Case Studies

This series of case studies is a representative sample of contemporary church planting among classically defined unreached peoples. Examples appear from the major blocs of unreached peoples: Chinese, Muslim, Hindu, Tribal and Buddhist. An urban population in Latin America is also included. Most are recent. All were initiated within the last generation.

The point of these case studies is to explore the complexity and the feasibility of pioneer church planting in our day. You won’t find simplistic formulas for success. You’ll see ordinary people prayerfully developing unique approaches for different situations. Some cases are short, reduced to a rough outline of what took place. Each story reveals a great deal about how each movement was initiated and nurtured through embryonic phases.

Compare and contrast the stories. Notice the crucial role of local workers laboring alongside expatriate missionaries. Observe how foreign workers enter culture and develop ways to communicate the gospel. Note how obstacles were faced and overcome, how partnerships were formed and bore fruit, the years required, the perseverance and creativity demanded. You’ll see how community development can be integrated with evangelism. You’ll notice setbacks, mistakes and disappointment along with dramatic breakthroughs. Take note of how prayer was lifted, suffering was endured and God’s hand was extended in order to establish movements of obedient faith in Christ.

The names of some authors, peoples and places have been changed at the author’s request.

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A Pioneer Team in Zambia, Africa

Phillip Elkins

This church planting case study differs from some in that it describes a team of missionaries who banded together prior to entering a field. Most efforts are put together by a sending agency and they bring together several people who may meet for the first time in the field. This team came together in 1967 out of a common concern to reach an unreached or “hidden” people whom God had already prepared to be receptive to His redemptive message.

The team took as its model the “Apostolic Band” of the first century. This multi-talented, multi-gifted group had varying degrees of field experience. Stan Shewmaker had already worked in Zambia, Africa for five years; Frank Alexander in Malawi, Africa for four years; Phillip and Norma Elkins had been involved in visiting and research of missions in 71 countries and two other couples had been on short-term assignments in Africa. Ages of members ranged from 25 to 33. The five men in the group had degrees in Biblical studies and just prior to leaving for the field completed master’s degrees in missiology.

Because of this experience and training, the team felt it could function as its own
agency in the same sense that the Paul-Timothy-Luke-Silas “band” of the New Testament did. The group was sent by an “Antioch” congregation in San Fernando, California. This church body recognized that the true “sending” agent was the Holy Spirit (Acts 13: 4, “so being sent by the Holy Spirit”) and thus did not consider itself the governing or “decision making” organization. Responsibility for field decisions was left to the team, directed by the Holy Spirit, in partnership with the national Christian leadership on the field.

Early Decisions and Convictions
As the team searched for an unreached people (two years), they concluded the Holy Spirit was leading them to a segment of the Tonga tribe (one of the largest in Zambia, numbering over 300,000) called the Toka-Leya. Ninety-five percent of these people were adherents of an ethnic, or localized, folk-religion (some would use the term animistic). Within a twelve-mile radius of where the team settled (the primary target area) were 100 villages with four small congregations that had not grown for several years (a total of 75 Christians).

The team spent most of the first two years (1970-71) learning the language and culture, without engaging in overt evangelistic activities. By the end of 1973 there were four times as many churches (16) and six times the membership (450). Beyond this immediate twelve-mile area, completely new movements were started. For example, in the Moomba chieftaincy, 70 miles to the north, newly trained national Christians planted six churches with 240 members within a few months. This was done in 1973 and involved winning the chief, a third of all the village headmen and both court judges.

I mention this early rapid response to show that we were indeed led to a “ripe pocket” in God’s mosaic of peoples. We knew that the national church, motivated and trained, had to be the vehicle to gather the harvest. By 1974 we felt most of the American team could pull out. By 1979, the last two “foreign” families felt they could responsibly move on to another new people to begin the process again. Today a national church continues the process of winning and discipling “to the fringes.”

“Methods,” “approaches,” and “strategy” may be “unspiritual” words in some Christians’ vocabulary. I feel in the context of this effort there was validity in the strategy and specific methods followed by the team. In addition to what has been described, I think the first two years in which we were involved as in-depth “learners” of the Tonga world view (language, lifestyle, values, politics, social structure, beliefs, educational systems and other aspects of culture) were essential to our efforts as church planters. My wife and I lived in a village of 175 people and followed a lifestyle closely identified with that of other Toka-Leya families. We learned to “hurt” where they hurt and “feel” what they felt. We identified, not so much to be “accepted,” though that is important, but to understand and appreciate their culture for its finest and best dimensions. We had to know what parts were already functioning positively within the will and purpose of God. We needed to know what had to be confronted and changed to fit the demands of the kingdom of God.

Perhaps most critical was the need to learn where people had “felt needs” through which God’s message of redemption could be accepted as Good News. The message that had been proclaimed as “Gospel” by earlier Christian efforts was in fact perceived as “Bad News.” The “Gospel” was perceived as God calling men to have one wife and not to drink beer. Though Christians were saying many other things, this was perceived as the “.banner” of the message. Because missionaries showed a major interest in setting up schools for children, the adult population found the message alright for children but almost unthinkable for adults.

Understanding the Tonga World View
During our two years of “incarnational identification,” the Tongas’ perception of reality (world view) became increasingly clear to us. Graphically, it might be described to a Westerner as follows:
It was to this perception of reality that we had to address our lives and message. Tongas believed that one can affect the *unborn fetus* in another person’s body. For example, if a pregnant woman’s family had brought death to members of your family, you could enlist the aid of a medicine man to cause the death of the fetus (without having physical contact with the pregnant woman).

The category of *living living* corresponds to our concept of living people with their finite physical limitations. But after physical death this person continues as the *living dead*. The personality, personal enemies, prejudice, taste preferences and so forth, continue intact. Therefore, one can go to the grave of the *living dead* person and request assistance based on a knowledge of that person’s personality and the obligations of relationship. Similarly, the *exalted living dead* are to be supplicated on the basis of the status they attained while in the *living living* existence.

The *forgotten dead* are those persons whose names and personalities have passed from living memory. Therefore, no one can now appeal to them, placate them, or appease them. This group represents a dimension of reality which strikes at the heart of the fears, apprehensions and frustrations of the Tonga.

Within this framework of “reality” I will describe how our team of Christians found an opening to speak to felt needs. The Tonga believed that God (Leza) created humans and, for a while, lived together with them. But as people became abusive in their relationship with him (in one story a woman strikes God) God left them, and all direct communication became impossible. The only remaining way to speak to God then, is through the living dead or exalted living dead. But the inability to “hear back” from God, to know his personality, to understand whether their needs were adequately communicated, represented an area of felt need.

Forgotten ancestors are commonly believed to be the *spirits* which enter people to kill them. A violent illness is associated with such spirits, and unless the person can get this spirit expelled, death will result. Other spirits represent alien forgotten dead (they come from another tribe) which frequently are associated with a long-term, frustrating, but not fatal illness. These spirits also frequently possess the person and use the person as a medium to communicate with the community. The community responds to this possession by special gatherings to dance and sing to the spirit. The purpose of these gatherings is to appease, control and hopefully rid the person of the spirit.

Finally, there are spirits which humans play a role in creating. These particular spirits were the most feared and frustrating for the people with whom I lived. None of the
literature I studied on spirits in Africa dealt with this particular spirit, though humanly created spirits do exist in other African tribes.

Our understanding came in this way. A very sick boy was brought to me one day. The child was near death and I felt it was beyond my own limited medical skills to help. I took the parents and child to a hospital, but as I watched the child died. From a Western medical perspective, the child died from complications growing out of malaria and anemia. A year later I attended a village court case where a man was accused of killing this very child. The man finally admitted, after weeks of trial procedures, that he was guilty. The reason was that the man felt he had been wronged by the father of the child and he wanted to create his personal isaku spirit. No one during the trial was willing to explain to me what an isaku was. People who were normally generous with information would deny knowing anything about these spirits. During this time my wife and I visited a village one evening where none of the women around a fire had their children on their backs. This was very unusual. I asked them why and they explained that it was because there were many isaku spirits in their village and they were afraid for the safety of their children. They explained that their children were in huts where they could be watched. When they discovered that I did not know what an isaku spirit was they explained only that it was an evil spirit. Since all spirits were considered evil, that was not much help.

As the weeks went by, I finally persuaded a medicine man, who occasionally visited our area, to explain isaku. This spirit could be created by people who wanted a being to steal, kill or otherwise serve their own interests. To create an isaku one would first have to dig up and decapitate a freshly buried body. The head would be removed in the middle of the night to an isolated area where two paths cross. A fire would be built and certain medicines would be added to it. The ensuing smoke would engulf the head to which portions of certain animals had been attached (snake skin, bird feathers, feet of a rabbit, etc.). This ceremony, if correctly done, would result in a living spirit called isaku. The physical part of this spirit was to be kept, fed and hidden. If one properly cared for isaku, the person would have his wishes granted. If not properly cared for, isaku would kill the person or a member of his family. When a person who owns an isaku dies, the relative who inherits the dead person’s name also inherits their isaku. Normally no one would reveal that they had an isaku. Thus, if a relative who was asked to receive a name was suspicious that an isaku was associated with it, that person might refuse to receive the name.

