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## URBAN MISSIONS TRANSFORMATION AND BANGLADESH

*Shankar Shikdar*

### INTRODUCTION

“Almost everyone wishes for the city they live in to be a secure, thriving, wonderful City (Crane 2015, p. 16).” My transformation started from the port city of Chittagong, Bangladesh in 1986 soon after the completion of my secondary examination and later migrated to Dhaka in 2001, the capital city, for employment at Bangladesh Football Federation. Then, I did not have a sense to justify my movement; however, I was impressed by the first great urban novelist Charles Dickens (1812-1870), who portrayed urban life in the Victorian England and Oliver Twist (1837-39) who represents a radical change in Dickens’s themes. The replica of urban development is supported by theology and missiology (Crane 2015, p.11). My aim is to interconnect our city with the context of Crane’s missiological view. Today’s Dhaka is decidedly different than 2001. Now it is one of the largest populous (21 million) cities of the world. Around 13% of total population (163 million) is on its shoulder, which is equal to the people of 8750 villages. Crane (2015) unerringly says the density of population in the urban areas unlock the journey to spread Christianity (p.12).

### TRANSFORMATION APPROACHES AND MODELS

Brooks Winnie (2020) says “the most compelling reason for focusing on cities is because that is where the people are” (MBTS-MAIS, W. 1). God needs people. The most common factors influence Bangladeshi people to migrate into city are for the hope of 1) better lifestyle and 2) education. I was born in a village where there had only government primary schools and high schools. Up till now Bangladesh has no university in the village, let alone in the 19th

century. I was concerned of insecurity, draught, instability, advance education, job opportunity, religious freedom, environment safety, etc. Without moving to the city, I could not have religious freedom. Maybe, up to now, I have to worship with gods and goddesses eg. Durgapuja, Saraswati Puja<sup>1</sup> etc. Urban mission could set free one from community pressure. I am one of the best examples of AOB<sup>2</sup> through their urban ministry.

1. Durga Puja is an annual Hindu festival which admires and pays homage to the Hindu goddess Durga and Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge, music, art, wisdom, and learning.

2. AOB refers to Association of Baptist, one of the 4 major Baptist Denominations of Bangladesh. It is part of ABWE.

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### CONTENTS

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|-----------|---|
| <b>1</b>  | <b>Urban Missions Transformation and Bangladesh</b><br><i>Shankar Shikdar</i>     |
| <b>6</b>  | <b>Urban Poor Mission</b><br><i>Raineer Chu</i>                                   |
| <b>14</b> | <b>The Pandemic’s Impact on Urban Churches in China Today</b><br><i>David Lim</i> |
| <b>20</b> | <b>Planting in All Seasons: Personal Reflection</b><br><i>TonyVic Tira</i>        |
| <b>25</b> | <b>Leadership or Servanthood?</b><br><i>Hwa Yung</i>                              |
| <b>27</b> | <b>House Church Planting in Bashkortostan, Russia</b><br><i>Christopher Carr</i>  |

Crane (2015) indicates that “Four key theological components are necessary for a theologically sound definition of urban transformation”. And these are: “1) Transformation is the work of God and is in alignment with God’s purposes; 2) Transformation is Gospel-centered; 3) Transformation is Kingdom-oriented; 4) Transformation is holistic (p.19-21).” Presently the population of Dhaka is 21,005,860<sup>3</sup> and in 2030 it may reach into 28,076,000. Crane (2015) considers Biblical priority of cities as the divine reward, individual change needs community involvement. Cities are the places where we deliver God’s purpose and the best place to serve the poor, God calls us for the well being of our cities and urban people are related to the wellbeing of cities. It is the best place to welcome and love people around, and we should envisage a transformed city life (P. 22-26).

According to statistics, 50% of total global population was in the city (2006) that will increase to more than 70% in 2030. However, there still has some cities with 80% population. It is our responsibility to innovate approaches and models to keep pace with the changing scenario. Crane (2015) indicates three approaches and models of urban transformation one of which is “Macro-Perspective of Models of Urban Transformation (p. 31).” It shows how the models of urban transformation correspond to the approaches.

### **BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CITIES IN CHANGING ENVIRONMENT**

Dhaka city is one of the largest multinational mega zones where massive traffic moves and stays together. It has an outstanding influence, plenty of population, social and cultural freedom, and theology of innovation. It reminds me of Paul’s missionary journey to Asia Minor<sup>4</sup> which was based on cities, and even he preached in the most influential cities of Rome (Acts 28:17-30). Paul’s ministry was the continuation of Psalm 48:1-3 where Jesus gets a name for Jerusalem, the city of the great King. However, the cities of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah had a bad influence on our predecessors. God desires security & praise<sup>5</sup> through the city (Genesis 11:4). It is God’s plan of redemption for mankind where Abraham is portrayed as yearning for the heavenly city.

God blessed Adam and Eve to fill the earth (Genesis 1:18). And the Bible reminds us of God’s beautiful desire and will of redemption (Revelation 21-21) for His people in the city. The first heaven, and the first

3. Dhaka Population 2020 (World Population View) February 17, 2020: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/dhaka-population/>

4. The cities located on the Anatolian peninsula (modern-day Turkey). Cities of Asia Minor important to the New Testament accounts included Alexandria, Troas, Assos, Ephesus, Miletus, Patara, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, Thyatira, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Colossae, Attalia, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and Tarsus (Holman Bible Dictionary).

5. They build a city in order not to be dispersed over the face of the whole earth (it is the security God desires) and they build a tower with its top in the heavens in order to make a name of themselves (it’s the praise).

earth were completely gone. However, we welcomed the Holy City of the New Jerusalem and “now God makes his home with human beings”(Revelation 21:3). Genesis 1:28 says the cultural mandate is an urban mandate. In Matthew 5:14 Jesus told the City of the Mount (metaphor) is the light of the world. His ultimate journey to the great city of Jerusalem is the movement towards urban ministry, because God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob flourishing cities where they can live as they remember God’s goodness. (Deuteronomy 6:10).

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**“The urban perspective on characteristics of a good city are: Density, Vibrancy, Diversity, Security, Economic Opportunity, Organic Growth” while the “Biblical Perspective of Characteristics of a Good City are: God-Centeredness, Shalom Social Vision, Kingdom Communities” (Crane 2015, p. 48, 54).**

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Go, Eliza (2020) exactly states, “We are to bear witness of God’s Kingdom and live out the peace that only comes from Him under His covenant” (MBTS-MAIS, W. 2). The urban perspective and Biblical perspective are not similar in considering a city as a good city. “The urban perspective on characteristics of a good city are: Density, Vibrancy, Diversity, Security, Economic Opportunity, Organic Growth” while the “Biblical Perspective of Characteristics of a Good City are: God-Centeredness, Shalom Social Vision, Kingdom Communities” (Crane 2015, p. 48, 54). The church is God’s Community within all the cities of the world. Based on Biblical framework by Crane (2018), there are 6 implications for the church: “1) Cities are Places of Common Grace, 2) Cities are Filled with People in need of Redemption, 3) Cities are Strategic, 4) Churches as Royal Priesthood, 5) Churches as Prophetic Presence, and 6) Churches as Foretaste are perfectly set” ( p. 7-10).

### **RESPONSE TO THE THEOLOGY AND MISSIOLOGY**

Church should reflect godly purposes (Crane 2015, p. 68) through worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and mission based on the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). I think very few churches in Bangladesh care for a deeper root system (Crane 2015, p. 66) through:

- 1) Message of Eternal Life (Jesus Christ) John 3:16;
- 2) Support people (human rights) Matthew 25:35-36,

- 3) Involve Community (learning & development programs) in multicultural and multi-religious society; 4) Awareness of people from different epidemics and pandemic (Yellow fever, Rubella, Dengue, COVID 19 etc.)
- 4) Care for Fellowship with children, family and parents, etc.

I appreciate Khumalo Mpho (2020) when he enlightens us in his words, "Above all, we need to discern the hand of God about where He wants us to be and how He wants us to roll out our presence and programs in the city" (MBTS-MAIS W.3). In Bangladesh, it is thorny to have a vision let alone strategy and action. We experience systematic and unsystematic oppression by the dominant groups. Power is an intrinsic characteristic (eternal power and divine nature) of God (Romans 1:20). Theology and missiology knowledge teaches us to obey the great commission and the great commandment. It is to be remembered that 1) Church is the approved agent of the Words of God and holds authorization to carry out the gospel of Christ, and 2) Church is the Judicial Authority of God. It is the lawful assembly to accept the body and blood of Christ in remembrance of Him and to take His good news. Thus, the church should utilize power to preserve, teach and preach what Jesus says on the above. According to Crane, the Godly Systems are:

- 1) Spiritual relationship with God (Deut 6:4-6, 14-16),
- 2) Politics of Justice (Deut 6:6-9, 17-19)
- 3) Economics of Stewardship (Deut 6:10-12, 20-25).

There has no exception of theological task, training and education (Crane 2015, p. 79) and missiological understanding to implement the Godly systems in the city.

Crane (2015) indicates, "The canopy ecosystem model addresses the elements of a good city with which the Church must be engaged. The model begins with a solid, God-centered vision grounded in biblical theology and missiology. The vision is one that prayerfully hopes for shalom in the city. A city marked by shalom is one that is just, secure, diverse, and provides opportunities for livelihood and growth" (p.163). We need Shalom that can give us a peaceful urban life. Teh (2018) exactly states that it is balanced with work, family and private life (work-life balance).

### THE PRESENCE OF INCARNATION IN THE URBAN CHURCH

Urbanization is the output of industrialization. It's an intersection of multi-cultural people that carry the norms of the society. However, there has some significance apart from the rural areas. The Church is not to change the culture but to change the heart of human beings who changes the culture. Crane

(2015) argues about the presence of incarnation for transformation (p. 83). However, I think, the urban church is anyhow dependent on the groups or individuals for social change. To have an ideal transformation, the urban church works as a canopy ecosystem (p. 88). In Bangladesh there have been many examples of "Guest (urban) Churches"<sup>6</sup>. Overnight they start the church with small groups, chase people with a view to increase in numbers, after some time they become tired and finally close down. They take this attempt often top down through community leaders or bottom up approaches by selling heads of slums people. They even renew or restart the church in another city, with another name, with another group of people. This process can also be called Church Business.<sup>7</sup> It does not have the presence of incarnation in the church. I believe, the urban church should ideally 1) bring peace (shalom) for all, 2) bring community engagement (bridging) to people, 3) develop relationship (urban expression), and 4) serve as pioneer models (distinct community of Christ) of the society (p. 96).

Shin, Julia Seongae (2020) positively expresses, "Regarding the truths of the gospel, we need to be firm about the constant values (MBTS-MAIS W. 4)." I am an immigrant at my own church (Dhaka) from my home town (Chittagong). I see some churches here in Dhaka having a rubber stamp management committee, pastors and evangelists do not have any voice. They are led by autocrat(s). On the contrary, there are also many small churches around the cities, which do not have minimum facilities, but doing wonderful work in the urban community. It means that the ability of the gospel does not depend on the wealth and power but to the faithfulness (incarnational presence) of God. To make disciples of urban dwellers the church should ensure missional posture (p. 96-96) through 1) reaching out to them with love and peace (shalom); 2) to connect the community people and slum dwellers (bridge); 3) to establish the community with a relationship (urban expression); and 4) follow the uniqueness of each community (distinctness of the local culture).

### ROLE OF MINISTRIES AND ORGANIZATION

Christ himself said, "Let your light shine before men, so they see our good works and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Ortiz (2003) noted the prediction of Rafael Salas that by the end of the 20th century the world would experience radical and overwhelming change with the majority of people living in urban centers, primarily in the cities of Asia, Africa and Latin America (Ortiz, p. 43)<sup>8</sup>. However, up till now "The

6. Guest Urban Church refers here as an allegory of a church for personal benefit, temporary advantage etc.

7. Church Business refers here as profit making enterprise in the name of the church of God.

8. Themelios, An international Journal for Pastors and Students of Theological and Religious Studies, The Gospel Coalition, Volume 28, Issue 2 (Spring, 2003)

rapid urbanization in Asia and Latin America has found the Church there unprepared” (Stuart Murray, *City Vision: A Biblical View*, 62).

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**The Christian organizations in the city are symbolized as orchids in the forest. Just like trees, the churches benefited from the ministries and organizations. Thus cities are in need of organizations that focus on evangelism, discipleship, community service, and leadership development. Thus, these are to be considered as the associate branch of the church that could be a vital way to reach and impact the city dwellers.**

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Lee David Hong Joo (2020) notifies, “Rather than the expensive program, we need to focus on the people in the city and permeate them. As we live for public good work, we could be multiplied” (MBTS-MAIS W. 5). The Christian organizations in the city are symbolized as orchids in the forest. Just like trees, the churches benefited from the ministries and organizations. Thus cities are in need of organizations that focus on evangelism, discipleship, community service, and leadership development. Thus, these are to be considered as the associate branch of the church that could be a vital way to reach and impact the city dwellers (Crane 2015, p. 100). Tim Keller (2010) emphasizes cities as the 21st century dominant factor and argues that the urban churches should reach out missiological movement with 1) young-adults, 2) most unreached groups, 3) business owners/ traders, and 4) the poor. In my observation, targeted church planting damages the Biblical doctrine. Church is chasing behind rural settings than counting neighborhood people around it. Cities in Bangladesh need to consider about educational institutes, neighbourhood, storefronts, etc.

