about his recovery 
from addiction. Others discuss how God has rescued them 
from a myriad of conditions, from abuse to war. The site 
offers opportunities for seekers or strugglers to call, chat 
or email for help. People are attracted by the testimonies, 
and invited to consider giving their lives to the Lord. It is 
a great tool to use to lead seekers to Christ in urban areas 
that have Internet connections.

At other locations on the site are invitations to begin or 
join an I Am Second group, patterned on the POUCH 
church idea. Deeper in the website are also Bible stud-
ies, with questions that are used in the groups and new 
churches. Training materials are also available on this 
one site, which are now being used worldwide. All of 
this comes together for the purpose of being a resource 
to believers, trainers and new church plants. Call it an 
online site to spark an offline movement.

You’ve probably heard the story of the little boy whose fa-
thor wanted to teach him the power of multiplication. The 
man asked his son whether he would have more money 
if he received $1.00 a day for 30 days, or a penny the first 
day, two pennies the next, and so forth, each day receiving 
double the day before. It seemed to the little boy that the 
addition of $1.00 every day would yield him more than 
starting with just a penny and doubling that daily. The real 
answer, to his astonishment, is that doubling the penny 
daily would yield a haul on the last day of over $10 million. 
People are much more than pennies, but God’s economy is 
also one of multiplication rather than simple addition. And 
Jesus talked of seeds each multiplying “a hundred–fold.”

In 2010, Curtis Sergeant was visiting his friend Thom 
in India. It had been 19 years since the bus incident, 
and 14 years since Sergeant left the province of that 
East Asian country. A Christian woman came to 
their door, very excited. “I’ve got to tell you about 
this place I visited. It was amazing! Every village 
has churches. The worship is phenomenal. They’re 
sending out missionaries! The government formerly 
persecuted the Christians, and now they are en-
couraging churches because the crime rate is down.” 
Thom asked, “Where is this place?” Sergeant smiled 
when she named the same province in which God had 
used him so many years back—the province that less 
than one generation before had been, a place of “heartless, 
evil people” with no hope in their hearts.]

1. David Garrison, Church Planting 
Movements (Midlothian: WIGTake 

2. Garrison, pg 60–61.