If anyone inherits a name, and unknowingly should have received an isaku, they learn of the mistake very painfully. They may arrive home one day to learn that a child has died suddenly.

As our knowledge grew of isaku spirits, many gaps in our understanding of the Tonga were eliminated. We grew increasingly conscious of how powerless the people felt to adequately deal with isaku spirits and those who would create them. This, coupled with the realization that the Tonga felt every death was the result of someone’s overt effort to cause it, helped us to understand the extent of much of the animosity and anger between individuals and families.

**Responding to Felt Needs**

From all of the above insights a picture of felt needs emerged to which God could speak meaningfully. The first Good News from God for the Tonga was that He had given to us a Holy Spirit. The Tongas knew nothing of a good spirit, much less a Holy Spirit from God Himself as a gift. We shared that we were not afraid, as they were, of isaku spirits because we had residing in us continually a Spirit that would not tolerate other spirits. The Spirit in us was more powerful than any other spirit. This explained the lack of fear they had seen in our lives, the joy, the confidence and hope.

The second part of our Good News was that the God, which they already knew by name, had not abandoned them. The Tonga had left God but He was willing to live among them again. He had already proved His willingness by sending a Son who lived as a human and showed humans how to re-
ally live. We explained that one can now talk directly to God about their needs and that this Son also serves as a person’s special advocate before God. We further explained that God’s Son was so concerned to remove the sin and guilt for all of the offensive ways that we live that He Himself accepted the punishment on our behalf.

The Tongas began to realize the verification and proof of what we said was the Holy Spirit which lived in us. Lest I be misunderstood by a reader of this, I am not talking about a special gift of speaking in tongues. I am speaking of that which every Christian receives at his new birth.

We also spoke of the verification that would come from knowing the Bible. This had little immediate impact, as most of the people could not read. However, the Word is not confined to the printed page. The Word was communicated daily by a God who was willing to reveal Himself in their lives. He revealed Himself one day as we went to a village where we were stopped by a drunken woman who forbade us to come into her village. She said they followed Satan and not God. That night she died and the next day hundreds of people came wanting to know more of God’s will for their lives.

The major political leader of our area had been leading the people to the graves of their ancestors annually to solicit rain. When he accepted the Good News, he demonstrated his faith by leading his people in a new way. When the first drought occurred he called the people together to spend a day calling to God to give them rain. This was a bold move which exceeded the faith of some of the missionaries. But God honored the boldness and before the sun set the earth was drenched in rain.

In the village where we made our home, almost half of the adult population accepted baptism. At their initiative we all spent a night in prayer before going out as a group to share our faith with another village.

As our team of American missionaries saw more and more churches planted, we began to modify our role as leaders in evangelism and church planting. I believe it was a good strategy for us to identify with the Tongas physically and to provide a physical and spiritual model for evangelism. I know this is a concept that is considered “past” in many circles, but I feel it should still be an emphasis in pioneer mission efforts.

To train an indigenous leadership we set up 16 extension centers for training every Christian in the basics of the Christian faith, and instituted a special course for those who emerged as church leaders. This was done with the new Christians bearing the cost of the courses. We followed the practice of not subsidizing the construction of buildings, or providing funding for those who entered the preaching ministry.

**Prepared for Battle**

I cannot close this story without admitting that we, like the team that Paul worked with, experienced some interpersonal conflict and setbacks in our ministry goals, including betrayals by believers and reversions by some of those we had the greatest hopes for. But we accept that as normal in the battle “against the principalities and powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).

I think it is important for one to know the Bible well enough to be able to know where the battle is. I think we invite defeat when we do not make the effort to learn the local language well enough to teach effectively in it. I think it is essential that we participate in a real way in the lifestyle and struggles of the people we are sent to. When we do not ground our proclamation on an understanding of a people’s hurts and felt needs, and when we allow our own cultural understanding of the Christian message to blind us to what God wants said in a radically different setting and culture, we invite failure.

I heartily commend the team approach for pioneer mission efforts. During the five years I was in Zambia one of our original families left, but others came and were incorporated. In addition, from the very beginning, we tried hard to expand the team leadership to include Tonga Christians. This kind of team approach is not the only way to approach the task, but it was part of what made our five years in Zambia a productive and happy experience.
The ministry in the Tungshih area of central Taiwan is an excellent example of how rapidly the Gospel follows along the web of family relationships. It also shows the wisdom of the missionary in guiding the Christians to make functional substitutes and thus satisfy the people’s desire to express in a Hakka way their respect of the departed.

**The Transformation of Mrs. Chan**
The work of God began with the transformation of Mrs. Chan, who had moved with her husband from Cholan in central Taiwan to Kaohsiung, a southern port city. She had been troubled with demons for some years and they really began to bother her when her son wrote from the off-shore island of Chinmen of his fear from the noise of exploding shells from Communist China.

Mrs. Chan went to a monk in Tainan, 50 miles to the north, who was known for his ability to cast out demons. For $15 Mrs. Chan got the advice to make a straw effigy of herself, put her clothes on it and have it buried. She was covered with a fishing net and taken to a dark corner to hide until the effigy was buried. The action was intended to deceive the demons into thinking that she was dead.

“Do you think that drove away the demons?,” she will ask in her testimony. “No!,“ she will shout. “It didn’t help one bit.”

About that time an elder’s wife from the Hsinsheng Presbyterian Church in Kaohsiung began visiting her and inviting her to church. She had all kinds of excuses but was finally enticed to see some slides on the life of Christ. The demon seized her in the meeting and she ran out, but the pastor came later to see her.

He said she would not get rid of the demon without first accepting Christ. He kept on visiting her and teaching her of Christ.

Almost two years later Mrs. Chan woke up early one morning and began breaking the idols on the home altar. Her daughter-in-law thought she was possessed again and called Mr. Chan. He told them to leave Mrs. Chan alone because she was preparing to believe in Jesus. She asked them if they could think of any help the idols had been, in the twenty years they had served them. Since they could think of none, she finished cleaning up the altar and sold to the scrap man what couldn’t be burned. She later was baptized and within three years her husband and two sons believed, too.

**Mrs. Chan’s Family and Friends**
Mrs. Chan began praying for her brothers and sisters near Tungshih immediately after she was saved. Over a period of ten years she visited them as often as she could, telling them what the Lord had done for her and encouraging them to trust in Christ. One brother was the village elder and he loved to drink. His liver became diseased from too much liquor, so Mrs. Chan prayed that the Lord would both heal his liver and take the taste for liquor from him. When the Lord answered her prayer, she encouraged her brother to trust in Christ. He said they needed to know more and would welcome a preacher to their home.

Mrs. Chan had not lived near Tungshih for many years, so she prayed as she walked to town that the Lord would lead her to the right person. She arrived at the Norwegian
Evangelical Lutheran Free Church at seven o'clock in the morning that May day in 1968. Mrs. Johansen was home and she called Miss Cho to interpret what Mrs. Chan was saying. Mrs. Chan told her story and asked Mrs. Johansen to go with her to Henglung.

Mrs. Johansen suggested that she instead should send Miss Ammon, who at that time was in Tungshih and who spoke Hakka. Mrs. Chan objected, “No, the Holy Spirit led me here. You are the one.” Then Mrs. Johansen suggested they wait until her husband came back. Again Mrs. Chan objected, “No, someone needs to go in now and each Sunday night as well as one night during the week.” Another fellow missionary was available and she went with Miss Cho and Mrs. Chan for the first meeting that day in the Yeh home in Henglung.

Rev. Johansen and Miss Cho began regular meetings in the Yeh home in mid-May in 1968. He spoke in Mandarin and Miss Cho interpreted into Hakka. They wrote out some choruses and a brief prayer asking the Lord’s forgiveness and blessing. The oldest women seemed the most responsive. When someone asked about worshipping their ancestors, Rev. Johansen hesitated. Then the oldest brother’s wife said, “In all these years that I have offered food to our ancestors not once have they taken what I offered.” There were no more questions on ancestor worship.

In May, 1969, Mrs. Chan came again and told Rev. Johansen, “Pastor, tonight you must speak on baptism.” Actually he had spoken on salvation and baptism before, but was not planning to give an invitation that night. He did some quick altering of his message and was ready to give the invitation that night when Mrs. Chan came forward to take over. She held a lively invitation meeting until twenty-six had raised their hands professing faith in Christ. At the baptismal service three weeks later, nineteen followed the Lord in baptism—the entire family of the village elder (six people), five members of the third brother’s family, three relatives and five friends. The oldest brother had gotten mad and refused to let his family be baptized. They were baptized at a later date.

A Funeral Takes New Meaning
Old mother Yeh passed away in February, 1970, at 94 years of age. She, too, had responded to the Gospel and loved to hear as much as Miss Cho had time to tell her. Her peaceful passing was a wonderful testimony to all. Mrs. Chan came up from Kaohsiung to make sure the funeral was “Christian.” There was no question about keeping idol and ancestor worship out of the ceremony, but a brother-in-law argued hard with Mrs. Chan for reading eulogies to the dead. Rev. Johansen asked if eulogies could be read facing the audience rather than facing the dead. Mrs. Chan agreed to the change.