#### **RECUPERATE THE FUNCTION OF CHURCH**

I appreciate the statement of Leong Ruth (2020), “For those who are in need in our church, I do see love in action among the church family” (MBTS-MAIS W.6) Because the Bible is the voice of the voiceless and help for the hopeless, it speaks up about rights, ensures justice and breaks the silence of the poor. Poverty and injustice are very common themes of movies<sup>9</sup> in the cities of Bangladesh, which people enjoy watching. City people lose their entertainment without this. It does not create any sense of emotion in people’s mind. Because, it has already been adjusted and adopted in

<sup>9</sup>. Movie represents here as the allegory of scenery.

their social norms and culture. Now the urban people consider this as a universal part of the society. Here people cannot think of a city without the poor and the slums. The characteristics of the city dwellers as set by Crane (2016) are almost the same with the poor around us: 1) in need of money, 2) less rooted communities, 3) relying on public transportation and utilities, 4) extremely oppressed, 5) living cost is higher than their income, 6) involve in crime for money 7) less trusted & no collective voice and 8) lack of development (Reader, p.118-19).

Crane (2016) further quoted by Craig L. Blomberg, “Christianity views the poor differently – more positively – than any other religion or worldview” (p.124). I partially differ this in the context of Dhaka, because most of the Christians here are living below the poverty line, even some Christians are also living in those so called slum areas like sheds in the cities. They often have no scope to view the poor differently from the same shoes. Jesus blesses the poor and we see that in the beatitudes<sup>10</sup> of Jesus when He says blessed are those who hunger, weep, hated, excluded, insulted, rejected and much (Luke 6:21-22).

It is a matter of concern that there may have multiple viewpoints; according to Crane (2016) most Christian churches experienced that the poor is one of the important tools of political and criminal game plan. The literacy, technology, communication etc. (p. 122) are the secondary (artificial) reason of urban poor and/or slum dwellers. I agree with Crane while he explains three ways for the church to respond; 1) Mercy- meeting emergency needs; 2) Love- long-term community transformation through community development and incarnational church planting; and 3) Justice- help in changing systems of oppression and injustice through responsible living, public advocacy, identification with the poor (p. 127).

The Church should connect people directly so that everyone could be treated with dignity and love as God does for us. Relief could be a temporary attempt during the time of natural calamities, floods, draughts, earthquakes, COVID19 and much more. Community development is another important attempt for the church that could operate kindergarten, extend small entrepreneurship loans, micro-credit loan, provide health and sanitation services etc. The advocacy program may help the church to penetrate the root cause so that it could be addressed. Many people around the city church are now fighting for food in Bangladesh. The Church can take the initiative on how to give away food to the hungry. But it is risky to approach people directly. The best way is through active engagement with the local neighborhood (Crane 2015, p. 140), and “one way the church can serve the city is by providing opportunities for artistic expressions by the poor and the working class

<sup>10</sup>. The Beatitudes are eight blessings recounted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Each is a proverb-like proclamation, without narrative. Four of the blessings also appear in the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke, followed by four woes which mirror the blessings (Wikipedia).

communities" (p.133).

## ECOLOGY FOR UPHOLDING TRANSFORMATION

Soh, Diana (2020) articulates, "God's way is through humility and attitude of serving everyone. If you want to be the greatest, you would need to be the servant of all" (MBTS-MAIS W. 7). Today's urbanization is an innovative outcome of human being. Transformation happens through the hands of the people, is for the enlightenment of the people, and is for the goodness of the people. Crane says, "Without a change of heart, a change of self, and of being, nothing will change." The urban transformation started in the beginning of the world; however, sporadically it changes its wrapping. It will be ongoing until the 2nd coming of Christ (Crane 2015, p.154). It is a collective effort, not by an individual or an institution. Crane (2015) says, "One church or ministry will not be able to singlehandedly transform the city. Neither will the city be transformed by all the churches tackling one particular issue. This is why the whole Church of the city must collaborate to seek the Shalom of the whole city" (p.150).

Bryan (2016) declares "God has given me a strong calling to participate in his redemptive mission with the young people and families in my city..... God is working through the mentoring relationships to transform lives and transform the neighborhood. There has been a steady stream of humanity that has come through our home since we moved into the neighborhood." <sup>11</sup> To me, transformation is the blessing of God that is visible through innovative outcome of people. Church is one of many particles where we can establish peace, pleasure, certainty and hope for mankind and decentralize those blessings to the urban people. Here the agent may be different; however the destination is the same.

## CONCLUSION

Christianity is not only a religion; moreover it is a relationship to our living God. Christianity is not only for Christians. It is for all mankind. Urban transformation should be justified by the approaches and models how it ensures a good city. It needs to identify and address the theological and missiological systems whether churches are without incarnational presence. Urban transformation requires the presence of the spirit of the living God for a thriving ecosystem. In addition, it should take care of poverty and injustice, because more than half of the people of the world are living in urban areas and a great part of them are living below poverty line and suffering injustice. Let's reshape our vocation for bringing healthy churches and ministries to pull out a vital

11. Dr. Bryan McCabe *The Gospel and the Future of Cities: Transforming the Lives of Urban Children and Youth through Asset Building* (October 15/16, 2016 in Quito, Ecuador).

spiritual environment for eternal impact.

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# URBAN POOR MISSION

*Raineer Chu*

## THE LANDSCAPE FOR MISSION HAS SHIFTED

There are now more people living in cities than in rural areas. Millions migrate to cities everyday all over the world. The world has shifted radically from a rural agricultural population to an urban population because to many, cities are where the money and employment can be found.

I have taught urban poor church planting for almost twenty years and occasionally I need to challenge a student or two who insists in doing rural church planting. I tell them that within five years after they have planted a church in the rural areas, most of the members of his church will already be in my church in the slums here in Metro Manila.

Urban poor church planting is far more logistically feasible than church planting in rural areas. I can walk ten kilometers in the province and maybe only meet ten or twenty families I can share the gospel with. While here in Metro Manila, I can walk within one kilometer in the neighborhood and meet more than a thousand families.

People come to the cities for jobs. But most of them find housing in cities as very expensive. So many city migrants end up in the slums or informal squatter settlements. This is the reason why we have targeted the slums for church planting. If you want to share the gospel to people who have never heard the gospel and you want to share it to the greatest number of people, go to the slums, here or anywhere in the world.

## THE SLUM AREAS AS MISSION FIELDS

I have visited most of these slums here and abroad. I have slept one night in the worse slum in Cape Town (Khayelitsha) where people say, you won't last a day and not get killed. Our group has helped start a ministry also in the worse slum in Chicago (Lawndale) where at that time you could buy a house for a couple of hundred dollars but you would be dead in 24 hours (because of so many "drive by shootings"). I have also been to the largest slum in the world (Dharavi, Mumbai).

Most of my work in the Philippines is looking for new slums where our organization, Companion with the Poor, can begin a church planting ministry. We have planted almost a hundred churches, all in the slums, in the last twenty years or more. Our group looks for the poorest slums where there is no church yet. We will not plant or start a church planting project in a community where there is already an existing church. Companion with the Poor is very small and has very little resources. If we want to have any impact at all in

world mission, we will only go to the communities no one else wants. No decent church would want to go to the poorest slums.

One time, I did a courtesy call on several churches in the coastal road area of Cavite. I told them I need their blessings and permission to plant a church in a slum community nearby. All of them unanimously discouraged me from going there because no church would survive, as there would be no income from tithes or offerings.

And yet, to reach the whole country for Christ, we need to go to where the masses are. Ninety percent (90%) of the masses in the Philippines are poor and are found in slum areas. And only few churches have a burden to reach out these poor communities because of many factors like finances, safety and lack of willing workers. But to us in Compassion with the Poor, Slums are the best place to start a ministry and plant a church.

## BUT NO ONE WANTS TO GO TO THE POOR

The biggest mistake of the first American missionaries who came to evangelize the Philippines was to target the rich and educated Filipinos. The first one hundred years of American mission in the Philippines hardly made a dent as a result of that defective strategy. They also believed that if they could convert the rich and educated, these converts would exert a powerful influence on society, thus, even solving poverty in the process.

My professor in my doctoral studies said, 87% of Filipinos who go to the USA for further seminary studies never return to the Philippines.

The Navigators targeted the best schools, like University of the Philippines, to disciple the best Filipinos. I was one of them. But none of those I knew in the Navigators wanted to go to the poor. As far as Filipino Christian workers were concerned, their goal was to go up, to eat the same food, live in the same house and drive the same car as their American mentors. Going to seminary implied seeking a higher salary but eventually, the only way up was to go to America.

American Christianity peddled not just Jesus but also the American lifestyle. Little did they realize they were making people more American than Christian when they evangelized the people in the country. For many converts, being poor was looked down, it was a demotion to go to the slums.

Christianity began to spread in the Philippines only when the church started to go to the masses. The charismatic movement and the Pentecostal

denomination spearheaded the drive downwards.

I got out of one of the largest Pentecostal churches after one Sunday service (one out of ten services that Sunday) in Chennai, India and saw the people streaming out like ants and blocked an 8-lane highway.

The people from squatter areas have come to worship the Lord in big numbers!

I was one of the leaders in an evangelism consultation in London one time, and also in Paris, another time. In both events, the leaders were all complaining about how difficult it was to evangelize the city (Paris or London). But at each conference, when I took a break and walked a block I saw a huge church, overflowing with thousands of people, right in the midst of the city, but they were not white. They were all colored: Africans, migrants, refugees, poor. They were not counted in the evangelism strategy of the white. I believe, Christian mission is stuck with the old paradigm. We don't consider the poor or the colored as decent evangelism targets. Churches should open their eyes to the vast harvest in their communities. When we are mandated to evangelize, disciple and baptize people on earth (Matthew 28:19), we need to include people of all colors, residents and economic status.

## OVERSEAS WORKERS AS MISSIONARIES

I was part of the mission team that planted one of the first churches in Saigon (District 4) under the Alliance mission in Vietnam, it was difficult to evangelize the locals residing in urban cities. As a strategy, we aimed to reach out to the highlanders and indigenous peoples (tribes). But our mission team composed of Filipinos were able to plant the seed of the church through the help of Filipino expatriates living in Saigon. We slowly started our ministry among the poor in the city and it grew into hundreds. They are now worshipping in our planted church in Saigon.

The church in Tokyo (City Blessings Church, 299-0245 chiba ken

Sodegaura Shi Kuranamidai3 Chome shinsei Brothers kuranamidai BLDG.) planted by a friend also grew beginning with Filipino expatriates, mostly illegal migrant workers in Japan. I think the same thing happened in Hong Kong where a thriving Philippine church exists. There is also a growing Philippine church in the Middle East where lots of OFWs work.

It is already clear that many of these Filipino churches planted worldwide (Berlin, Jeddah, HK, Singapore, Tokyo, Ho Chi Minh, etc.) were started by Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs).

OFWs are a significant feature of Philippine mission. Assuming there are 12 million OFWs, then assuming 10% of these are born again (1.2 million), and assuming further that 10% of the born again OFWs are actively sharing the gospel, that would give us the largest Christian mission force in the world today, roughly 120,000!!! Not even the South Koreans

can swallow that. But we seldom consider them as missionaries. They are poor and didn't go to seminary. We have to remember that the first missionaries in the Bible were poor and uneducated. And like the OFWs they went out to mission not because of some profound realization about the need to expand the kingdom of God, but they left because of either famine or persecution or both.

Our OFWs left for not a very unsimilar reason, they left the Philippines because they were in need of jobs and their families are hungry. The number one problem in the Philippines is there are no jobs forcing millions every year to leave for work overseas as OFWs.

## THE OFW STRATEGY

When the first missionaries, the rag tag band of new Christians, went out, they did not go to the Greeks or the Romans or the Egyptians or whoever was in that foreign land. They always went to their relatives whom they found in the synagogues, their fellow Jews.

This is also the case with the OFWs. They did not evangelize the Japanese in Tokyo or the Arabs in Saudi or the Germans in Berlin or the Chinese in Hongkong. They shared the gospel to their fellow countrymen. When the synagogues were evangelized, soon, other nationalities also came and became part of the church. In Tokyo, when a Filipino woman became a Christian, she would bring her Japanese husband to church. That was how the church grew and took root. For more than twenty years I was discipling the educated and rich Filipinos on the same belief with the first American missionaries that if I reach the educated and rich Filipinos, they would in turn go to the masses and preach the gospel. But they did not. And worse, it took a very long time for them to respond to the call of Christ to go to mission, even to the upper class members of the society.

One day, our group decided to train and mobilize the urban poor Christians instead. That was how our mission started and that is the reason it has grown into a large organization today. The poor are easier and cheaper to mobilize, compared to the rich and educated Filipinos. Ninety Nine percent (99%) of the workers in CWTP today came from the slums. They don't need much adjustment to slum life because they grew up there.

## CHURCH PLANTING MISSION

Most experts (Wagner, Schwarz, Hybels, Peace, etc.) will say that the most effective form of evangelism is church planting. Studies have shown that it is better than the Navigator's bridge illustration and better than the Campus Crusade's Four Spiritual Laws. This is the challenge today in urban mission: how to plant churches in the slums. The first church grew quickly because the apostles planted churches.



The reason why we don't plant in places where there are already existing churches is because it is counter-productive. Most foreign missions in the Philippines do not realize this. Many of them, do not mind stepping on other churches, or even killing existing churches.

There was a time I had a thriving pre-school in our church in Payatas. It was really growing and the parents in the community paid tuition for their kids to enroll in our school. The school expanded from pre-school grades to Grade 6 over the years, until the Korean missionaries came. They set up their church and opened their own school beside us for free. Our school enrollment promptly dropped, and the church attendance as well.

Companion with the Poor will not just plant in a place where there is already a church. We won't go also where other churches might want to drop by and put up their own church. Thus, going to the worse slum was our only option. No one wants to go there but us. We don't stand a chance with the competition. We are very poor ourselves and when you see our church buildings, you will be discouraged. But if we are the only church there, people will have no choice but worship in our church.

Finding the ideal slum, where there is no church and which is very poor, is very difficult. At one time, it occupied my whole day. In looking for the area candidate we usually spend six months every year for slum communities that fit our standard for church planting. We would drive around, from one end of Metro Manila to the other end.

And we realized, there is no more Metro Manila in terms of territory. Antipolo, Taytay and Bacoor which are definitely not part of Metro Manila now form part of it in a very seamless way. No one notices that these areas are no longer part of Metro Manila. They became extensions of the district.

We used to work near the center of the Metropolis, like Tatalon or Balik-Balik, Sta. Mesa, Manila, where one can find railroad tracks. But as the metropolis grew and prospered, we were pushed farther and farther away from the center. When land gets too expensive because of developments (construction of malls or condominiums), the poor have to go farther away. Our slum churches are now found at the farthest edges of Metro Manila, as far away as Norzagaray (Matictic), Bulacan, Teresa, Calamba, Laguna and a couple of years ago, we began in Cebu. There are no slums in Davao City in Mindanao or Iloilo City in the Visayas or San Fernando in Pampanga, notwithstanding what people will say to the contrary. We have scouted these cities extensively and repeatedly.

Slums are always a function of too much money coming in too quickly. There are potential slum church projects along the coastal road up to Batangas because of the many economic zones that were opened there. This is southward. There is nothing like that happening in the north, along Bulacan, Pampanga

or Bataan because there are no significant economic activities there.

## MISSIONS AMONG THE SLUM DWELLERS

My eyes were opened one day when I read Dr Richard Peace's book titled Conversion, it was really his 25-year long dissertation at Fuller Seminary. He had done a scientific study of the work of the famous evangelist Billy Graham and came out with some astounding conclusions.

He had challenged Dr Graham directly saying his so-called converts were not joining churches at all in a significant way. Upset, Dr Graham undertook his own study, with more funding and came out with the same result.

Dr. Peace recommended that we stopped focusing on conversions involving a dramatic turn of life or behavior. We often focused on conversions like that of St Paul on the road to Damascus which accounts for only 20% of total conversions worldwide. 80% of true-blue blooded Christians today (including my wife) never had a dramatic conversion. Focusing on 20% is definitely a losing proposition.

I then made that the focus of my dissertation, how to train workers to plant churches in the slums. I was eventually invited to teach that program in Asian Theological Seminary (where I taught urban church planting for more than 12 years).

I have boasted to my students each semester that when they finish the semester, I guarantee that they can plant a church in 6 months. I have not lost my bet up to now. Our group continues to plant churches this way.

It all depends on the correct selection of the site. We use the following best parameters as we start our ministry among the slum-dwellers:

1. Find the poorest of the poor, no schools, no electricity, no water
2. Where there is no church, no Christians
3. Must not be an old slum community, less than 5 years old
4. Must have physical boundaries that allow for community relationships to grow
5. Must not be in places where the people can be summarily ejected, there is prospect for long term settlement
6. Squatter land, owned by the government or private sector, not owned by the poor occupants
7. Must not be less than 500 and not more than 1000 families
8. There is a land we can acquire on which we can build a church that can accommodate about one hundred worshippers

## CHURCH PLANTING MUST FOCUS ON THE 80%

Before CWTP begins church planting, first, it will do the initial demographic survey to find out if the community falls within the parameters we have set



above. We encourage churches or mission groups to follow this evidence-based approach in ministry also, to ensure they are really contributing to the expansion of the kingdom.

Most churches today have only pirated members from other churches. Studies also show that most mega churches do not plant churches.

I was in one of the biggest churches in America, Willow Creek community Church, one weekday. I was shocked with the boldness of Pastor Bill Hybells, her founder. If churches today would do what he did, we would solve half of our problems today. During the service, out of the blue, he began asking how many of those inside the church that night met Jesus for the first time, found Jesus in or through Willow Creek Community Church. Then he did the unimaginable, he asked them to stand up. I could only hold my breath. Then almost half of the church stood up! That is phenomenal.

For all his faults, Pastor Bill Hybells was a man of great wisdom and vision. I had been to that church more than once and each time I was there, I heard him taking time to explain the gospel carefully, and clearly. He may deserve to be removed from the church but he clearly was the reason Willowcreek grew to be what it is today.

### **SATURATION DRIVE STRATEGY**

I have observed that lately our evangelism no longer pressures people to make a decision on the spot. Those who come, are those who are called by God. When they are in church, we deem them members of the church already. And each Sunday we have an altar call. The 80% usually prays to receive Jesus more than once, some, twenty times. Up to now, my wife cannot say when exactly she was saved, what day, what month. And if you ask her today, she will pray to receive Jesus again.

After the demographic survey and we have collated and tabulated the results, we proceed to make the strategic plan for the two years we will be doing church planting in that selected community. Always as part of the strategic plan's evangelism activity, we include a saturation drive.

We make a map of all the houses in the slum community. If there are 1000 houses, we divide them systematically into the number of team members participating in the saturation drive. We then go to all the houses, knock on 1000 doors, to find the one called by God. We usually complete the drive in two days.

Of course, people will think we are crazy if we ask them, are you the one called by God? So we translated the questions to ones that can be measured, into negative questions that are designed to rule out those NOT CALLED by God:

1. Do you want to attend our Sunday church worship, we are born again, we are not Roman Catholics?

2. Do you want us to conduct a bible study once a week in your house?
3. Do you want to listen to a gospel presentation about how you can be saved in Jesus?

Those who say NO, will be ruled out as NOT CALLED by God. Almost all will say no. if we have chosen our slum community correctly though (no Christians and no church), we will usually get positive answers and in our experience, we always receive more than 20% Yes answers. After getting so many No answers, when we finally get a Yes answer, it usually brings tears to our eyes. It's always a very moving experience.

We mark on the map those who have said yes and we also prepare the Sunday service for their coming, which means we need to have enough chairs.

The most common approach in churches planting is to first form many small bible study groups. And then after one year, they gather all of the Bible Study groups to join the worship service, assuming now they are ripe for worship.

But CWTP starts our worship service immediately, even on the first Sunday that we are in the community. Cwtp holds small bible studies also to complement the Churchplanting. We form home bible studies HBS, which is one of the most effective evangelism tool alongside Churchplanting.

Our approach is founded on an assumption that in the Philippines, conversion can reach an average of 10%. The statistics of PCEC or Philippine Challenge (<https://www.philchal.org/growth-calculator>) supports this. It is very high and if we take advantage of it, at 10% 500 families can yield a minimum of 50 adults attending our church. But it also means we target communities which have never been reached by the gospel. If it is already saturated in some way, naturally the yield will be less than 10%.

I have seen some pastors make a terrible mistake not realizing this fact. For example, a church which is already more than twenty years old, has a revival among their youths and the pastor directs them to do evangelism with their fiery faith, to the adjoining streets by their church. The results would be disastrous as these nearby households are already very saturated. If the pastor instead tells them to go to a community which has never heard the gospel, the newly set ablaze youth would become even more encouraged when they see a bounty of harvest of souls in their evangelism.

### **THE GOSPEL MUST BE BROUGHT TO THE POOR**

Luke 4 strongly hints that the gospel should be brought to the poor as the primordial concern of the church. But the conventional definition of gospel or evangelism obviously does not suffice. It is not enough to share the gospel in other words especially if what we mean by the gospel is the narrow reductionist gospel we know of today.

The number one cause of poverty in the Philippines is graft and corruption (in government) according to World Bank (<https://cids.up.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Corruption-in-the-Philippines-vol.5-no.1-Jan-June-2001-2.pdf>). There are no other scientifically done study that correlates poverty with anything else except this World Bank study which correlates poverty with corruption.

I am also sure that the gospel did not mean to provide just a purely spiritual solution to the problem of the poor. In my dissertation, I have tried to show that the gospel was really good news to the poor and that the church was equally good news just as the gospel was. Throughout the gospel, there is hardly any mention of church. Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom. In the book of acts, the kingdom began to fade to the background and the church came to center stage until the end of the New Testament.

**THE FIRST TO REJOICE IN THE COMING OF THE CHURCH WERE THE WOMEN.** They had been sidelined for centuries and when they had menstruation, they could not even come near to worship. With the advent of the church, women now could freely worship side by side with their husbands or the male members. This was liberating for the women and the gospel went around the world setting women free.

**THE SECOND TO REJOICE WERE THE SLAVES.** My professor loves to tell this story about Onesimus. He was a slave and had stolen from his master and was now a fugitive. Under Roman law, his master had the right to have him executed. He is on the run and after running more than 2,000 kilometers, he has arrived in Rome, terrified, exhausted and hungry. While sitting in the marketplace, catching his breath, he begins to hear a sermon. At the end, he becomes born again and approaches the preacher, who was no other than the apostle Paul.

Paul immediately recognizes his accent and ask if he is from a certain city and if he knows a certain Philemon. Of course, Onesimus becomes even more afraid. But Paul assures him and writes a letter, the famous epistle to Philemon. And he tells Onesimus to bring it to Philemon, his master. Onesimus carries the letter, in his sweat filled hand, 2,000 kilometers back to where he came from, unsure if doing so would not mean his certain death.

In the letter, we have the famous lines from Paul (in my own paraphrase): Dear Mr Philemon. I am sending to you Onesimus. I know he has stolen from you. Whatever he owes you, charge it to me. But remember you owe your very life to me. (Philemon was saved in Christ through Paul). But I am sending Onesimus back to you, not only as a slave but as a brother also. We all know the ending. But what we often fail to imagine is this, that now, master and slave stand side by side as equals on Sunday during worship. This is the good news of the gospel and one brought about by

the advent of the church.

### **WHO ARE THE POOR?**

The poor in the Bible is not always defined in a straightforward way. I think the best way to define poor or who are the poor is by the process of association. The poor is often written together or side by side words like meek, orphans, widows, sick, oppressed, etc. These associated words add meaning to the word poor.

God had his favorite expression: *almána ger yatom* or orphans, widows and strangers. All throughout the Old Testament, God used this phrase, either to praise the Israelites when they did right (you have taken cared of the orphans, widows and strangers) or else, to castigate them for having neglected or abandoned the orphans, widows and aliens.

### ***Almána ger yatom was God's Plumblines and our First Definition of Poor.***

When Jesus came, he introduced three more plumblines, three more trios. *The first were the despised poor: prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners. The second were the invisible poor: prisoners, lepers and gentiles. The third were the outcaste poor: beggars, those with defects and the sick.* All these constitute what the bible refers to as the poor (including *almána ger yatom*).

All these drew near to Jesus, were drawn to him and He welcomed them.

In my wildest dream, I always think of a church mobbed by sinners just the way they mobbed Jesus. Today, the church repels sinners. But I imagine a church filled with crooks, homosexuals, prostitutes, corrupt politicians.

CWTP today has five full-pledged gay church planters. Someday, we will also have staff who are former prostitutes.

Sinners in the gospels had a unique meaning, it was a derogatory label for a specific group of despised individuals. It was not a generic term (as in, all have sinned, all are sinners). It is similar to our label for some unsavory people in our culture (drunkards, womanizers, drug addicts, etc.; in America, it might refer to "niggers"...just think of any label difficult for you to pronounce).

The invisible poor are people the Jews did not want to see in public. They had to go into hiding. Prisoners literally disappeared once they were in jail. This is emphasized in the teachings of Jesus who one time said, you visited me when you visited the prisoners (Matt.25:36,40), when talking about the sheep and the goats.

Aliens or foreigners or Gentiles have an interesting implication today. They would be the hated illegal immigrants that President Trump wanted so badly to eliminate in the USA. I have many relatives in America who were at one time or still now are, illegal aliens. God is the god of migrants or illegal aliens. The white Americans were once aliens in America too.

God has a rebuke for the Israelites which he repeated

so many times in the Old Testament: do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, seeing you were also once aliens yourselves (Ex 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33; Deut 10:19; 24:17, etc.). it is repeated so many times, it gives one a headache. The greatest rebuke though is when Jesus said, the prostitutes and tax collectors will go to heaven ahead of the decent Jews. (Mark 2:17; Luke 19:9) The gospel always turns our world upside down.

## GOSPEL, KINGDOM AND CHURCH

There are three concepts that are deeply intertwined with each other: gospel, kingdom and church. Without one, the two others are meaningless. You cannot define church without the gospel or kingdom, you cannot define the gospel without the church and the kingdom, and you cannot define the kingdom without the church or the gospel.

Church means worship, community and mission. The mission of the church is to preach the gospel. The church is composed of believers living together and living out the kingdom, and also points to the kingdom. Through the church, the world sees the kingdom, the church is not the kingdom, it just points to the kingdom.

We see the centrality of the church in the plan of redemption in the words of the Apostle Paul:

*I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.*

- Ephesians 3;7-13

This paragraph above lays down the ground work for us to fully and faithfully define what the gospel is.

The reductionist gospel says we are saved to Jesus, period. Our preachers tell us, now that you are saved, go your way and leave me alone. This bizarre gospel came out of the highly secular (reductionist), materialistic and individualistic American gospel.

The true gospel says we are saved to Jesus and also to the body. The body is not optional. In fact, it is by making a community life mandatory that the gospel becomes truly good news to the poor.

God is saying in the gospel, "Hey world, look at my church, look at how they love one another, how they forgive each other 500 times, how they carry one

another's burden. See how I have blessed them and there is no poor among them. Are you not envious? Don't you want to become part of my people also? If you do, you can come through my son, Jesus Christ." This is the gospel that is good news to the poor.