A group from mother Yeh’s side of the family came to express their sorrow by playing Chinese horns, violins and cymbals. Mrs. Chan refused to let them play and the village elder was very chagrined. He explained to Rev. Johansen that the group had come to express their sorrow. Rev. Johansen suggested to Mrs. Chan that the group play at that time and not at the funeral. Mrs. Chan consented and the brother was delighted. He ran up the road to where the group was waiting and told them to come.

The seven-week memorial for old mother Yeh became an excellent opportunity for teaching about life and death and what Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection. Each week for seven weeks, Rev. Johansen went in to Henglung to hold services in the home. This took the place of the heathen rites of having a monk come in each week to report the progress of the soul through hell. It was a very satisfying time for the family. They felt they had done all they could for the departed.

Other Fellowships Begin
During the funeral Mrs. Chan stayed with her youngest sister in Tamap’u, a town nearby. She encouraged her to have meetings in her home. She agreed to the idea. So on Easter Sunday 1970, Rev. Johansen began services there, too. It was not long before the youngest sister and her son believed and were baptized with several older neighbor ladies.

In the meantime, old Mr. Tai, who had been baptized in the Henglung home, asked if they could use the village elder’s office in
The Impact of Missionary Radio on Church Planting

William Mial

Historically, the role of radio broadcasting of the gospel by missionary radio stations has varied greatly from country to country. In a geographically remote region, such as a river basin area in Venezuela, radio has provided the first contact of the gospel with the listener, ultimately culminating in a nucleus of listeners in a village accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior and going on to use the Bible study programs on the radio as the focal point of their weekly worship.

In other areas of the world, which are unreachable by any other means than radio due to political restrictions, we find that gospel missionary radio broadcasting is used by the head of the house to give basic Bible training to his family. In some cases the radio is used as an evangelist to bring his family to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

One significant development in church planting through missionary radio is found in India as a result of the Trans World Radio broadcast from Sri Lanka. The strategy behind this type of ministry is first a presentation of the gospel through various types of radio programs, such as a morning devotional program patterned somewhat after the Hindu morning worship, but with gospel music and scripture reading. This attracts a large number of Hindu morning worshipers, providing them with a familiar atmosphere but bringing to them the message of the only true God and the hope of eternal life found in His only Son, Jesus Christ. Various types of traditional and more innovative programming are broadcast throughout the morning and evening in approximately forty one major Indian languages. A variety of Bible correspondence courses are offered and a certain measure of spiritual awareness is developed through this follow-up method.

A less conventional type of follow-up has also been carried on in several language groups in the form of “Seekers Conferences”—three day extended weekends.

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Through a mail offering, true seekers of Christianity have the opportunity to register for these special conferences. As a result, there has been as much as 100 percent response by these men and women to accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior. In other cases, “Radio Rallies” have been held when radio listeners are encouraged to join other in their area in attending a series of meetings held over a period of several nights. Here again we find a high percentage of attendees choose to follow Christ, resulting many times in the spontaneous desire to follow the Lord in believer’s baptism. In the such cases, Trans World Radio makes every effort to place these new converts into existing evangelical churches in their particular area. But often there is no church. The response has been so great that special follow-up strategies have been developed which train leaders and encourage new churches.

In sections of India, primarily in Andhra Pradesh, we find such a strong wave of popular response to the radio broadcast that we utilize a daily 30-minute Bible study transmission. This provides the core for evangelism and Bible study in many homes. The Founder of Trans World Radio, Dr. Paul Freed reported,

I went into home after home where “house churches” were assembled. People crowd into small houses until there isn’t a square foot of standing space left. And this is an everyday occurrence! They work all day, and then begin to arrive for the radio services two hours before the programs even start! In one of the homes I visited, a man had taken a wire and attached it to a speaker outside. When the broadcasts begin in the evening, they can be heard throughout the area surrounding the house.

Hundreds of house groups have been started by the 650 member staff of TWR’s sister organization in India, Vishwa Vani. Often, it all begins by the head of a home bringing in his neighbors to listen to the radio transmissions. At the conclusion of the programs in that particular language, the content of the program is discussed. Following this, the new believers begin to give a personal witness to the non-Christians who have come to the house Bible study group. This practice is often carried out on a seven day per week basis.

Church planting of course implies at some point that an adequate number of trained pastors would be available to carry out pastoral responsibilities in these new congregations. Over the years, the spiritual fruit of this outreach has led TWR India to further develop the ministry. Vishwa Vani workers are systematically trained for follow up, leading ultimately to the establishment of churches. In order to accommodate these developments, another arm of this radio outreach has been created called India Believers Fellowship. This organization takes the mature house groups and forms them into congregations where a full church life experience will be provided to the new believers. Recently, such a group was started in the midst of a highly Hindu area in Varanasi (one of the holy cities of Hinduism). Vishwa Vani workers began the work of establishing a new fellowship when 90 were baptized as a result of the radio broadcasts.

In this case and many others, radio provided the foundation for a complete ministry cycle: the preaching of the Gospel, the response of the listeners, the personal follow up with listeners, the preaching of the Word both by radio and also by lay leaders and local workers, and ultimately in the establishment of centers of worship.
For decades, Christians have talked about integrating evangelism and development in world mission, but there have been obstacles. Perhaps the foremost has been a narrow definition of evangelism, limiting it to the verbal presentation of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ, however, is not simply a spoken word; it is a Living Word. The gospel is Life. It is the incarnation of the Word of God into the cultures and lives of humankind.

The secular definition of development has been a second obstacle for mission-minded Christians. The secular approach to development focuses most often on economic growth. With the goal of increasing profit, this focus becomes individualistic and often pits entrepreneurs against one another. This emphasis on individualism and self-attainment contrasts with the Word of God. The Bible focuses on the good of the group, teaching self-denial and service to others. As Christians, it’s important to remember that our definition of development comes from the principles and values of God’s Word, not from Wall Street.

A third obstacle to integrating development with evangelism arises when it is attempted by Christians who are not living out the transformation of Christ in their own lifestyles. I am deeply concerned about what I feel is a departure from the gospel of grace in the church today. We are duped by the religious value system of American society which teaches that humans must work at being morally good. It is only as Christians truly understand and believe the gospel of God’s grace—living out that grace in every aspect of organizational life and work—that grace results in the ongoing transformation both of the Church and the society around it.

A final obstacle to integrating development with evangelism is that the Church is presented in many settings as a cultural foreigner. This is especially true in Third World countries where local cultures are seen by missionaries explicitly or implicitly, as sinful. Western church forms are held up as pure. The result is that relevant forms of church life are not explored or established. Western Christianity remains foreign to the hearts and minds of non-Western people.

**Integrated Holistic Development**

As a missionary of the Evangelical Covenant Church—for the past 27 years in Northeast Thailand, an area also known as Issaan—I am part of a ministry that seeks to overcome these obstacles to integrate development, church planting and evangelism. Several North American missionaries and a staff of Northeast Thai (150 as of 1998) are engaged in what we call “integrated holistic development.” It is “development” in that it seeks to transform people from what they are into what they are meant to be in Christ. It is “holistic” in that it deals with the whole person, with all areas of life. It is “integrated” in that all aspects of the ministry are tied together and do not function or exist independently. The ministry currently consists of the Thailand Covenant Church, the Issaan Development Foundation (which addresses social, economic and physical needs), and the Institute for Sustainable Development (which conducts research and curriculum development training for the Church).

The ministry has one primary focus, that of enabling Jesus Christ to be born into Northeast Thai culture. Team members gifted in “holy gab” go out into villages to talk about Jesus.

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They don’t talk about religion. Instead they say, “We’re not here to change your religion, because all religions are basically the same; they’re all about making people good.” Then they talk about knowing the Word, the Living Word who is Jesus Christ, Jesus who is above all religions. Many who have responded positively to this method of sharing the gospel were religious people searching for truth, yet not finding it in Buddhism. They agree that they can’t possibly live up to the demands of religion, but by accepting Jesus they can find salvation. These new believers quickly began sharing the Good News with their family members and friends. In this way, the Church continues to expand spontaneously.

Some of our team members focus on training. They develop contextualized theology and study materials to ground new believers in the Word of God. Those who study the materials teach others. Instead of translating English materials into Thai, the team has Thai theologians working with missionaries to write Thai materials for Thai people. To date, the ministry has given birth to over 40 “mother” churches and over 250 “daughter” churches. Our team also has some people who specialize in the arts. It’s their job to get the gospel into the cultural forms and expressions of the Thai people. When you visit these churches, you see gospel stories told by means of Thai drama and dance forms. You hear worship songs with Thai tunes accompanied by Thai instruments. Through all these means, we create a way for Jesus to come alive to the Northeast Thai and to be understood by them.