It is an invitation to become part of the community of God's people, believers living together, and living out the kingdom. The door or entry way for the unsaved is Christ Jesus, the way the truth and the light, the door, the lamb of God.

## THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS

Today, the church has no sense of community. After the worship service, we go home and we don't remember who was seated beside us during the worship service. And during the week, that person may have died and we will never know.

Community life is not just living together. Paul gave the political implications of our life together. He said, now, in the church, there is no more male, female, Jew, gentile, rich, poor, black, white, slave, or free. And he gave its economic implications. All shared their possessions so that there was no poor in their midst. Because he who gathered much did not have too much and he who gathered little did not lack anything.

Jesus also created its boundaries. "Who is my mother, who is my brother, who is my sister? But he who does the will of the father." All the members of the church community are believers. There are no unbelievers. All are in pursuit of one thing, to do the will of the father. There must be an Olympiad inside the church as each member competes with one other to do the will of the Father. It is also through this Olympiad that the reality of Christ inside the church becomes concrete.

The gospel is an invitation to a relationship, to a wedding feast, to the Body. It is not just a bunch of propositions to which we give our intellectual assent. The invitation is to a life together.

This was how it all started. God called one man, Abraham. And he made a covenant with him, to build from him a nation, a people so numerous no one could count them, a community with rules different from that of the world. He began a contest. He would show to the world that his system, his kingdom, his people would be better.

God was going to show off. Moses said,

*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as*

*this body of laws I am setting before you today?*  
- Deuteronomy 4:5-8

Without this contest, there is no urgency in the gospel. The contest comes about because of a community in which God can show off to the world. And the contest is between two paradigms, two ways of life, demonstrated in two communities, the people of God living out the kingdom and the people of Satan living out the ways of the world.

Without community there is no contest. Without community, the gospel becomes bad news to the poor. Individualism means there is no gospel. It also means the poor Christians are left on their own.

## THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

The church today is very worldly. It has become very materialistic, very individualistic, and very secular. There is no community to speak of, no family of God to invite people to. Its every man for himself.

Also, individualistic people cannot plant churches. The church they plant won't be able to form communities.

In CWTP, it is necessary that our church planters be part of a community before they can go out to plant churches in the slums. Otherwise, their individualism will only further fuel the deterioration of the gospel.

This has been the greatest challenge for CWTP. How do we form such a community, what models can we use? Throughout history, most Christian communities are composed of only one gender, all men, all priests or all monks or all nuns, all women. CWTP has single men and women and also married staff and many with children. There are some models with heterogenous memberships, who have families like the Mennonites. Most of them however are separatists, withdrawn from society. But our calling is to be salt and light and it means we are dumped right in the midst of worldliness.

Cwtp is developing our own model, approximating as much as we can, the community described in the bible.

John Driver, a Mennonite, professor of New Testament, working among prostitutes in South America, and constantly in dialogue with liberation theologians, has written a helpful book, *Images of Church in Mission*. In the book he says, the Bible does not have a definition of church but it has hundreds of images of church. CWTP is using these images to slowly form our vision of what a biblical community looks like.

At the beginning, we gave each one a vote. We empowered our members. They are not staff or employees, but family. After some time, we noticed that the spouses also needed one vote each.

Someday, when our children are old enough, and bothers to join the election, they too will have one vote each. This is the cornerstone of our community building, making our more than one hundred

members, be owners and stakeholders of CWTP. They elect our board and officer's and take part in financial decision making.

Secondly, we are building corporate values that we hope will work towards making it easier for all our members to be more open to sharing their possessions based on what the book of Deuteronomy 15 says, ie there shall be no poor among us.

The movement towards community life begins with those who are rich and powerful. Community begins with them, not with those who are poor and weak. The former must reach out, must begin the process of sharing generously. Our model is Christ Jesus, who though He was rich, became poor, in order to make others rich.

For everyone, we all try to follow what is written in Acts: it is more blessed to give than to receive. This redefines wealth. For us wealth is not measured in terms of how much we possess but in how much we have given away.

## IT IS A LONG JOURNEY FOR CWTP

Martin Luther wrote about the hiddenness of the church. All those images of the church pointed out by John Driver are, the church as family, the church as an army, the church as salt and light, etc. all these are hidden. They are hidden in mysterious ways. The church is here but it is not.

I have been in many church conflicts, usually as a lawyer for one side. I know that the church today is ridden with divisions and strife, lustful and carnal, materialistic and vain. In the last two years, during the pandemic, I have read about many Christian leaders, world renowned leaders, who have fallen or been found out in their sins, some were exposed only after their death.

In a way, the church today is hidden under a ton of filth. CWTP knows this for a fact. We struggle painfully with it. But it is only through this painful struggle that we can see the true church emerging.

We know that the second generation, our children and even our children's children, will not always be on God's side, will not be born again and will thus pose a big weakness within the community. This is the fate of many Christian communities which started out well and then died one or two generations after when the new generation that took over, who no longer knew Jesus.

Holding properties make the risk even greater. Most churches fight over money and properties. We want to relinquish all properties but we cannot. Instead, we hold them all with an open palm.

Part of the training of the staff before they can become a member of CWTP is to immerse in the slums. They sleep there for three days and two nights. They don't bring any money or food. They are totally at the mercy of their hosts, whoever that may be. We tell them only one thing: to find out what they can live without. Can they live without their toothbrush, their beds, their

daily baths, their cellphone, etc.

The goal is not to make them self-denying ascetic monks but to help them find their freedom. St Paul said, I know how to live in opulence and I know how to live in destitution. We cannot solve our lust by rejecting all luxuries (one day, what we suppress will just burst out and make us implode). Sin can only be solved by finding our freedom. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

When John of the cross encouraged us to live the austere life of *nada nada nada* (three nadas), he was not emphasizing a life of abstinence. He was referring to a life full of Jesus. He was encouraging us to have nothing but Jesus. Desire only Jesus.

### THE CHURCH'S ENEMY

Materialism makes individualism necessary. Our view of material possession, that we are owners instead of stewards, makes community almost impossible. Secularism or its smaller version, reductionism, justifies this way of life: we don't have to share, its every man for himself.

Historically, the greatest enemy of the church has always been a spiritual virus. It enters the church so Christians have to leave the church, they never know who the real enemy is. Worldliness is the enemy. It is a virus that has entered the church and mutated the gospel.

The real work of the church today is to learn how to combat this worldliness, the virus inside.

Paul said, we are not to be conformed to the world. But before we can fight it, we have to be able to identify it. We have to know how worldliness operates. Worldliness is materialism, individualism and secularism. They are now integrated into the gospel we preach today.

So, at CWTP we want to fight materialism by going to the urban poor, going down instead of going up. CWTP is on a downward mobility, towards the slums and squatter areas. We form them into communities that share the love and grace of God that they may gain salvation, a community that is now part of the cosmic contest.



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# THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON URBAN CHURCHES IN CHINA TODAY

*David S. Lim*

The COVID-19 pandemic that struck the world from China caused several complete lockdowns of cities and regions in its country of origin. This article describes the main lessons that China's urban churches – both the registered Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches and the unregistered “house church fellowships – have learned during this period since January 2020.

## CHINA'S CITIES TODAY

Since 1978, China built so many cities and megacities so rapidly to become the second most prosperous economy in the world today. But in the past 2.5 years, she faced a triple whammy: struggles with its zero-Covid policy, a lagging economy that prompted its central bank to cut interest rates, and a punishing heat wave that has caused factories to shut down to save power. A major drought in southwest China has threatened water, crops and power. 19.9% of China's urban youth were unemployed in July, a new record. President Xi Jinping has rested his economic program on striving for shared prosperity, and Beijing now wants more cities to benefit, as *The Economist* wrote recently. But Xi's strategy faces headwinds, the magazine writes elsewhere: “The commitment to zero-covid and to ending China's housing excesses comes from the top. But as [Xi] prepares to secure a third term at a Communist Party congress later this year, those iron commitments have left the economy in a jam. The economic setting for the congress is not what Xi thought it would be. The Chinese dream of homeownership is crumbling; the economy could go with it. Even when Xi has emphasized rural development to balance economic growth, urbanization has continued. (At present China is already 60.8% urban). In 2018, the Chinese government announced a policy encouraging cities with populations under 3.5 million to grant migrant workers city household registrations. Some fast-developing provincial capitals (mainly those in second-tier cities) have started to absorb increased population to expand their size so migrants can live there more easily. This trend is going to become more and more obvious, and cities of third and fourth tiers will copy them.

In addition, due to a series of advantageous policies, such as revitalizing villages, alleviating poverty through development, encouraging migrant workers to return for employment, and so on, more villagers now choose to stay in their hometowns to work and even to start their own businesses. Yet there is still the continuous planting of more churches in the cities

or towns where migrant workers' original household registrations are or in other second- to fourth-tier cities.

## CHINA'S URBAN CHURCHES TODAY

The springing up of urban churches is closely related to the population flow in China. Benefiting from the revival of Christianity in villages, migrant worker churches have been developing fast in cities since the mid-1990s. But during the pandemic, the first-tier cities have started to send migrant workers who were engaged in “low-end” industries back to the villages. So the size of many urban churches have begun to shrink gradually as those in low-end industries leave. But there are opportunities in the lower-tier cities.

The current strategies of church planting used by urban churches have mainly been through pastors who go with or among believers in the midst of the migration wave, guiding and encouraging mature believers to embrace the vision and burden of church planting as they arrived in the major cities. Even before these migrant workers transfer to new cities, they have been equipped and empowered to live out the Great Commission to make disciples and to start churches wherever they go.

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**New churches have started to reflect a mixture of people from cities and villages, permanent residents and migrant workers, middle-aged, seniors, younger generations, and so on. Diversity is also manifested by the areas of church planting. The core areas of church planting are cities with the biggest populations.**

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Since the 1980s, the composition of urban churches has been rather homogeneous, with the majority of the congregation being middle-aged and made of migrant workers moving from villages to cities. Rarely do these people settle down in cities, and it was normal for them to keep moving from one city to another. In recent years, the migrant population has grown younger and with higher educational background. In addition, the state has officially announced a policy to allow migrant workers to have their households registered in cities. Therefore,

migrant workers can have their families registered in the cities where they work. New churches have started to reflect a mixture of people from cities and villages, permanent residents and migrant workers, middle-aged, seniors, younger generations, and so on. Diversity is also manifested by the areas of church planting. The core areas of church planting are cities with the biggest populations. But based on the recent government policy to develop the smaller cities and rural areas, new churches have been spreading into neighboring satellite cities and towns. In areas such as Beijing-Tianjin-Shanxi Province, Yangtze Delta and Pearl River Delta with highly concentrated populations, church planters are using cities as their bases for planting diversified churches in neighboring areas.

Since 2013, Christians in China have come under renewed pressure when the Xi regime implemented repressive religious policies and regulations. Security forces have been intensifying their crackdown on various house churches that have operated secretly to avoid harassment by the authorities. This has been a big shift from the relatively democratic freedoms (including to gather for religious practices) which they have enjoyed since Deng's reforms in 1978.

Just before the end of August this year, at least three house churches were raided by the police, with their leaders being arrested and detained on trumped-up charges. Authorities raided the Xi'an Abundant Church, the Linfen Holy Covenant Church, and Changchun city's House of Light Church. This latest series of crackdowns come a week after Chengdu-based (the capital of Sichuan province) Early Rain Covenant Church and Beijing Zion Church saw their members arrested during a Sunday service.

It is still unclear why Beijing has launched this new wave of crackdowns on these urban churches.

### **THREE URBAN CHURCH TRENDS AMIDST THE PANDEMIC**

Against the tightening of the regulations on the religious sector, the resurgent COVID-19 outbreaks and the normalization of pandemic prevention measures, many significant changes have taken place in the form and function of the urban churches in China.

According to the China Source Team, more small groups, more household-oriented and more online are the three dominant observations that have been made by a number of pastors from churches in different parts of China in recent months when they were asked to describe the current situation and trends in their churches since the pandemic began in the early 2020. These leaders have been pastoring churches of varying sizes, some are doing outreach work among various groups, and some are engaged in theological education alongside their pastoral ministry. It is the recovery and renewal of the ecclesiology that the essence of the church is "two or three gathered in the

name of Jesus (Matt. 18:18-20).

Small group meetings and emphasis on family gatherings have existed in previous years, dating as far back as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1978). But the situational changes brought about by the 2020 pandemic have prompted these three phenomena to become more important and crucial in urban church life. It can be observed that these three trends have become more prominent because of the public health lockdowns, and that these dramatic changes in the external environment have contributed to these developments.

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These trends are not confined to small, scattered meeting points, but are also increasingly evident in large churches all over the country that have over a thousand members and have had difficulty in meeting in person consistently over the last two years or so due to pandemic control measures.

The phrase "more small groups means to move in the direction of meeting as groups of less than 10 adults. "More household-oriented means increasingly characterized by meeting and fellowshiping in a particular believer's home. And more online refers to the phenomenon of more and more worship services, meetings, and training being conducted via the internet.

The reality is that the whole congregation could not meet in person, and pastoral care needs have to be addressed and strengthened. So "more small groups, more household-oriented, more online has become the response. Its practical outworkings have included: large churches have begun to value operating small groups; there has been a greater emphasis on returning to the house church and valuing the family, while at the same time more and more Christian families have learned to value family devotion/worship; and online meetings and training courses have also been growing significantly compared to the pre-pandemic period.

It is unclear how long the current conditions will last and how long these trends will continue. It is possible that if in-person congregational meetings become stable and regular once more, then these trends



may diminish significantly among urban churches, especially those that have stable assets and meeting venues.

Yet these church trends brought about by the changing circumstances have already led so many churches to discover the pastoral improvements brought about through small groups, put more value on the model of the early church, as well as the inescapable contemporary opportunity of making good use of the internet. Even if in-person congregational meetings are restored, the influence of these trends on their thinking and practice may well not diminish, but rather get stronger.

#### *“More small groups: Pastoral care through cell groups*

Foremost may be the rediscovery that small groups bring about marked improvement in the pastoral care of churchgoers. The common challenge for many churches in the city is how to pastor a congregation of thousands when it is difficult to open the church doors or gather in person.

The aftermath of the 2020 pandemic has not been easy for churches anywhere. Thanks to the pandemic itself and the related control measures, church doors have been closed more than they have been open. One church in a north-eastern city with more than 1,000 members counted the number of days the church was open: for the past 828 days, the church had switched continually between “double suspension and “resumption of in-person meetings and had only been open for 157 days.

This is not an isolated example. TSPM churches in over ten provinces faced these problems to a greater or lesser extent. In May 2022, churches in some provinces, such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang, began to resume in-person services, but pandemic prevention controls in Hangzhou and Zhejiang, for example, require possession of a nucleic acid certificate within 48 hours of attending and generally only allow gatherings of 50 people, and at the maximum limit of 300 people. This means that for the many churches in the city with several thousand members, at most only 300 people can attend a regular in-person Sunday worship service.

Hence over the past few years, many churches have already begun to show a great deal of interest on how to put small-group church into practice. Various small group meetings and meetings in homes have begun to take shape, dividing the church into groups of around 10 people for small-scale gatherings and for pastoral care. In the process, many pastors have found that doing small-group fellowship has allowed for a more individualized pastoral approach than the previous feeding of the whole congregation all together.

A team of researchers has recently spent a rewarding time observing a few small group meetings in homes. They found that such meetings were relatively small in size, with as few as three people, and as many as six or seven, gathering in believers’ homes, sharing

in fellowship, talking about faith or the next steps in church work and other insights, and cooking together after the discussion. All of these greatly improved interpersonal relationships, and everyone had fun in the process.

There have also been many challenges. For example, some churches had too many small groups and the church could not manage them well. There have been cases where group leaders have drawn away members. Also there have been cases where cults have infiltrated the church and cult members have become group leaders so as to lead believers into heresy. In view of this, many churches are placing more and more emphasis on training group leaders and co-workers.

Because of these changing circumstances, more and more churches are placing more emphasis on the training of core church workers and the building up of group leaders, rather than on the size of the church building or the number of people.

Pastor W, a young pastor in his 30s serving in eastern China, said in March 2021 that the pandemic had not affected his church very much, “because half a year before the pandemic started, we had already begun to implement a kind of small group pastoral care. They did not immediately withdraw from renting the meeting place previously used by the church, so that believers still felt “at home and had a sense of belonging. After all, they had been meeting in the hall for many years. “At the same time, we pastored online. When pandemic prevention was less intense, we combined online and offline meetings. The small groups take turns coming to the main church hall for Sunday services.

Small group pastoral care is about focusing more on the lives of believers, so that believers can build a relationship not with the church or with the pastor, but with God, so that they can live in the presence of God no matter what circumstances they are facing.

#### *“More household-oriented: Renewal of “house church ecclesiology*

Arguably one of the biggest changes in recent years is that the emphasis on venue size and congregational numbers is changing. More churches are emphasizing the internalization of faith and personal relationship with God. Thus, church leaders and members are gaining a deeper understanding of their view of the church, which actually is a revival of the “Little Flock (Brethren) ecclesiology of Watchman Nee, that was the theological framework of the “gospel explosion in the early 1970s to early 1990s in China.

Pastor X, a middle-aged pastor in Beijing who has been pastoring an emerging church in the city for many years, said that one of the greatest realizations brought to them by the pandemic was about ecclesiology. “The church is not the building where the congregation meets, but the ‘gathering of two or three in Jesus’ name’ – that’s the church.

A similar view was expressed by Pastor Y, who pastors a group of migrant workers in a second-tier city in eastern China. He prescribes that in the post-pandemic era we need to move away from “temple-centrism, because this kind of focus on sacred space will hamper the church from making progress in a more restrictive religious environment and in the post-pandemic era.

The dominant church paradigm, with its models of worship and community identity, perpetuates a temple-centric theology. The concept of church is therefore centered on the church building. Sooner or later the church must materialize in a particular place or concentrate in a particular place. Because a church building is for gathering, once gatherings in the building cease, the church effectively falls apart. Gathering requires a physical space, hence the identity centered on a church building. The physical gathering, which is centered on and hosted in a particular building, means that the church is necessarily visible to society in public fashion. Gathering becomes the primary way to express the existence of Christianity.

However, once the social space is restricted, then this building-centered gathering encounters challenges. When believers become accustomed to defining their faith and identity in terms of the gathering in a church building, pressures on social space also mean that the church is unable to manifest itself and the space for its very existence is restricted. The result inevitably is to struggle for the existence and expansion of actual physical space by any means possible, which inevitably generates conflict with the reality of the secular state. Indeed, many of the ideas of the church today come not from Jesus, but from traditions that Jesus opposed (John 4:21-24) and that were also rejected by the early church (Acts 7:48; 17:24). This is also one of the main reasons for the plight of the global church today.

So Pastor Y called for the model that Jesus started: the model of a free Christ-centered communion, a union that is not limited in number or gender. It could be two or three people, or a dozen people. In this way, in a more meaningful way, a few people come together to learn and grow, to change themselves, to change their families, to make the world a better place. “By this shall people know that you are my disciples: if you love one another (John 13:34-35). This is not an objection to church meetings, but to a temple-centric ecclesiology. These extraordinary days, when space for activities is curtailed, are a time for Christians to accept and respond to myriad changes, a time for Christians to be molded and to mature, and this is the best way for the Christian faith to be a witness in the present.

Before the pandemic, many older pastors of Chinese churches believed that the key to the development of house churches in China was following the example of the early church, the “house church. The turn away from large venues to small group meetings is seen by many house church pastors as a return to the spirit of

the “house church.

The answers given by traditional churches regarding the definition of the church have mostly focused on the perspective of holiness and sanctity, emphasizing the boundary between a community of Christians and the secular world. However, while this definition of the church is certainly consistent with the teaching of Scripture and the nature of the church, it also has a weakness, namely that this positioning itself alienates the church from society and thus diminishes its willingness to actively influence society. However, in the teaching of Jesus, the church is first and foremost not a holy organization, she is a community – a community formed by Jesus and his disciples for the purpose of the highest good, for the exercise of God’s commands on earth. The church enters the world but does not merge with it. This is the purpose of the community of Jesus, and that is the supreme good.

Some pastors are concerned that the increasingly fragmented way of meeting will lead to the dissipation of the essence of the church, and in this context some pastoral workers and other Christians emphasize that the essence of the church is being a community. This concern about fragmentation has highlighted the challenge of building consensus on the foundations of orthodox Christian theology.

A cautionary note is sounded by Pastor Y, who has long paid attention to theological education in house churches. He believes that the formation of a shared foundation of orthodox Christian theology across denominations and churches is crucial at this time, because, at the moment, churches are forced to meet as families and in small groups, which makes it hard for problems to be brought out to the open. In this sort of situation, heretical teaching and cults are bound to make trouble. So, while there is still time and opportunity, a comprehensive system of theological education needs to be established urgently. If there is no unity of thought and the churches continually divide, in time they will become a scattered mess.

So Pastor Y insists that orthodox theological foundations need to be disseminated and established as soon as possible. Otherwise, as churches go underground, run themselves and develop individually, they will result in all sorts of chaotic things coming to the surface once times become more open again. Thus it is very important to unite everyone around orthodox doctrine. First, and as quickly as possible, we need to all be clear on unity around the great principles of our faith. The rest of pastoral care is a secondary matter. Once the broad principles are in place, anything can be done. Otherwise, it is likely that the Chinese church will be entangled in heresies and internal schisms. (For me, the “Apostles’ Creed is good enough as our orthodox theological foundation worldwide).

*“More online: Fraught with tension*

Five or six years before the 2020 pandemic, Teacher Z

in Hangzhou had already started pastoring believers through QQ, WeChat, and other means. At the time he found that many people were skeptical and critical of his approach, with many pastors believing that “the internet is the devil and trying to keep away from it. But during the pandemic, the difficulty of meeting in person gave rise to a boom in online meetings. At one point, some believers would receive links to more than three online meetings per day.

Now, more than two years have passed. The importance of online pastoral care is increasingly felt by pastors and churches, but tensions are still evident. For example, the debate on whether to have “online communion has been going on for more than a year, and although some TSPM churches do openly practice “online communion, whether it is a valid sacrament or not is still a very controversial and divisive topic among the house church networks.

Online pastoring represents a considerable challenge to an ecclesiology that has an in-person understanding of the church. Some pastoral colleagues have warned that as the church becomes more and more fragmented in its gathering, there is a risk that its very essence will dissolve. In order to resolve this issue, it is vital to develop the biblical vision of the church from a perspective of community being a community or family/household of God.

The use of the internet and social media will still be through natural relationships between individuals, but not institutional. The government has imposed rules on religious matters, and more strictly recently. For instance, there have only been a few reports of successfully acquired Internet Religious Information Services License. Among the first was the Xin'en Church in the City of Yiwu (Zhejiang), which acquired the license on April 18. The licenses are issued by the provinces. In Guangdong Province, “Guangdong Catholicism, that is, the two official Catholic governing bodies of Guangdong Province - the Patriotic Association and the Commission for Church Affairs - was the first successful religious entity, which received the license on April 28, it was followed by the Protestant Guangdong Union Theological Seminary, which received its license on April 29. Meanwhile, courses and exams for prospective “religious information verification personnel continue - the organization applying for a license must prove that it has such qualified verifiers.

Yet individual use of online communication for ministry has been proliferating. A Korean missionary who has been training pastors and church-planters in China for the past twenty years told me recently that the pandemic has brought a “multiplier effect” to their ministries. All was routine even after they began to have online classes in 2015. But when the lockdowns started in early 2020, the alumni and the students have reported to him that their churches and ministries have “gone viral,” beyond their control, as small groups multiplied in-person as well as online.

## CONCLUSION

China's fight against extreme poverty may be over, but the urban-rural divide lingers: revitalizing rural areas has mixed success, and many still struggle to find their niche. There are still about 280 million migrant workers, the majority of whom flow into the second- and third-tier cities in recent years. This provides China's Christians with some references in terms of locations to prioritize for multiplying urban churches, perhaps moving from first-tier cities to those of second, third, and fourth tiers.

Gladly what the Xi renewed persecution has failed to do, the pandemic has been instrumental to make evangelism more convenient for Chinese believers. Because of this public health crisis, the church has to function in “underground” and “informal” forms, which has enabled the church to grow faster and more broadly.

In a recent survey on “How Chinese become Christians” conducted just before the pandemic, 74.6% come from Christian background (2nd generation). The primary reason that actually led urban Chinese to trust in Christ is personal evangelism or, by various channels, to hear and agree with what was heard about the gospel. The second is to solve practical needs that cannot be solved, such as illness. The third is to enter into a fellowship of Christian love, to study the Bible, and worship God. All these were made more personal, relational and contextual by the pandemic, which has enhanced effective ministries and effected church multiplication and expansion beyond human expectation.

The internet has not become the main tool for the conversion of Chinese people's beliefs yet. One major factor is the government's vigorous control of the internet. Radio and video products also have limited impact, due to other factors. In the past, the most important media that influence Chinese people to become Christians are the Bible and other Christian writings. This shows that the choice of media by the Chinese is closely related to the educational status of Christians in urban China. It also shows that the traditional culture of “writing is for conveying truth” still regulates the Chinese mindset. Hence the need for Bible printing and distribution persists for the growth of the Chinese church.

Yet despite all the tensions, there seems to be a growing consensus among most pastors and churches that online pastoral care is important, especially in the ongoing pandemic context, even if on-the-ground and in-person meetings are still more important, indeed irreplaceable. More and more church leaders have been organizing their ministries with “more small groups, more household-oriented and more online. May they also shift clearly towards “house church ecclesiology as they move into the post-pandemic era.

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# PLANTING IN ALL SEASONS: PERSONAL REFLECTION

Tonyvic Tira

## INTRODUCTION

The 'gateway to the north', Edmonton, Alberta, Canada is the northernmost metropolis of around one million people in the world. Growing up here, the city had a 'small town' feel. As a child, I could go a month without hearing a car horn, the American pop culture trends were popular here at least six months after they had gone out of fashion south of us and seeing people experiencing homelessness was completely foreign to me. In addition, to see someone who looked different, I had only to look in a mirror, as I was the only Filipino in my school. Today, Edmonton is a diverse and growing city, Tagalog is the third most spoken language behind English and French, over fifteen thousand international students temporarily migrate to here annually, and encountering panhandlers is a common occurrence whether in the downtown core or far-removed suburb. In just over a decade, Edmonton has changed rapidly, and with change, there is a tremendous need and opportunity for the Good News.

*"The pandemic wrote the menu!"* said the small business owner of an Edmonton restaurant to me, who due to the global pandemic adjusted his menu and rebranded (from 'the Local Omnivore' to 'Gravy'). He further explained that in order to meet the needs of a community that relied on food but could no longer consume it as they had been, not only did his method of delivery and staffing model have to change, but also his menu. And while the essence of his menu remained, he needed to tailor it in a way that would meet the needs of the people he was trying to connect to.