The Northeast is the poverty belt of Thailand. There is a great need for development work, but we believe development must serve, not lead. Our development is always based in the local church. It is not viewed strictly as a means of evangelism. Rather, it is seen as a way for the local church to impact the social, economic and physical lives of the people. The centerpiece is the Udon Patina Farm, a complex of three different eco-system farms which demonstrates sustainable agriculture in the region.

One of the farms involves a system of fish ponds, ducks and pigs. When duck and pig manure is composted with grasses on the surface of the ponds, the fish thrive on the phytoplankton that multiply. Pond water and dead fish provide organic fertilizer for the grasses and trees growing along the pond dikes. Ducks also feed on pig manure. The pigs, fish, and ducks can be used for food or sold for profit to support the church work. These farms are the models for cooperative projects undertaken at the village level.

A Cooperative Project in Action

The village of Nong Hua Koo provides a good look at a cooperative project in action. Kitlow is a typical villager. He is a tenant farmer on someone else’s land. Since half of his harvest goes back to the landlord, he was constantly in debt to moneylenders. His children often did not have enough to eat. Wunde is typical as well. Although he owns a small rice field, the climate and the soil of the region are not good for growing rice. He, too, was often forced to borrow from moneylenders to make ends meet until harvest. With interest rates of 120 percent or more, it was impossible to make a decent living. The Issaan Development Foundation approached the Covenant church where Kitlow and Wunde are members. They offered help to start a fish-duck-pig cooperative. The foundation would lend the initial stock of animals, provide training in the business, and donate a grant to buy land. For their part, co-op members would find land for sale, build pig and duck pens, dig a fish pond, and agree to work together. Eventually, they would pay back the loan with their own animals.

Kitlow’s and Wunde’s families, along with five others, accepted the offer. Now that
the co-op is established, each family works for it one day a week. From this, they earn enough selling pigs and fish to avoid money-lenders. They don’t go hungry because they eat about half the fish they raise. They tithe their profits to the church and also use another 10 percent for village projects like stocking the pond used for fish for the elementary school’s lunches. Neighbors notice not only the generosity, but the unusual cooperation as well. They see members filling in for someone who is sick or less able, yet still sharing the profits equally. Village cooperatives like this one improve the economic situations of participating families and provide resources for the church. Most importantly, they provide the opportunity for members to live out their faith—learning to love, serve and forgive each other.

In addition to agricultural projects, the foundation also helps local churches impact their communities with vocational training in skills like sewing or mechanics, with primary health training, and with meeting the basic needs of the rural poor. All the programs focus on the participation of groups of people rather than individuals. In this way, new communities are being established in Northeast Thailand filled with people who are being transformed. The people grow in a new relationship with God, with others, and with nature. In response to God’s grace, they develop a dynamic new lifestyle, the result of a change in their entire value system.

There are seven basic principles at the heart of this ministry:

1. **Authority.** Central to all of our activities is a firm belief in the authority of the Word of God. The gospel of God’s grace, with all its implications, forms the set of beliefs on which all policies and practices of the ministry are based.

2. **Integration.** Every aspect of the ministry is tied together by the grace of God. We manage our organization and our lives by grace. We plan, implement, evaluate and correct problems by referring to the principle of grace as our model and guide, by depending on the power of grace.

3. **Flexibility.** We try to do everything possible to allow God’s grace to be communicated to the Northeast Thai. To reach that goal, we are willing to change anything and everything about our organizations if necessary.

4. **Contextualization.** People communicate clearly only if they share a common culture. Effective communication is what is understood, not necessarily what is spoken or meant. Thus, the worship and life of the local church, as well as the structure and management system of the development programs, have grown out of local Northeast Thai culture.

5. **Power encounter.** As the gospel of grace is incarnated into Northeast Thai culture and into every area of our ministry, it is brought to bear on the local cultural value system in a powerful and effective way. The result is transformation at the level of values and mind-sets.

6. **Process/broker approach.** The institute and foundation are in a process/broker relationship with the local church. Process means going “down and in.” Development starts with people themselves, especially with the poor at the bottom of society. It begins with dialogue that involves them in a participatory approach. The broker function involves going “up and out.” The foundation can link local churches to outside settings and resources. It can assess markets, research technology and so on.

7. **Local church focus.** The local church as the basic unit of Christian society is the obvious starting point for holistic development. The final goal is that the local church become the local development organization that impacts its own larger community with the transforming power of God’s grace.

This ministry has not been without problems. The first was the tendency to grow too much. An increasing number of staff meant that the basic philosophy behind the work became watered down, especially in the lives of those at the periphery. When we reduced the size of the organizations, we were able to reconsecrate ourselves to our basic core values. As we had grown larger, there was also a tendency to have the financial support of the
organisations become the highest priority. When we found that we were more focused on support for operational costs than on mission, we knew we must cut down to a more manageable size.

Another problem was a failure to relate honestly and to address wrong values in ourselves and in others. Thai culture, just like Western culture, has a natural tendency to avoid such encounters. In order to grow in power for service, we needed to learn how to talk to each other and to counter each other in love. Other problems in our work could be mentioned, but they all come back to the central point: the more we have learned to deny ourselves, to accept our weaknesses and to depend on God in every detail, the more we have found His wisdom and strength to be sufficient for all our needs.

The role of mission agencies, Christian aid agencies, and local development organisations includes the ongoing integration of evangelism and development at the local church level. Both elements are critical ingredients of the mission of the Church, and this is where the transformation of society begins. As the local church in every culture is enabled and equipped to reach into its own context with the power of God’s grace, evangelism and development will merge to bring about the true transformation of society.

South Asia: Vegetables, Fish and Messianic Mosques

Shah Ali with J. Dudley Woodberry

My Muslim father tried to kill me with a sword when I became a follower of Jesus after comparing the Qur’an and the Bible. He interpreted my decision as a rejection not only of my faith, but of my family and culture, as well. Historically Christians were largely converts from the Hindu community and had incorporated Hindu words and western forms into their worship.

In trying to express my faith, I encountered two sets of problems. First, as indicated, Christianity seemed foreign. Secondly, attempts by Christians to meet the tremendous human need in the region had frequently led to the attraction of opportunistic, shallow converts and the consequent resentment of the Muslim majority.

Christian Faith in Muslim Dress

I was able to start dealing with the foreignness of Christianity when a missionary hired me to translate the New Testament using Muslim rather than Hindu vocabulary and calling it by its Muslim name, The Injil Sharif (“Noble Gospel”). Thousands of injils were bought, mostly by Muslims, who now accepted this as the “Gospel” of which the Qur’an spoke. This approach may be supported not only pragmatically by the amazing results but, more importantly, theologically as well. Unlike the Hindu scriptures, the Qur’an shares a lot of material with the Bible. In fact, most Muslim theological terms were borrowed from Jews and Christians.

Shah Ali is the pseudonym of a follower of Christ from a Muslim family in South Asia. His identity is being concealed—currently, there is persecution of Christians in his country. He translated the New Testament into his national language using Muslim terms.

J. Dudley Woodberry is Dean and Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary. His publications include editing Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road and co-editing Missiological Education for the 21st Century.

Subsequently, a graduate of Fuller’s School of World Mission asked me to train twenty-five couples to live in villages and do agricultural development. Only one couple was from a Muslim background. All the others had problems: Muslims would exchange visits with them but would not eat their food until they began to shower in the morning, hence were ceremonially clean by Muslim law after sleeping with their spouses.

The Christian couples were called angels because they were so kind, honest, and self-sacrificing, and they prayed to God. However, they were not considered truly religious because they did not perform the Muslim ritual prayer five times a day. Thereafter, we only employed couples who followed Jesus from a Muslim background, and we developed a ritual prayer that retained all the forms and content that Muslims and Christians share but substituted Bible passages for Qur’anic ones. Little adaptation was necessary, because early Islam borrowed so heavily from Jewish and Christian practice in the formulation of the “pillars” of religious observance (the confession of faith, ritual prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage).²

Our Muslim neighbors defined “Christianity” as “a foreign religion of infidels”; so we often referred to ourselves as “Muslims” (literally, “submitters to God”). The necessity of submitting to God is certainly Christian (see Jas 4:7), and Jesus’ disciples call themselves “Muslims” according to the Qur’an (5:111).³

When villages have decided to follow Christ, the people continued to use the mosque for worship of God but now through Christ. Where possible, the former leaders of mosque prayers (imams) are trained to continue their role as spiritual leaders.

**Persuasion, Power and People**

God used other means as well as contextualization to bring Muslims to faith in Christ. On several occasions I have had public discussions with Muslim teachers (maleis) and have been able to show that, contrary to popular belief, the Qur’an does not name Muhammad as an intercessor. Rather, it states that on the judgment day “intercession will not avail, except [that of] him to whom the Merciful will give permission, and of whose speech He approves” (5:109 Egyptian ed./108 Fluegel ed.). But the Injil (“Gospel”), which is from God according to the Qur’an (5:47/51), not only states that God approves of Jesus (e.g., Matt 3:17) but that He is the *only* intercessor (1 Tim 2:5).