During these past couple years, various studies have been released illustrating the challenges and effects of COVID-19 on our global society. Regardless of geography or station in life, the pandemic has affected how people work, gather, speak, and relate to one another. For many churches, this meant expanded digital services. According to Lifeway Research, prior to COVID-19, *"only around 1 in 4 (27%) [of Protestant pastors surveyed] said they livestreamed either the entire service or just the sermon."* In their more recent study at the height of the pandemic in early 2021, Lifeway found that *"85% of Protestant churchgoers said their congregation offered livestreamed worship services, and 76% said their church posted a video of the worship service to watch later. Additionally, 53% of churchgoers said they watched online worship services at their church more in 2020 than in 2019, while 21% said they watched more online services at a different church in 2020."* In other words, the pandemic has affected how the church

connects with people, while simultaneously changing how people connect with local churches.

Furthermore, while churches enjoyed an initial boost in reach (through online delivery), recent studies challenge the quality of those connections. Christianity Today, reported that *"according to data collected in April and May 2020 by Barna Group, one in three practicing Christians dropped out of church completely at the beginning of COVID-19. Moreover, church membership in the US dropped below 50 percent for the first time in 2020, according to Gallup data dating back to 1940."*

In Canada, these statistics have been practically observed by many. Here, the issues of change and rapid decline are not new, although they have been greatly exacerbated during the pandemic. In an April 2022 report by Global News, they affirmed the growing trend in Canada of the fastest growing religious classification being the 'nones' or non-believers (19% or 1 in 5 Canadians), while the largest religious group (46%) identified as 'spiritually uncertain'. Significantly, the Angus Reid study they reported on found that among those surveyed, *"Evangelical Christianity – which encompasses dozens of denominations such as Baptist, Pentecostal and Mennonite – was the only religion seen as more damaging than beneficial by every other self-identified religious group."*

Personally, in my corner of the world in Edmonton, Canada, pandemic restrictions sparked great debate over the integrity and obligation of the church to meet together physically. Some local churches made international headlines claiming 'persecution' and encouraging active defiance of local governance as a moral, ethical, and spiritual responsibility of the Christian church. These arguments brought to the fore the efficacy of the local church in my context, bringing to the surface further questions not solely of method of delivery but also the essence of what the church is offering. During this generational season of rapid change and decline, many are asking 'how can the church connect with people in a society where the church is seemingly and exceedingly disconnected?'

## DISCIPLES EAT TOGETHER

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

- ESV, Ac 2:42,46-47

In 2015, I started working as a Pastor for Young Adults, and it was my belief that if people were educated, exposed, and experienced in mission they would naturally take the next steps in full-time Kingdom service and ministry. For three years, we intentionally pursued active mission engagement. We went on a couple short term mission trips (both nationally and internationally), many of the core group of 40 joined mission ventures through work in inner-city Edmonton, while some joined other missions' organizations for their own mission trips. This group met for weekly fellowship, Bible study and inner-city mission serving people experiencing homelessness by delivering hot dogs (rain, snow, or shine). After three years of experiencing numerical growth and emphasizing missional living, I was convicted by the importance and impact of mission when the hearts of the people serving were challenged to be further focused and aligned to the heart of Jesus. In the summer of 2018, we embarked on a study and reflection on heart and purity issues, which saw (over the course of five weeks) the attendance dramatically decline to under 5 people (and never recover).

This experience caused me to reflect on 'the menu'. As a church leader, 'what were we offering?' I reflected on three things: presence, community, and burnout. And after a year of honest reflection, I concluded that while we were connecting with people, the essence of that connection – Jesus, was not primary (as I had believed), but rather secondary to missional service. This led people not to a richness of abiding resulting in bearing "much fruit" but instead an abundance of human endeavor, utilitarian relationships, and obligatory programming.

The summer of 2019 (pre-pandemic) after intentionally discerning and prayerfully asking 'how can our community meet Jesus in a more profound, genuine, and powerful way?' we started a monthly gathering focused on facilitating an intentional yet simple atmosphere that initiated intimate fellowship, free worship, and authoritative prayer. This was centred around the person of Jesus and the exercise of communion (typically through a potluck meal). In January of 2021 (mid-pandemic) this monthly fellowship began meeting weekly online, incorporating as a church in September, and was recognized as church plant (of the SEND Network) one month later. We named this gathering, Supper Club.

### PREPARING FOR PRESENCE (BEFORE POWER)

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

- ESV, Jo 6:35

'How do I do that?' or "I don't hear anything" were common responses from people when I had asked them to discern and ask the Holy Spirit for direction.

Seldomly, some would say that they didn't believe the Holy Spirit spoke to people directly, however, in this was a more common response than "I believe God is 'telling' me..." I must admit, that for the majority of my life as a PK (or pastor's kid) and now a pastor, these were my responses too. My prayer life was akin to picking up a cup on a string, speaking into it, putting it to my ear to hear a response, and frequently hearing nothing. This resulted in me pulling on the string to check if the connection was working. Unfortunately, for many in the churches I have encountered this lack of confidence is sadly common. In my experience, the vast majority of prayers I heard were desires for an exhibition of God's power, but lacked an equally, if not significantly greater fervor for God's presence.

The summer of 2021 was a historically dry and hot season in Edmonton. The weather fluctuated from extraordinarily hot to unbearably smoky (due to forest fires hundreds of kilometres away). At the beginning of July 2021, the provincial government revised restrictions allowing for Supper Club to finally meet in-person. However, the challenge was to meet indoors was to reduce the potential size of the gathering by two-thirds of occupancy typically allowed. After prayerful consideration, we decided on a mobile gathering, meeting outdoors in a different backyard or park, which would migrate week to week. Interestingly, the Sunday afternoons we would gather for fellowship regularly called for inclement weather leading up to and including our fellowship time. On one particular occasion that forecasted rain, our people began to pray for "good weather" or "no rain". The prayer was rooted in the idea that 'preferred weather' would lead to a more impactful gathering. Challenged by this, we began to pray a prayer of surrender, that regardless of the weather (rain or shine), what we wanted most was God's presence, and the resulting weather was delightful. On another occasion, a local advisory for smoke inhalation was lifted to a suitable amount a couple hours before our fellowship. Another time, while meeting in a busy centrally located park, the sky darkened for a moment, and began to rain heavily (forcing strangers into the gazebo we were worshipping in). It felt like an Old Testament story, as the rain literally fell around us, stopping in a line literally only several meters away. When the days looked too hot, the weather cooled in time, or when it looked gloomy, the weather warmed. Week after week, from July to October, we were never forced indoors due to weather, and from prioritizing God's presence, we began to experience and grow in awareness of His power.

In John 15, Jesus' disciples are encouraged to abide in Christ. The place of abiding is where fruit manifests, and that apart from him, we can "do nothing". As a disciple, how much do we really believe that? I understand, that anything of significance requires Jesus, but truly, I can do 'something'. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing! Not even hear. As a pastor,

many times I had been called or asked to pray for people in the congregation. From dedicating cars or career direction to improved health or new homes, the vast majority of prayer was in relation to these. Rarely did church-goers pray for the manifest presence of God in their homes, work, or relationships, and so it should have been of little surprise to me that people did not have confidence to speak to the Holy Spirit themselves. As a Church, are we preparing for presence (before power)? If not, is it any surprise that the fastest growing belief (in Canada) among those who grew up in churches is that God does not exist, and if he does, he is not within earshot of people.

As a community, we have been prioritizing intentional stillness. Adopting a posture of humility, our goal has been to be in God's presence and stay there. The idea is that if we are to partake in meaningful mission, it'll be God's initiatives and not our own. In a practical way, the extent of our 'church programs' has been prayer. Through a divine appointment, our church was provided a mentor to teach us to pray. Dr. David Chotka of Spirit Equip Ministries taught a weekly class on discernment, partnering with us to teach the Lord's Prayer to fifty-nine individuals, representing eight different churches, from three denominations. After this, we invested in three months of weekly meetings to re-learn how to pray (taking the Transform! Prayer Course). Furthermore, the initial members of the church have all read or been to Soul Care conferences, having at least an introduction to deliverance ministry. We believe, that in order to pursue God, we must learn how to hear from him first.

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**As a community, we have been prioritizing intentional stillness. Adopting a posture of humility, our goal has been to be in God's presence and stay there. The idea is that if we are to partake in meaningful mission, it'll be God's initiatives and not our own.**

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By prioritizing listening to the Holy Spirit, we've intentionally addressed and surrendered many corporate and individual barriers to Kingdom advancement. Throughout the year, the corporate practice of prayer walking led us throughout the city. And through these times of prayer led Supper Club to divine appointments, opening doors to move in and acquire its current location, and growth its pastoral team. We are learning to trust God in new ways, and to be comfortable being still in His presence.

#### **A DATA-INFORMED (NOT INTENDED) MENU**

*Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him*

*and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

- ESV, Mt 14:15-21

From the creation account in Genesis to the New Jerusalem in Revelation, the Bible shares data. As churches, we are encouraged to gather data before we embark on a task. And yet, the extent to which churches gather and communicate data is limited to monthly finances, Sunday attendance or membership, and professions of faith. While this data is useful, it only highlights one part of the story. Imagine, the feeding account without either knowing that 5000 people were fed, or that the initial meal was from five loaves and two fish? The story and its impact would be incomplete, understanding only that God feeds a lot or they didn't start with much. We would be limited to apprehend that God feeds abundantly from a meager initial offering, when offered in thanksgiving to God and service to others. Likewise, when churches limit data to 'bucks, butts, and baptisms', it fails to encourage further action and instead rewards established behaviour based on how much they give rather than the joy of their worship, their weekly commitment rather than their daily witness, and their initial decisions rather than their growth as disciple makers.

In a Disciple Making Study of US churches in March 2020, Exponential and Grey Matter Research found that 73% of all churches had either plateaued or were in statistical decline, 27% of churches reported short-term growth through programs, while only 5% of churches were "part of numerically growing churches... also characterized as churches that are reproducing disciples and disciple making". 5% of churches "weren't even scored because no one in their church was making disciples".

Discipleship.org defines: a disciple making movement - "through gospel activity, that has abundant fruit among the lost, that multiplies these disciples (people growing in obedience to all of Jesus' commands), who in turn replicate themselves in others, so that we can see at least four generations regularly produced in multiple streams of disciple-making activity and these streams multiply consistently into churches."

As a Church, what are we counting? How are we



reporting it? And is it having the intended impact? Meaning, if we were to gather data based on what we wanted to accomplish, are we actually doing it? Oftentimes, faith leaders are reluctant to collect or communicate data, insisting that the value they are providing cannot be counted as they are intangible and not measurable. Leaders without measurables, is to take people on a journey without a destination. To steward without accountability, is to risk resources without development. And finally, as the body of Christ without a tangible purpose, is to engage hunger without feeding the hungry. Churches have a responsibility to not only gather data but communicate it in a way that encourages forward progress, inspired to give God thanks and motivated to serve the community God has placed us in.

Prior to launching weekly gatherings, we used data to not only further understand and strategize connection points in the community but also to begin praying for the individuals and families in our target community. When studying potential church planting communities, we prayed for areas with (1) a low ratio of established churches to people – the lost; and (2) a greater number of diverse people groups with the potential to impact exponential communities in addition to the target community – the Kingdom. These variables led us to an intersection community in central Edmonton, which bordered downtown Edmonton and a brand-new community with the potential for growth equal to the size of downtown (which due to its age was completely unchurched). Afterward, we completed several demographic studies, looking at individual and family makeup, culture, and career. These were important for us as they have allowed us to tailor ‘the menu’ according to the identity, belonging, and (desired) purpose of the people we are trying to reach. Furthermore, these studies not only allowed us to identify needs and service opportunities but also pre-existing barriers to Christ-centred community.

At Supper Club, we’ve looked for practical ways to communicate engagement. Based on the philosophy that introduced vehicle activated speed indicator devices, our desire is to intentionally collect all points of data and simply tell people how ‘fast’ they are currently travelling in a certain direction at a fixed point in time. It is not intended to police or govern behaviour, but rather encourage reflection and personal assessment, leading individuals to ask, ‘is it my intention to be moving in this direction at this current rate in this season of life?’ Quarterly, we communicate not simply what we intend to accomplish but instead ‘what is the impact of what we have accomplished?’ Simple questions are presented according to our stated mission, vision, and values, asking things such as, whether we have eaten a meal with our neighbours, are exercising life-giving spiritual disciplines, or have served a community need. The questions are intended to be simple, encouraging ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses. Based

on the responses collected, we encourage a single point of action for the upcoming quarter. Our desire is purposeful integrated missional living rather than seasonal practices where mission can be switched off or assigned to a selected few instead of undertaken by the church (as a whole). We want to have community impact for Jesus through integral disciple making in all seasons.

## OFFERING RELATIONSHIP (INSTEAD OF RELIGION)

*But he said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many...” ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.’*

- ESV, Luke 14:16,21b-23

People are not looking for ‘a church’. This is the reality of the community we are church planting in. Through the studies previously cited and others, the vast majority of people are not interested in going to a building to attend weekly services. In fact, the mere mention of church or ‘religion’ is considered so off-base that it is essentially the simplest way to conclude a conversation. Those are for people unchurched, when engaging many people currently in churches I have found that they are either hesitant to serve or if they are involved, it is out of a greater sense of obligation than worship. However, while many people are disinterested in organized church, COVID-19 has articulated a great hunger for genuine, inclusive, and meaningful relationships. In a 2019 City of Edmonton video, they encouraged people to say ‘hello, how are you?’ after reporting that 1 in 5 Edmontonians feel socially isolated. As a church plant, we’ve prioritized a culture that models itself after Jesus, through the simple invitation to eat with others.

During the last Christmas season, a number of volunteers were cleaning Supper Club and setting up a

Tree. On my way to get pizza for the volunteers, I noticed a trespasser inside one of the vehicles outside. I informed the owner of the vehicle, and he came out to speak with the person. After the trespasser left, I spoke with the owner of the vehicle and they shared that the person was probably in the car because of the cold, and if possible, they’d like to invite them in to warm up. On cue, the trespasser returned because they had forgotten their phone in the car. We then invited them in to not only warm up, but to eat with us. As we shared a meal with them, they also shared their life with us, and we asked if we could pray with them. After praying together, they told us: “I thought I was in trouble when you wanted to talk to me. I didn’t know there was a church here, but I am thankful that

this church is here [now]."

Oftentimes, we can become so preoccupied with programs and outcomes, that it is easy to forget that we are called into relationship (first) with God, then with His body, followed by the communities he has sent us to. As we've embarked on this season of church planting, we want to be intentional about developing relationships. Not only have we encouraged intentional simplicity in mission but also in community. It can be tempting in this season of statistical church decline to prioritize the growth of our local church plant, however, one of the great opportunities we see in our community is not only its potential to reach the lost but also for the Church to work together for the Kingdom.

In a 2019 Barna study on evangelism, they reported that among lapsed Christians, 31% would be more interested in learning about Christianity if they "saw various churches in [their] community working together more". It is not only important to ask, 'how we will connect with the community of unbelievers?' but also 'how will we connect with the community of believers'. It is after all, our love for another that "people will know that [we] are [Jesus'] disciples". In this season, how will the Church not only work together but love one another? How do we show love, to churches who have responded to the pandemic differently? How do we work with churches who engage the lost with varying traditions?

At Supper Club, we've attempted to work with other churches by encouraging Christians of different traditions and cultures to come pray together and lead worship in central Edmonton. In October of 2021, when we first moved into our location we hosted a worship night. The goal was not only to facilitate but also invite other churches to lead in this space. Why? We want the Church to take ownership. One of the ways we have been intentional in this area is through worship and vision nights. In October of 2021, we invited several churches to not only attend a worship night but also lead it (in their native tongue). That evening, we worshipped with 59 different people from eight different congregations in two different languages. Encouraged, we did the same thing for Christmas Eve with almost ninety people. This past Good Friday (April 2022), we worshipped with 128 people, from thirteen churches (representing 3 denominations) in English, Mandarin, and Swahili (while being livestreamed via Zoom in mainland China)! At the communion table, Jesus calls all disciples to love and serve one another. In this way, we show and share the gospel to the world around us, and we can do this in all seasons.

## CONCLUDING POINTS FOR CHURCH PLANTERS

'Farm to Table' is a food concept that encourages healthy and sustainable eating through local produce

and consumption. As church planters, are we promoting healthy practices which encourage others in our churches to not only serve but also to grow? Jesus encourages His disciples to participate in the harvest (cf. Mk 9:37) and to be reminded that it is God who plants the seeds (cf. Ma 20:1). For Supper Club, we have been learning that it is indeed God who prepares the harvest. During the worship night in October, 2021, a pastor shared with us how nine pastors had previously committed to praying for a church to start in the specific community we planted in. Unbeknownst to us, they started praying on November 26, 2013, almost eight years prior. Even in seasons of great challenge, God is reminding us that "the harvest is plentiful", let's keep praying.

- Pray for planters to move according to God's agenda (not their own).
- Pray for planters to act according to their actual impact (not simply their intentions).
- Pray for planters to prioritize people (not their programs).

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# LEADERSHIP OR SERVANTHOOD?

*Hwa Yung*

Everywhere in the church today throughout the world there is this drumbeat of emphasis on leadership and leadership training. This is true of local and national churches, colleges and seminaries, youth groups and parachurch organizations, and so forth. And woe betide the pastor or institutional leader who fails to run leadership development programs of one sort or another.

Good and great leadership is certainly needed in the church and the Bible is full of such examples. Yet, at discussions and seminars I have often asked the question, "Where does Scripture teach or encourage leadership training in the church?" Invariably the participants scramble all over the Bible and end up stumped! I suggest that there is not a single verse in Scripture that stresses this. The preoccupation with leadership training appears to have resulted from the church jumping on the corporate and academic bandwagon, and unthinkingly adopting its agenda, often with negative consequences.

In recent years there has been a flood of revelations concerning Christian leadership failures everywhere. These include power and financial abuses among megachurch pastors and institutional leaders, sexual sin among Catholic priests and Protestant preachers, politicking for advancement and promotion, and so forth. With the constant drumbeat about leadership in the modern church encouraging and even sanctifying self-seeking ambition and celebrity status, are we being largely blinded to the serious leadership crisis in the church today? For all our talk about wanting to glorify God, the ever-present temptation to "steal God's glory" lurks everywhere in our ministry.

Could this be the precise reason why the Bible is silent on the leadership development emphasis in the modern sense? Instead, central in the New Testament is that the call to ministry is first and foremost to be servants of Christ in his church. Until and unless this is fully understood, internalized, and lived out in our lives, any talk about leadership roles will almost certainly incur the danger of our being sucked into the quagmire of ambition and self-seeking.

The late missionary statesman and scholar, Bishop Stephen Neill, a generation ago commented on the training of ministers for the gospel in the newer churches in the Majority World as follows: "If we set out to produce a race of leaders, what we shall succeed in doing is probably to produce a race of restless, ambitious and discontented intellectuals. To tell a man he is called to be a leader is the best way of ensuring his spiritual ruin, since in the Christian world ambition is more deadly than any other sin."<sup>1</sup>

1. Cited in Oswald J. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, rev. ed.

Yet, almost everywhere in the global church today, we are encouraging men and women in ministerial training to aspire to leadership!

The New Testament's focus on the call to servanthood, rather than leadership, is abundantly clear throughout. In the classic story of Mark 10:35-45, James and John's request to be seated at the right and left of the Master (that is, for the plum jobs in the new cabinet) when Jesus is anointed the Davidic king in Jerusalem is met with a simple answer. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (10:43-44)." To press home the point, Jesus goes on to say, "For even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). He was and is the ultimate model servant.

We find the same emphasis in the vocabulary for ministry in the New Testament, with the words for servant (*diakonos*) and bondsman (*doulos*), and their cognate verbs, being the words mainly used. Moreover, when we examine the apostles' self-identities in their writings, every one of them understands himself to be a servant of Christ (Rom 1:1; Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Rev 1:1; etc.). And it is the lowlier word *doulos* that is used, rather than *diakonos*.

It is important to note that what Jesus and his apostles emphasized is servanthood and not "servant leadership," as suggested by many. Various writers including Robert Banks, Duane Elmer and Steve Hayner have pointed out the inadequacies of the latter term for understanding New Testament servanthood. In particular, the term may actually betray a primary desire for leadership status, with "servant" being tacked on to mask our real self-seeking ambitions. Thus, to have a proper grasp of biblical servanthood, we must examine what the Bible says about it in itself, without having it distorted by being looked at through the leadership lens.

Inseparably linked to the question of leadership or servanthood in ministry is the issue of authority. After all, for the work of God's kingdom to advance, our ministry must carry authority – spiritual authority to be precise. The ministry of Jesus, whether in his preaching and teaching, or in realm of the supernatural signs and wonders, was marked by an authority which onlookers recognized immediately (e.g., Mark 1:22, 27, 34; 2:11; 4:41; 5:21-43; etc.). Nevertheless, in his earthly ministry, Jesus does not point to himself as having an authority of his own, even though he is the Second Person of the Trinity. Instead, we find him repeatedly asserting that "the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father

(Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 148.

doing” (John 5:19), and that “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father has taught me” (8:28).<sup>2</sup> In other words, Jesus’ incarnate life was lived in total submission to the Father, doing only what the Father willed. Yet, paradoxically, precisely because he lived in total submission to the Father, he could therefore exercise the fullness of his Father’s authority through the power of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

The same principle applies to us. Jesus asserts this when he said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). This was said in the context of Jesus telling his disciples that “it is to your advantage that I go away” (John 16:7), because only after he goes will the Holy Spirit be sent.

To sum up, Jesus modelled servanthood for us, and that includes his total submission to the Father. We are similarly called to servanthood and to live in total submission to God, both being inseparably linked. When that happens, we will then be able to exercise the Father’s authority in the power of the Spirit, in exactly the same way as it was exercised in Jesus’ life on earth.

Unfortunately, these biblical emphases on servanthood and that spiritual authority flows out of total submission to the Father have been largely missing in our Christian theology of ministry. Instead, the church at large has opted to follow the way of the world which thinks of authority primarily in terms of the executive powers which leaders have. And since it is the church or institutional leader that holds executive power, we must therefore aspire for organizational or institutional leadership if we are to have authority. The overall tendency then is to speak of leadership in terms that are not very different from the way the world around us does, with the language, concepts, and underlying motivations assumed in such discourses largely borrowed from secular leadership studies.

Could it be that, as noted by Samuel Escobar in his critique of “managerial missiology,” much of our thinking on church ministry and mission have succumbed to modernity’s scientific-technological approach? Do not most of us assume that if only there are sufficient resources such as suitably trained personnel, money, proper strategic planning and sound management, the church will invariably grow and our mission goals achievable without fail? The whole exercise hardly differs from the corporate management and leadership techniques used in selling Coca-Cola and smart phones. With such sound management thinking what need is there for God in the whole process?

Yet the evidence before us, both in church history and

2. Cf. also John 5:20; 6:38; 8:28-29; 12:49-50; 14:30-31; etc.

3. For details of the argument see Hwa Yung, *Leadership or Servanthood: Walking in the Steps of Jesus* (Carlisle: Langham, 2021), 38-46, building on the work of J. I. Packer, Gerald F. Hawthorne and others.

today, is that ultimately the gospel does not advance merely or primarily through good management and leadership techniques, important as these may be. Rather, it advances through men and women who are “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). This is clearly seen in the amazing growth of the church in the Majority World in the past century. Examples of this include the powerful ministries of Prophet Harris (1913 onwards) in West Africa and Simon Kimbangu (1921 onwards) in Congo, the rapid spread of Christianity in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Pentecostal growth in Latin America in the latter half of the century, and the gospel’s advance in Korea, through grassroot churches in India and house churches in China, and so forth. In many cases, against intense opposition and left with nothing but God, the revivals came. As they say, the rest is history.

Could it be that this ultimate dependence on the Holy Spirit is largely missing in our leadership thinking in the modern church? It is not only a problem in the West but a global one. This is not to say that everything taught today in our leadership training programs are wrong and a waste of time. Indeed there is much that is good and useful, and many of us can indeed benefit immensely from these. But when the church forgets the Holy Spirit and that divine authority is indispensable for the Kingdom’s advance, all our human efforts by themselves will come to naught. As our Lord says: “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Hence, Scripture does not appear to encourage us to strive for leadership in itself. Rather, we need to recover the centrality of servanthood and the practice of total submission to the Father, which Jesus modelled for us, in our theology of ministry. This means that if we live by the ways of this world and ambitiously strive for leadership, we will fail to attain it. Even if we manage to get ourselves into some significant leadership roles, we will still fail because our exercise of leadership will be badly compromised by ambition and self-seeking. But if, instead, we learn to die to self and faithfully serve Christ and others, in total obedience to the Father, our lives and work will have leadership impact even when we have not sought it.



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# HOUSE CHURCH PLANTING IN BASHKORTOSTAN, RUSSIA

*Christopher Carr*

The present study outlines nine three-hour training sessions designed to encourage and prepare Russian evangelical leaders and believers in Russia's semi-autonomous Republic of Bashkortostan to adopt house church models for church planting, models that also may be described as organic or cell churches. Implementation began before completion of the study, with 20 new house and cell groups and churches launched by the end of the nine-week project.

## UFA DEMOGRAPHICS

The study was undertaken in Ufa, Bashkortostan's capital, located 725 miles east-southeast of Moscow and just west of the Ural Mountains, which divide Russia between Europe and Asia. The city has a population of over 1.1 million, which is approximately one quarter of the region's four million people.<sup>1</sup> Bashkortostan's capital consists of 48 percent Bashkir and Tatar (528,000), 39 percent Russian (429,000), and 13 percent divided among smaller minorities including Chuvash, Udmurt, Mari, Mordvinian, and Ukrainian (143,000). Over 100 ethnic groups are represented in Ufa's population.

## CHURCH DEMOGRAPHICS

Ufa is home to approximately 2,500 evangelical believers. In 2009 Evangelical Christian-Baptist (ECB) representation in Bashkortostan included 15 churches and 5 small group fellowships, of which 7 were in Ufa, with a membership of 940, including 387 in Ufa, and 15 Bible study groups, including three in Ufa. Churches that are part of the Russian ECB Union in Bashkortostan include Good News, House of Prayer for All Peoples, Grace, Holy Trinity, Light of the Gospel, Resurrection, and two Baptist churches both named Grace. ECB pastors in Bashkortostan number 15, with 7 in Ufa, but with only 4 serving in specific church-type buildings, one of which is in Ufa. Nineteen churches meet in other structures (houses, apartments, cafes, and theaters), including 6 in Ufa. Twenty Southern Baptist missionaries have served in Bashkortostan since 2000, with most of this number serving in the capital.<sup>2</sup> Also, ECB evangelistic Bible study groups meet regularly in Ufa and may emerge as churches in the near future. Charismatic and Pentecostal churches in Ufa include Life of Victory, Rock, Union of Christians, Light of Truth, Vineyard,

Bethel, Central Pentecostal, and one additional unnamed congregation.<sup>3</sup> All combined, Ufa, then, is served by nine Baptist churches and multiple evangelistic Bible study groups, ten charismatic and Pentecostal churches, plus one Lutheran and one Catholic congregation.