God has also shown His power through answered prayer—the recovery of a three-year-old girl who, the doctors said, would die in a few hours; the sending of rain and the stopping of flooding; and the appearance of an unknown man to stop a crowd bent on killing an imam who followed Christ.

A conscious effort has been made to foster the movement of groups rather than just individuals to Christ. People have only been baptized if the head of the family was baptized. Effort was made to see that leaders understood the message. A Muslim mystic (Sufi) sheikh, upon learning that the veil of the temple had been rent from top to bottom, threw down his Muslim cap, followed Christ, and brought his followers with him.

Since illiteracy is high, the Bible and training materials are recorded on cassettes, and inexpensive cassette players are made available to the villagers.

There has been persecution. Our training center was closed down. A court case was made against me and three fellow workers. Likewise, there has been friction between the leaders and misunderstanding by other Christian groups. But the movement of people to Christ continues. Most new believers remain in independent Messianic mosques, but some contextualized congregations have joined the major denomination, while still other individuals are absorbed into the traditional, Hindu-background church.

**Toward Responsible Self-Help**

Besides trying to express our faith in meaningful cultural forms, we have been trying to meet the tremendous human need around us. We want to proclaim the Kingdom and demonstrate its values. Trying to do both presents certain problems.

First, there is the problem of using human need for evangelistic purposes—of manipulating people and attracting the insincere. Consequently, we help all the villagers despite their religious affiliation and...
give no financial help to Jesus mosques or their imams.

Secondly, the former colonizer-colonized dependency easily gets transferred to donor-recipient dependency.

Thirdly, even the distribution of donated food from abroad may only help in the city, because of the difficulty of distribution, while giving little incentive to the peasants to produce more because of the artificially reduced price.

Fourthly, the introduction of technology may only help those with the skills or the finances to make use of it, while the poorest can just watch the gap between the haves and have-nots widen.

To deal with these problems we have followed such common development practices as loaning planting seed to be replaced at harvest time and providing pumps that are paid for from increased productivity. Now, however, we are adapting a program developed in Southeast Asia which should express holistic Christian concern, deal with the problems outlined, and ensure that the indigenous church remains self-supporting.

The program is training national workers in contextualized church planting and an integrated fish and vegetable cultivation system. The workers are, in turn, sent to needy districts where they are responsible for training local farmers in the easily transferable technology so that they can become self-sufficient. Increased population means less land is available for cultivation, and a poor transportation infrastructure means food must be produced near its consumption.

The intensive food production system was developed elsewhere. In that system, fish ponds are dug and the excavated dirt used for raised vegetable plots. Excess stems and leaves from the vegetables are used to feed the fish, and the waste from the fish is used as fertilizer for the vegetables. These food production centers are within walking distance of regional urban centers for daily sales and provide space for training of regional farmers and leaders of the Jesus mosques.

The concept of Messianic mosques and completed Muslims (following the model of Messianic synagogues and completed Jews) still causes considerable misunderstanding among other Christians. The combining of evangelism and humanitarian ministries by the same people also raises concerns among those who feel Christian agencies should only focus on one or the other. Nevertheless, the models we are developing have been used by God in the raising up of many new disciples and expressing His concern for total persons with physical and spiritual needs. Likewise the Messianic Muslim movement has spilled over into a neighboring country through the normal visiting of relatives; when colleagues and I visited a Southeast Asian country recently, a whole Muslim village began to follow Jesus.

End Notes
1. See Arthur Jeffery, The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an (Oriental Institute, 1938).
3. In this context, however, they demonstrated their submission by believing in God and His apostle (apparently Muhammad, who had not yet been born).

Study Questions
1. Why do attempts to use meaningful cultural forms and attempts to meet human needs present such problems?
2. Can missionaries call themselves “Muslims” or express their faith in Islamic cultural fashion? Why or why not?
Reaching the Baranada People of Barunda

Paul Pearlman

Nested between Maluwa, Batu, and the blue ocean, Barunda is a tropical nation of fifteen million people. There are some twenty-eight million Baranada; they are the second-largest Muslim ethnic group in Africa. About 60 percent of the ethnic Baranada are Muslims; the remainder are animists. Present-day Barunda is the ancestral homeland of the Baranada people, who are distinct from the surrounding animistic tribes. Barunda, which is unusual for its ethnic homogeneity, is 90 percent Muslim with a 10 percent animist population, mostly of ethnic Baranada background. Eighty-five percent of the ethnic Baranada outside of Barunda are animists, the remainder being Muslims.

The vast majority of the Baranada, both Muslim and animist alike, are subsistence grain farmers. The low-lying terrain of Barunda is ideally suited to such agriculture, but it has been subject to severe weather, including both flooding and drought. Population is quite dense in areas where arable land is at a premium.

The countryside is socially divided along patrilineal kinship lines. Kinship, which includes the widest possible range of people “related” by blood or marriage, is reckoned in several complex ways and is ingeniously expandable to include close social relationships. The basic community structure is the village, within which there is considerable interrelationship. Households are divided into “eating groups,” which are communally run. This household unit symbolizes its mutual interdependence through the preparation and sharing of common food and living quarters. The concept of “community” is a cultural norm traceable well into the animistic past of the Baranada. A person’s family membership and place of residence are thus the focal points for all of his activities in the world.

Islam came to the Baranada during the fourteenth century and experienced a rapid growth under the influence of Sufi sheikhs, whose egalitarianism was very appealing during the period of slave trading. The Baranada are Sunni Muslims, for whom the five pillars of Islam are deeply embedded in daily life. The custom of female seclusion is quite strong. Sufi orders also continue to flourish in the rural areas. There are, however, a number of animistic practices the Baranada maintain, one of which is saint worship, as witnessed by the widespread participation in natu, “commemorative gatherings,” at the tombs of their saints.

The Status of Christianity in Barunda

Christians number some thirty thousand—equally divided between Protestants and Catholics—and comprise less than one percent of the population. The Church is derived entirely from Baranada people who have had an animistic background. Despite their common racial background, animists have no dealings with Muslims. The various denominations are almost entirely dependent financially on western Christian assistance. This applies to church budgetary needs as well as to job opportunities in mission institutions and western developmental organizations. As pressures continue to increase for the establishment of shariat, or Islamic sacred law, in Barunda, the Church has been concerned with the growing instances of persecution and social second-class status.

The Church, a small, introspective, and often insecure body of believers, has been growing slowly. Twenty-five Protestant mission societies have some 250 missionaries working throughout Barunda, and Catholics 169. There are twelve denominations in the
country. Most missionaries work within the established Church or are attached to mission-operated institutions. There is a definite trend to place more missionaries in full-time evangelistic outreach.

New Efforts to Reach the Baranada in the Mawasa Area

Despite the Baranada’s seeming resistance to the Gospel, some recent breakthroughs have occurred among them under the leadership of the Overseas Christian Missionary Fellowship (OCMF). In 1959, the OCMF entered the town of Mawasa, which has a population of eight thousand in a district of two hundred thousand. Between one and three missionary couples have resided in the town up to the present. Until 1975, their efforts proved fruitless; no church was established and almost no one was led to Christ. Mawasa appeared to be barren and resistant. The OCMF field council determined that it would be expedient to withdraw from that area unless a breakthrough occurred in the ensuing twelve months. Then, the miraculous began to unfold. Through the influence of two Muslim converts, Tabbar and Sadig, the OCMF began to adopt Baranada Muslim forms in their work of communicating the Gospel. Presently there are two worshipping groups of believers in the Mawasa area. Each fellowship is made up of fifteen Muslim converts, almost all of whom are male heads of families. Numerous factors have played a part in the new responsiveness. For example, the response of Christian agencies during natural catastrophe has built up an attitude of goodwill. However, the vast majority of converts cite the Baranada-like quality of the message as being the main reason for their conversion. The Baranada have a highly developed culture and sense of historical tradition. Thus, adapting the forms of the message of the Gospel to fit their patterns and to speak to the needs of their society has been the key factor in establishing the fellowships. The following descriptions of these groups illustrate this point.

Description of Converts

The majority of converts are farmers who, on the average, are barely literate; economically they are self-supporting; and they are close enough sociologically to be able to intermarry. Those showing the most rapid spiritual growth were formerly devout Muslims. Almost all converts are reading the Bible (or having it read to them), praying and meeting together informally in their village homes for worship—without the presence of a foreign missionary. Witnessing to their neighbors and extended families began on the day of their conversion and has been the major cause of reproduction. Until now, it has not been the missionary who has won these men to the Lord, with a very few exceptions. His role is basically to give spiritual encouragement and biblical teaching. The believers have shown initiative and vision. After a study of 1 Corinthians 12, one group on their own appointed an evangelist, an administrator, a prayer coordinator and a pastor. A few of the wives and children have accepted Christ, but this area of evangelism still remains an obstacle. There has been an appreciation of the supernatural on a practical level, with visions and dreams of spiritual significance occurring fairly frequently. There is a simple faith that prayer is an instrument of change. Crying out to God and fasting are utilized to effect release from difficulty as well as to bring healing to the afflicted.

The missionary’s role is basically to give spiritual encouragement and biblical teaching. The believers have shown initiative and vision.

Form Adaptations

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 set down some practical theological guidelines for his involvement in the cross-cultural communication of the Gospel. In Barunda, we are seeking to minister within the same liberties and restrictions that Paul experienced. The offense of the nature of God and the atonement of the Cross will and must remain. However, there are innumerable peripheral areas that can be subject to alteration without violation of scriptural command or principle. A list of implemented form adaptations follows:
The missionary
1. Our men wear the clothing of the target group, which is the village farmer. Our women wear the local dress and at times have worn the veil covering, which has been very much appreciated by the Muslim and convert community.
2. Several of our men have full beards, which is part of the appearance of a Muslim religious man.
3. Lifestyles are simple.
4. Eating style corresponds to Muslims. No pork is eaten.
5. Time is regarded as more “event oriented” than the traditional time absolutes of the West. Some have adopted the 8 PM Barunda suppertime and thus have entered into the social visitation pattern of the society, which takes place each evening between 6 and 8 PM.

The national
1. A place for washing before prayer is provided for optional use. It is explained that there is no merit attached to such ceremonial washing.
2. Shoes are removed before entering the worship center.
3. All worshipers sit on the floor.
4. Bibles are placed on folding stands such as are used for the Koran.
5. Occasionally, Greek and Hebrew Bibles are placed in a prominent position in front of the worshipers, thus demonstrating our regard for the “original” Bible, such as Muslims feel toward the Arabic Koran.
6. Hands are lifted up Muslim style during prayer times. Prostration is frequently done in Muslim fashion. Some pray with their eyes open, wearing traditional prayer hats.
7. Muslim tunes with Christian words are utilized. Scripture is chanted, as are personal testimonies.
8. The local Muslim dialect, rather than the animist dialect of the Christian church, is spoken and read in the services.
9. Embracing is done in Muslim fashion.
10. Days and times of worship are pragmatically regulated.
11. Fasting is an area of liberty, but is scripturally explained.
12. A Muslim-convert, homogeneous church has developed rather than one of a heterogeneous character.
13. Informal church organization is promoted, basically along the lines of the mosque.
14. The Muslim names of converts are retained.
15. The word Christian is avoided because of negative connotations. Presently Christians are called “followers of Isa” (Jesus).
16. Bible study, prayer and fasting are emphasized. A higher profile of religious observance is encouraged because Muslims feel Christians are spiritually lazy when they are never seen praying.
17. The converts have chosen their own leadership.
18. The church grows along family and friendship lines.

Financial Considerations
Gifts and employment opportunities from the West have created a horizontal dependence syndrome within the Barunda Christian community. There is little motivation to give sacrificially or to pray about church needs when one is assured budgets will be met with foreign assistance. Christians are given preferential treatment at mission hospitals and schools. A select few are granted theological scholarships abroad. Comparison of lifestyles between nationals and missionaries convinces Barunda Christians that personal sacrifice is not particularly relevant to the “dedicated life.” In my view, all of this points to a basic failure on the part of missionaries to live, teach, and administer sound indigenous financial policy in relationship to the national church. The crashing wave of a forced missionary evacuation, which was only barely averted last December, would most likely reduce our practicing Christian community by a minimum of 50 percent. In Mawasa there is a fresh slate. No traditional Christians reside in the area. The emerging Muslim convert church is the only worshipping group present. Our approach has been as follows:

Missionary adjustments
OCMF possesses no compounds or purchased property. This assures mobility as well as a lower financial profile. Missionaries
live on as low a lifestyle as emotional and physical health permit. One family presently lives in a small bamboo hut with a mud floor. Others are in simple cement houses rented from Muslim landlords.

**Financial relationships with nationals**

OCMF aims to preserve the financial autonomy of the convert in relationship to himself, his family and his peers. Existing economic structures should, at all costs, be preserved. The convert is told from the start that Christianity will only be credible among his Muslim friends if he stands without foreign financial assistance. No option for flight from his village is offered. Jobs, scholarships and relief are not part and parcel of the Gospel. New believers must learn to stand on their own resources from the commencement of their pilgrimage of faith. OCMF has not been involved in institution or relief work. We have no national evangelists, although we have used Sadiq Jabbar occasionally as volunteer help. The emphasis is on lay witness and ministry.

**The Existing Evangelistic Team**

At present six foreign missionaries and the forty national believers from among the converted Muslims comprise the major functioning evangelistic team. Other Muslim converts have and will continue to be involved on an itinerant basis. At present, the Baranada church with its animistic background has been very wary of this Islamic-flavored movement. Those Christians are a potential team to assist with evangelism, as are the missionaries of other societies. However, for the time being they have adopted a wait-and-see attitude and are uninvolved in this work.

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**God Wanted the Matigsalogs Reached**

*Jun Balayo*

Two hours of Toyota land-cruising over newly constructed roads cut through seemingly endless mountains brought us to an altitude of over one thousand feet. The unfamiliar breeze was now cool, soothingly fresh and chilling. From this mountain top one could view the majestic rain forest spread thick and deep as far as one’s eyes could see. This vast frontier is the heartland of Mindanao in the Philippines, the ancestral territory of the Matigsalogs, a highland tribe whose favorite habitats are the banks of swift rivers.

The Matigsalogs are a group of people characterized by their shyness and independent-mindedness. Generally, they are peace-loving but may suddenly turn fierce and violent when their cultural rights are violated.

Considered to be the largest cultural group numbering over 80,000 families, the Matigsalogs attracted national attention during a month-long rebellion in July, 1975. The conflict was resolved only after the Matigsalogs, led by Datu Lorenzo Gawilan, obtained from the government a specific area which is now called the “Matigsalog Ancestral Territory.”

The way the General Baptists (G.B.) received a mission to reach the Matigsalogs was a bit sensational. Totally devoid of any prior human plans, it could only be explained as part of God’s wonderful ways.

The G.B. work started in 1969 when Angel Digdigan, a rather small, unassuming young family man, could not continue with his last year in the Bible school. Utterly frustrated and discouraged, he wandered adrift like a rudderless *banca* (boat). In spite of his name which suggests celestial assets, Angel was no better than a bird with broken wings!

**From Empty Bottles to a Clear Vessel**

Not knowing what to do or where to go, Angel could only roam the barrios in search of...
empty bottles to buy and then sell. This he did to make a few centavos to keep himself and his family physically and spiritually intact.

Angel could not explain how the Lord led him to the land of the Matigsalogs in Mindanao’s hinterland. It was like the experience of the beloved apostle John who was isolated on the Isle of Patmos by the Holy Spirit. All that Angel can recall was that he received God’s definite call the moment he was with the people. There the vision became clear and the burden grew heavy.

Beckie, his understanding wife, had entertained thoughts that Angel might have died since she had not heard from him for three months. When at last he suddenly returned home, it was only to fetch his family so that together they would obey a clear vision, a truly exciting mission to reach precious souls in the heartland of the “land of promise.”

Blazing the Trail
It does not always require academic trappings before a man can apply his basic principles in pioneering a church planting work. At times it only takes the yieldedness and the willingness of a man to be usable in God’s hand. Angel approached the delicate work within the very world of the Matigsalogs. He lived as one with them in their village. His own native hut was made out of split bamboo and cogon grass. He easily learned their dialect. He ate and played with them. His acceptance with the people stems from the fact that Angel’s first friend was Datu Madut Tawas, their influential village chieftain.

Aware of the basic problems of the Matigsalogs, Angel helped to explain government laws of which the people were ignorant. In the very early part of the evenings Angel and Beckie would teach from 80 to 100 adults and children how to read and write. Since farming was still very primitive, Angel shared with them some simple techniques. He maintained a small vegetable garden for purposes of actual demonstration and as a source of income to support their various projects. This includes a small elementary school which was started in 1971.

As the work expanded gradually through the years, more workers were needed. During a church growth workshop conducted by an O.C. Ministries team for the General Baptists in 1976, Angel presented a dramatic appeal by exhibiting four Datus garbed in their exquisitely hand-woven, colorful, Matigsalog costume. The timeliness of a principle in church growth “to direct manpower and logistics to responsive areas” strengthened Angel’s call for immediate reinforcement.

The response of the G.B. mission was beyond what Angel expected. Soon an intensified program was decided upon and the General Baptist Tribal Ministry became a major ministry.

Rev. Dean Trivitt, who now resides with his family in Senuda Mission Station among the Matigsalogs, has been designated as missionary in charge. Rev. Robert Carr, a new missionary, directs the Bible School where some Matigsalogs are being trained for the ministry. Mrs. Mary Howard, a missionary nurse, is in charge of a greatly needed paramedic program. Angel Digdigan has been given supervisory responsibility over G.B. pioneering and church planting programs with about 14 national workers.

As of April 1979, encouraging results had already been noted in the G.B. work among the Matigsalogs. Churches increased from four in 1976 to 13. Twenty-two other outstations are being maintained which will eventually be organized into local congregations.