## CHURCH SITE RESTRICTIONS

In light of the fact that most Protestants, at least for the foreseeable future, do not have resources to purchase or build churches, pragmatically speaking they must reappraise church planting and evangelism and actively consider using house church models. Because of Ufa's unique position as one of the main centers of Sunni Hanafi Islam in Russia, thus presenting serious impediments to the purchase of land and buildings for churches, it would appear that the house church model will best fit church planting needs in Ufa and Bashkortostan for years to come.

## TRAINING PREPARATIONS

Of the 25 project participants, 15 completed a basic values survey, a measurement tool adapted from East-West Church & Ministry Report • Spring 2013 • Vol. 21, No. 2 • Page 5 (continued on page 6) Sherwood G. Lingenfelter's and Marvin K. Mayer's *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003). Participants also completed a theological values instrument adapted from *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches* by D. Michael Lindsay and George Gallup, Jr., (Omaha, NE: Gallup Organization, 2002).

## PUBLISHED TRAINING RESOURCES

In addition to the Bible, the writings of Neil Cole, Bruce Carleton, and Frank Viola provided the rationale for the Bashkortostan house church training project. Church planter and pastor Neil Cole is founder and executive director of Church Multiplication Associates and is also part of Leadership Network. His seminal work, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), is now also available in Russian. It is one of the most influential books among Southern Baptist International Mission Board church planters in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. One of Cole's key theses is that the Lord's church should bring God's message to people where they are rather than expect

1. "About the City of Ufa," <http://www.ufacity.info>.

2. "2009 Russian Baptist Union Statistical Observations for Bashkortostan," email from Arkadi L., administrative assistant for the senior pastor for Russian Baptists in Ufa and Bashkortostan, 6 May 2009.

3. Email from Stas K., 2 May 2009.

people to appear in church. His approach is also in keeping with the message of Jesus who lived among the people. According to Cole, "If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section."<sup>4</sup> Bruce Carleton, a former Southern Baptist International Mission Board church planter and currently professor of cross-cultural ministry at Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma, has written a church planting training manual, *Acts 29: Practical Training in Facilitating Church-Planting among the Neglected Harvest Fields* (Radical Obedience Publishers, 2003). (Carleton's material is not to be confused with the Acts 29 Network, an association of emergent, postmodern churches that espouse "Christian freedom" in connection with the use of alcohol.) Each trainee received Carleton's Acts 29 materials with instructions to complete the reading in advance of nightly training sessions. Frank Viola provided a third, major influence upon the Ufa training program. Project participants received two of his books translated into Russian: *Rethinking the Wineskin: The Practice of the New Testament Church* (Gainesville, FL: Present Testimony Ministries, 2011) and *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008).

## OTHER TRAINING RESOURCES

Time was also allocated for a handout describing POUCH, an acronym representing a specific approach to house church development: Participative Bible study; Obedience shown daily on the basis of what Scripture teaches (not to a leader, church, or tradition); Unpaid lay leadership; Cell groups or small congregations; and House churches. After a 30-minute discussion led by group member, Maxim M., regarding Frank Viola's texts, *Reimagining Church* and *Rethinking the Wineskin*, this author previewed for the group a document entitled, "A Jesus Manifesto," co-written by Leonard and Frank Viola, stressing its implications for the house church planting model and an overall definition for church. Another program resource, a film clip, "Corpus Christi," illustrated the concept that believers and God's church are like a lifeboat throwing out a lifeline to those drowning, rather than a cruise ship devoted to creature comforts and entertainment for its passengers.<sup>5</sup> Each trainee also received a copy of the evangelistic tract, "I'll Do It Later," as an example of a tool to use in witnessing, especially because of the pattern of procrastination among many Ufa citizens.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the author presented the discipleship model,

4. Cole, *Organic Church*, xxvii.

5. Produced by Reinhard Bonnke, Full Flame Film Series, <http://www.bonnke.net/fullflame/>. An English-language version may be viewed at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7945138045913570814&ei=6KRfS8KBCJQqALvsZnVBw&q=full+flame+video#>.

6. Published by Fellowship Tract League, a ministry of Fellowship Baptist Church, Morrow, OH, [www.fellowshiptractleague.org](http://www.fellowshiptractleague.org). An English-language version may be viewed at this website.

Training for Trainers (T4T), and gave copies in Russian to those present and also within a few days to regular attendees who could not be present because of sickness or their own group's meeting. As a means of encouraging a continuing witness to atheists, intellectuals, and university students, training sessions also made use of Volume 15 of *Intelligent Design*, a bimonthly journal published by Dimitri Kurovsky, Kyiv, Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Other resources for the project included Thomas Wade Akins, *Pioneer Evangelism* (Rio de Janeiro: Home Mission Board, Brazilian Baptist Convention, 1999); David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004); and *Caring Via Mutual Discipleship*, developed by Biblical Education by Extension (BEE). Seminar proceedings were videotaped and DVDs were prepared for future training sessions.

## A CHANGE OF PLANS

Original project plans called for Bruce and Gloria Carleton to lead an entire week of hands-on Acts 29 training. Unfortunately, they were unable to come. Two additional and unexpected supplementary training opportunities came to light quite soon. First, I learned of the house church planting work of Pavel S., assistant to the senior pastor for missionary work for the northwest Baptist region based in Saint Petersburg, Russia. He accepted an invitation to share his experience as one component of the training project. Pavel led an entire day of training based upon his experience planting house churches in Kazakhstan and across Russia. In addition, three Moscow believers (Brad S., Gennadi K., and Dima S.) led a day-long training session regarding the biblical basis for cell groups and cell churches, sharing their practical experience from two years of practice in Moscow.

## FIRST FRUITS

Surprisingly, many of the project group participants themselves began asking how to continue the group, its energy, and the emerging movement, before the final training session. Moving the training sessions' venue from an office setting to the author's apartment created an environment that turned out to be conducive to the effectiveness of the training project. The initial intent of using the apartment was not for the goal of modeling a house church, but that is how the situation progressed. Some of the early skeptics emerged as enthusiastic supporters and practitioners of house church planting. Three project participants (Timur Y., Vatali S., and Marcel K.) started new house groups on Wednesday evenings near the end of training sessions, precluding their involvement in the project to the very end but providing a real-time example of the fulfillment of church planting. If you want to win this world to Christ, you are going to have to sit in the smoking section. Some of the early skeptics

7. <http://www.origins.org.ua/index>



emerged as enthusiastic supporters and practitioners of house church planting. Page 6 • Spring 2013 • Vol. 21, No. 2 East West Church & Ministry Report The eighth session began with a time of sharing victories and prayer needs, including one person (Marcel K.) relating that his unbelieving relatives in a village about three hours from Ufa had invited him to come start a new group in their living room. By this time in the project, every trainee was either leading or directly participating in new house groups or house churches, with four participants (Andrei D., Ilgam M., Naeel A., and Maxim M.) having started and/or leading two or three new groups.

#### **PAVEL S.**

The participation of Pavel S. proved invaluable to the overall project's effectiveness. His extensive prior experience planting house churches, coupled with his ministry responsibility for missional work for an extensive region of Russia, including the megacity of Saint Petersburg, brought critical credibility to the project. His involvement and leadership cannot be overestimated. His effectiveness with house groups, along with his ability to communicate the scriptural basis for such an approach and endorse it in a culturally appropriate and challenging way, provided one of the key moments in nudging church leaders, such as Peter Z., to a more supportive position regarding the project. Having the determined involvement of a national believer of Pavel's stature and influence helped to "de-Americanize" the project further and to insure more enthusiastic acceptance and relevance of the training project. Pavel's presence took on especially vital importance since Bruce and Gloria Carleton were not able to come to Ufa for the planned Acts 29 segment of the project.

#### **OTHER RUSSIAN TRAINERS**

The involvement of national believers from the capital of Moscow also added weight and value to the training project experience. They brought their practical experience of real-life, cell church planting to bear upon the training needs of Ufa believers. They found a willing audience with not only project group participants, but also among more than a dozen other Ufa believers who participated in a day-long presentation regarding the efficacy and place of cell groups and cell churches in church planting. Their involvement built upon the strategic input of Pavel S. and added further impetus to prod local leadership into deepening involvement and blessing of the overall training project. The participation of the Moscow cell church planters served as a further tipping point that contributed to the paradigm shift that eventually led to the emergence of new house groups by the official end of the project. Twenty-one new house groups and churches were launched in Ufa and Bashkortostan as of late December 2009, as well as

many new believers and a growing number of longer-term believers involved in the emerging movement.

#### **RESISTANCE**

The project has not been accomplished without disagreement or tension. As mentioned previously, the ECB senior pastor for all of Bashkortostan, Peter Z., was not substantially supportive of the project and the principles and philosophy behind it. Thankfully, he did not try to obstruct it, instead leaving it to individual churches and pastors to decide whether or not to pursue house groups as tools for church growth. Unfortunately, at a meeting just before Christmas 2009, Peter Z. spoke strongly against much of what various Western contemporary church planting practitioners and researchers propose, including Neil Cole, Frank Viola, and George Barna.

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He stated that much of what they wrote was incorrect. On 26 December 2009 project member Maxim M. wrote to the author on furlough: The meeting was very difficult. Andrei and I, especially me, made a mistake in citing books which you gave us to read. Peter Z. does not agree with most of their arguments; he almost announced a ban especially on the books by Frank Viola. He does not want us to give these books to our believers to read. But all the brothers supported house churches themselves as a mission project. Therefore, we will carefully and quietly work and cite only Scripture. Otherwise it will take 100 years to experience support for this. It is the author's hope that Pavel S. will be able to return to Ufa annually for the next three to five years for one- or two-day training seminars to help keep the project group (and its expanded circle of influence through new trainees and new disciples) focused, forward-looking, and risk-taking in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, and house church planting. In future meetings and presentations regarding house churches and the biblical philosophy behind them, the author will instruct group participants to avoid citing heavily from the writings of Western church planting practitioners. Although this author believes strongly that such writers have made a solid, biblical



case for the validity of house church planting models, it became evident by the end of the project that quoting from such authors created a stumbling block, especially for older Russian Evangelical Christian-Baptist leadership in Ufa. A wiser approach will build a strong biblical case and show from experience that house churches work, rather than relying heavily on Western authors.

## IN SUMMARY

The inability of one expert to participate initially caused the author to start rethinking the training session schedule. Within two days of the cancellation, the Lord orchestrated a series of events leading to an invitation for experienced and respected Russian house church planters to assist the author during two training sessions. Funds miraculously became available to cover travel and lodging expenses to the glory of God.

Notes: \

1 "About the City of Ufa," <http://www.ufacity.info>.

2 "2009 Russian Baptist Union Statistical Observations for Bashkortostan," email from Arkadi L., administrative assistant for the senior pastor for Russian Baptists in Ufa and Bashkortostan, 6 May 2009.

3 Email from Stas K., 2 May 2009.

4 Cole, Organic Church, xxvii.

5 Produced by Reinhard Bonnke, Full Flame Film Series, <http://www.bonnke.net/fullflame/>. An English-language version may be viewed at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7945138045913570814&ei=6KRfS8KBCJQqALvsZnVBw&q=full+flame+video#>.

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7 <http://www.origins.org.ua/index>.

## Author's Postscript,

January 2013 I have learned by experience since the completion of my doctoral dissertation that we should have appointed a coordinator for the emerging house church network. At least a dozen evangelistic Bible groups still meet in and around Ufa, with many more spawned farther afield in cities and villages across Bashkortostan. I also see now that not providing consistent, ongoing training was a weakness. Still, several key churches that participated in the doctoral project and which are now in more strategic leadership positions are jointly coordinating ongoing training. We are having a follow-up house church training event in March 2013 in Ufa at the House of Prayer ECB Church, and other similar training events in fall 2013. Grace ECB Church, of which I am co-pastor with Zhenya Vasileev, a former drug addict,

is quite active in outreach, including evangelistic Alpha courses, English-language evangelistic clubs, men's and women's monthly evangelistic picnics from April to October, holiday parties, rehab recovery groups, weekly street kid meetings, and special-needs projects. Believers from Grace Church, House of Prayer Church, and Ufa Bible Church go on monthly trips to outlying villages and small towns to start new Bible study and outreach groups. A zeal exists within these churches. For some, it is a new zeal; for others, it is a recovery of the zeal triggered during the doctoral project by God's grace, and for others, it is a steady continuation of what God began in fall 2009 here in Ufa. We are expecting a leadership transition by March 2014 and are cautiously optimistic that the new ECB presbyter will be supportive of Bashkortostan's house church movement.

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*Dr. Chris Carr has served as Executive Director and Co-Director, respectively, of Global Gates Network of Canada since arriving in the Greater Toronto Area in Sept. 2017. Chris and his wife Eileen previously served cross-culturally in Russia and Ukraine from 1999-2015 with the International Mission Board primarily as strategy coordinators for the gateway city of Ufa, Russia. They are both graduates of Oklahoma Baptist University (Eileen in 1997—Christian Studies, and Chris in 1986—Pastoral Ministry and Sociology). Chris earned a Master of Divinity (with Biblical Languages) degree in 1997 from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, a Doctor of Ministry degree in International Church Planting Leadership in 2010 from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, and a PhD in Biblical Missiology in 2021 from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City. Chris served as a pastoral leader and elder for churches in Oklahoma and Russia. The Carrs have five children: Nathan (25), Tim (23), Heather (21), and Stephen & Seth (20—twins). Tim, Heather, and Stephen live/work/study in Shawnee, Oklahoma; Nathan lives/works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Seth lives with Chris/Eileen and with Holly, the family cat in Brampton, ON and recently completed an electronic music production course of study at Metalworks Institute in Mississauga."*