At the height of the rebellion in 1975, Angel was probably the only lowlander who remained with the Matigsalogs when others fled. He may have been the only lowlander who could enter the Matigsalog territory and come out alive when it became a no-man’s-land. Angel must have been the only lowlander who dared risk being caught in the crossfire as he passionately interceded and pleaded with the authorities in the cities and the rebels in the mountains to put an end to the senseless shedding of Filipino blood by Filipinos themselves.

It is then no wonder that today the G.B.s enjoy preferential treatment from a grateful people. Such a privilege could only be the fruit of a precious seed of a dedicated life that is totally committed to God’s divine call and unreservedly devoted to the people that He seeks to win.
A church lives in Sarabia. It is a truly indigenous church. The believers are baptized, nationals are recognized leaders, whole families are Christian, believers meet regularly over the Word of God. The church assumes responsibility for its own financial affairs, spiritual growth and witness. Long years of faithful labor on the part of both missionaries and nationals resulted in this fellowship. It is one of a precious few gatherings of mature Christians in Sarabia. More are sure to come.

Sarabia’s inhabitants include both Arabs and indigenous people of Berber descent. The Berber existed before the Arabs settled, and now consist of both Arabized Berbers and mountain rural Berbers of different kinds. The Muslim government of Sarabia assumes that every Sarabian is a Muslim. Although the government might be described as socialist, it is actually an eclectic mixture of Islam, socialism and the charismatic personalities of the rulers.

Because of the French colonial influence, the educated people speak mostly French, have had their education in French, and in many cases do not even read Arabic well. Although the government has attempted to Arabize the country, it is evident that French will dominate the culture until those born after 1970 are in leadership. The people of the capital city tend to be affected by French culture with its pessimistic existentialism. Consequently, university students with no awareness of the Sermon on the Mount may be quite familiar with Camus and Sarte. The people of Sarabia, particularly those in the capital, are not fanatical Muslims. Only a small percentage perform the daily prayers. Most are caught up eking out an existence, often due to a critical shortage of housing. Many show little motivation to get ahead because most business and commerce is nationalized.

A Missionary Presence
Although Christian missionaries have worked in Sarabia for a hundred years, they have never been present in great numbers. It is probably safe to say that the capital city has never had as many as 25 missionaries at one time. As in most Muslim lands, Christian work in Sarabia ebbs and flows. At one time there were Arab pastors, salaried by the American Methodist Church, but this is no longer the case. Nevertheless, in the past two decades, individual Muslims have responded to Christ. Although there are no full-time Christian workers, there are up to ten expatriate workers in the city. Many of these have been working a full 20 years. It may be that the continuity of this expatriate presence enabled a church to take root.

Each of these missionaries came to Sarabia with a good working knowledge of Arabic and French. At least half were from secular university backgrounds. One American couple seem to have been the major facilitators in starting the church that is now growing. The husband continues as the only foreigner of the seven elders in the church. Together with a former Inter-Varsity worker, this couple befriended students in a university reading room and began an investigative Bible study. About ten years ago, the investigative Bible study led to a believers’ Bible study. This led in turn to a worshiping group and finally to an organized church with elders and membership. The church still meets in that same room today. Because it is crowded on Sunday mornings, they have a multiple-meeting system. Sunday School

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meets at a different time from worship services or in private homes while the adults meet in the reading room.

There may be as many as 100 known believers in the capital city of Sarabia. Perhaps half of them are members of the church, committed to its purposes. Most believers are between 18 and 40 years old, with the notable exception of a few who, being older, have provided credibility and stability to the group. A high percentage of the converts come out of the university or technical colleges. This has resulted in a congregation that is well educated. The church has been hesitant to appoint young university students to the position of elders before they find wives and marry. But since it is a long process in prayer, searching and family negotiation to find a Christian mate, only four of the current elders are married.

Mid-week prayer meetings are relevant and dynamic times of dealing with real needs among believers. They also provide occasions for salvation of other Muslims who have been invited to attend by the Muslim converts (note 1 Cor 14:14-25). Although the Sarabian elders organize all meetings, the style is similar to the Plymouth Brethren format in that they are participatory services. Expatriates provide deeper Bible study and training for six to eight Sarabians at any one time. These Theological Education by Extension (TEE) classes meet in the homes of the expatriates.

The Testimony of Arab Believers
It has been difficult for Sarabian Christians to understand that commitment to Christ, the Head, also means commitment to Christ’s Body. Sarabians do not normally commit themselves to people outside their own families. Many still fear repercussions or find little motivation to identify themselves with the established church. Still, for several years there has been a good body life, supportive relationships, and, for the Muslim world, a reasonably high level of trust — all making the Sarabian congregation an attractive one. As Arabs are able to meet converted Arabs, the credibility of Christ is greatly enhanced. The testimony of an Arab believer is by far the primary means of communicating the gospel.

Most Sarabians have grown up believing that Christianity and the Western lifestyle are synonymous and, therefore, that Christianity is an inferior and “dirty” religion. Because Islam and politics are completely integrated, the Muslim assumes that Western politics and Christianity are integrated as well. Rejection of the one brings rejection of the other. For most Sarabians, it is a totally new consideration that one can be a follower of Christ and a good Sarabian. Christian baptism brings about such alienation in this Muslim culture that it is thought best by many converts not to broadcast such realities and let them be discovered slowly. A number of the believers have not told even their families that they are followers of Christ. Even their marriages, although both the bride and groom are believers, are thought to be Muslim.

There has not been any organized opposition to break up the congregation in the capital city or to keep it from meeting. The police frequently “raid” meetings of believers, but they seem interested only in whether the unauthorized group has political intentions. The fact of the raids, however, does keep those who fear repercussions from regular attendance. The stronger believers in the congregation have taken a bold stand with the police and the result has been greater courage on the part of the weaker members.

A Call for Expatriate Missionaries
Expatriates enter Sarabia initially as tourists, then move into Arabic study for which they can get a resident visa. This visa can be good for two or three years, allowing enough time to make contacts and secure a job. Job status is required for a long-term visa. These jobs are often limited to six months to a year, however, and leave the expatriate worker looking for a new raison d’etre. Witnessing opportunities abound. Many Sarabians who have heard radio programs from France and enrolled in Bible correspondence courses, want to check out Christianity through personal visits. A number, if not most, of the believers in the church initially were contacted through radio and Bible correspondence courses. Web evangelism, in which believers themselves witness to friends and relatives, may be more common now than it was before.

Missionaries in Sarabia pray and plan carefully with the national believers. They have
made plans to start a new house church in at least four other cities, beginning with the one to seven believers that already exist in those cities. One of the leaders of the capital city church has been identified as an evangelist-church planter and helped financially to visit these believers and hold house meetings in these target cities. Nevertheless, both expatriates and Sarabians verbalize a tremendous need for outside missionaries who can pioneer efforts in the country’s 15 cities with populations of over 100,000. Except for the capital city, not one of them has an established church.

The church in the capital city emerged in the midst of hardship mostly due to the skill and dedication of pivotal people. Three or four Sarabians and three or four missionaries kept the goal of an indigenous church always before them. The missionaries established the following criteria for an indigenous church: a) baptized Christians, b) recognized national elders, c) Christian families, d) regular meetings for ministry of the Word in a place not provided by foreigners, e) group responsibility for finances, spiritual activity, discipline, administration of ordinances and witness. They taught that it is God’s purpose for those who accept Christ’s Lordship to also make a commitment to the existence of a church. Perhaps because of their higher education, the Sarabian believers were not as intimidated by social disapproval and government opposition as some believers in other Muslim countries. Perhaps the missionary presence over 20 years provided a stability and continuity that was crucial to the emerging church.

The church in the capital city provides a model for what could happen in other cities of Sarabia. It has also shown other missionaries what they can do. There are good prospects for church planting when missionaries and willing nationals team up on compatible intellectual and spiritual levels. This will be possible as soon as missionaries who can speak both French and Arabic become available. These missionaries must understand how to set goals and how to motivate and coach national Christians without making them overly dependent. Progress is slow in planting a new church until there is a “critical mass” of believers, enough to make Christianity a viable alternative in the minds of seekers. The church in the capital began as an investigative Bible study. Now Christians from other cities can gain a vision of how they, too, might plant an indigenous church—perhaps beginning, as well, with an investigative Bible study.

An Upper Class People Movement

Clyde W. Taylor

In recent months I have become acquainted with a fascinating movement in Latin America where the Gospel is spreading by a pattern as close to the New Testament pattern as I have ever seen. I’ll not name a country, for the leaders do not want any publicity. But what is happening is to the glory of God and represents a quite significant breakthrough.

I learned of it when I was invited to hold a missionary conference in that country a couple of years ago. I was not prepared for what I encountered. I understood the missionary involved had a small work, but I discovered the Gospel was spreading in a way that Dr. McGavran would call a “people movement.”

The unusual aspect of this movement is that its faith is spreading almost exclusively among the upper-middle and the upper classes of the nation. Furthermore, the number of converts involved is relatively high for the size of the segment of society in-
involved. Since the movement is intentionally not highly structured, it is difficult to get accurate statistics; but my extensive conversation with leaders lead me to conclude that a minimum of 2,000 converts were actively involved. The number could easily be as high as 5,000 or more.

**Beginnings**

The work of the missionary, whom I’ll call “John Swanson,” began in the 1950’s in somewhat typical fashion as he witnessed and evangelized among the responsive lower classes. After several years of ministry in the capital city, he had some 20 to 25 converts whom he was training in his home. He came to realize that he was really not a pastor and preacher—his skills were in music and teaching and so asked another mission to shepherd his little flock.

In 1962, Swanson moved to the second largest city in the nation where, after studying the methods of Paul in the books of Acts, he changed his approach. He went to the university and started witnessing to students. Within a few months he won 12 of these to Christ whom he then began to train in discipleship. For seven years he led them in their spiritual growth and trained them also in theology, church history, books of the Bible and so on.

While Swanson was writing, translating and mimeographing materials for the daily sessions with his disciples, they were out witnessing to other students. By 1964 they had won and discipled about 300 others. These were all baptized in and some became members of various churches in the city. (At present about a dozen of these early converts are full-time workers in some of these churches.) The movement at this point was focused in small groups meeting in private homes and university lounges.

**Churches Grow and Multiply**

These early converts, it should be remembered, were all students and therefore single. In time, when some of them graduated and got married, they began thinking in terms of their own church. In 1969, therefore, the first church with five couples was organized in a home and a second church was organized three years later.

In 1977 the first house church, which had grown to 120 members, divided into two separate churches of 60 members each. The second church grew to 160 members and in 1978 divided into two congregations of 80 each. In February of that year another church was formed bringing the total to five house churches with a combined membership of about 500.

This gives a partial picture only of the work, for, in addition to the many who joined existing churches, the leaders of this new movement to Christ estimate that at least 50 percent of their members have scattered to other sections of the country and even to the U.S. In many cases they begin the process of witnessing, training new converts and establishing house churches all over again.

Furthermore, cells of believers have been established in many of the universities of the region. I was told, for instance, of a type of church meeting for 35 medical students, another for 15 in the biology department and another for 12 in the technical institute of one university.

In 1964 one of the original 12 leaders graduated and returned to the capital city. He began a work along the same lines in which he had come to know the Lord and had been trained. Swanson followed him a few years later.

When I visited there in 1979, I was told that there may be as many as 100 Christian cell meetings among the upper classes in the city. These seem to be spreading on their own. The churches (cells) directly identified with Swanson and his workers, however, have grown to 15 with a total membership approaching 1,000. They told me about a number of similar house churches in other cities as well.

**An Inside View**

One of the unique features of these house churches is that they are made up of members from the upper-middle and the upper classes of people. The churches in the capital city, in particular, are made up primarily of those from the highest circles of society. This is not to say that they are unconcerned about the poor and less educated. They have evangelized among them and gained many con-
converts. They discovered, however, that as soon as people from the lower and middle classes began attending their churches, ingathering from among the upper class ceased.

Taking Paul’s statement that he became all things to all men, they concluded that if they were going to win upper class people they were going to have to win them with Christians who were likewise from the upper classes. As soon as they gain enough converts from the lower classes, therefore, they organize separate churches for them. For these leaders, it is not a matter of not wanting to associate with those on lower rungs of society, but a matter of how best to win the most people to Jesus Christ on all levels.

The growth of this cluster of congregations looks a lot like that of New Testament congregations. The converts meet in homes where they worship, fellowship, study the Word and are sent out to bring others to Christ. Each convert is not so much “followed up” but receives the Gospel in a very personal context to begin with. For example, the group has printed and distributed millions of tracts, but none of them have a name and address printed on them. Instead, the one passing out the tract gives his own name and address. When someone comes to know the Lord, he is immediately given training in discipleship.

I talked with one girl, for example, who meets with four new converts at 6 AM. They pray, have fellowship and study the Word until breakfast at seven. She meets for lunch with three other girls who are older Christians. They pray and discuss problems together.

Each church is completely independent, though they all carry the same name. They do not keep any membership lists, but they do seem to know everyone who belongs. They baptize, serve communion and train and ordain their own pastors whom they call “elders.” They are not highly structured, but their high level of caring and training binds them together.

It is an interesting paradox that these converts are wealthy but they can expand indefinitely with almost no funds since they meet in their large homes and ordain their own lay and unpaid elders (pastors). They do give 20 percent of their incomes on the average, however. With these funds they send out missionaries to other parts of Latin America and even Europe. Money is never mentioned until someone is ready to go to the field and needs support. Then it is not uncommon for someone to say, “I’ll give $200 a month, and another to say, “I’ll give $150,” and so on. Support is thereby raised very quickly.

I heard of one missionary lady who is supported by four of her friends, all executive secretaries. They give her full personal support which is equal to what she would earn as an executive secretary in her home country. They also pay her transportation to and from the field and her ministry needs as well. One of the girls gives 80 percent of her salary, another 60 percent, another 50 percent and another 30 percent. Altogether the fellowship of house churches fully supports 16 missionaries.

The exciting thing about this Christward movement is not just that millionaires, government officials and leading businessmen are becoming believers. The Lord loves the poorest beggar and his conversion is no less precious in His sight. It’s significant that disciple-making and church planting is now spreading quickly through a segment of society that has been heretofore unreached. If it can happen in one nation of Latin America, it can happen in others. The Lord of the harvest—of all kinds of crops—will be pleased when it does.
Ann Croft and the Fulani

Fatima Mahoumet

Although Ann Croft’s father had planted many churches in the U.S. Midwest during her childhood, she wasn’t thinking of herself as a missionary when she went to Nigeria. She was simply a teacher of English as a Second Language. She was able to get to know some of her Nigerian students better, joining them for some meals and eventually reading and discussing stories from the Bible. One student expressed an extraordinary interest in the Bible.

Open Doors
As their friendship grew, her student opened doors for her into the labyrinth of extended family life among the Fulani people in her area. He had many sisters who had married into a number of families in the area. When her student visited them, Ann accompanied him and met each family member.

As a teacher, Ann was also respected by the male leaders of the community. At their request, she spent many hours answering their questions about the Bible, helping them to understand more fully the biblical events and characters, including Jesus, whom they had encountered in the Qur’an. In preparation she had done a comparative study of the Qur’an and Bible, noting their uniqueness, differences and similarities. She used their folk tales as bridges for discussing Scripture.

Soon, Ann had access to every part of the Muslim community. As a woman, she was able to meet the women related to all of her male contacts, even those in the strictest purdah (seclusion) who would otherwise be well beyond the sphere of married, let alone single, Christian men. One of the women was especially drawn to Ann. She took her to all the special ceremonies, such as naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals. She helped her with the language and provided many needed bridges of communication and explanations as Ann continued to learn about the Muslim way of life. Ann also learned the traditional stories of her new people and grew to deeply love and appreciate the rich fabric of their lives.

She discovered that being a single woman had its advantages too. In response to questions as to why she was not married, Ann referred to 1 Corinthians 7 and a comparable passage in the Qur’an about single women being able to be totally involved in the work of the Lord. She added that the Bible, unlike the Qur’an, allowed her to do so well past her 20th birthday. Besides, she remarked, how could she otherwise teach their children and always be available to them any time they were having trouble, day or night? She wasn’t subject to the demands of marriage or the constraints of purdah. She was always free to help.

Caring for Cattle
Ann began to focus her efforts among the Fulani people of Northern Nigeria.

The Fulani are a largely nomadic people, whose search for good pasture for their cattle has scattered them throughout sub-Saharan West Africa. Strong clan fidelity and six centuries of Muslim evangelism have made them the most effective champions of Islam in West Africa. Of 6.7 million Fulani, only 400 are known Christians.

As Ann studied more about the people to whom God had sent her, she discovered ways of showing the Fulani cattle-herders that they are very special to God. She found numerous references in the Bible to nomadic cattle-herding peoples who played special roles in biblical history.

Knowing the great importance of cattle to them, Ann began to help upgrade the health of the cattle with veterinary medicine and so helped the Fulani begin to cope with some of the economic problems they faced with the growing pressure of urbanization.
Caring for cattle was the way to the Fulani heart. On one occasion she helped a Fulani elder get tuberculosis medicine for his son and worm medicine for himself. But it was not until she gave him medicine for his cows that he said, “Now I know you really love us!”

Ann was able to join forces with another mission agency in a distant city that was planning an evangelistic three-day “conference” especially for Fulani. Fulani people were told that it would be a religious conference studying one of the prophets—Abraham, a superherdsman who had cows and sheep and donkeys and goats and camels. This was a big event for the Fulani, not accustomed to special events just for their people.

At the end of the evangelistic conference, the chief of the area said to Ann that he wanted his people to become part of the Christian community. He had seen that Christians and their Holy Book cared about the needs of his people. Some of the greatest prophets, after all, like Abraham, were cattle-herders too! He also told her that to get a lot of people interested in the Christian faith, one of the best things she could do would be to continue to show a real, genuine interest in every aspect of their culture.

Gathering new believers into viable fellowships is proving to be a tremendous challenge. It is hard enough for some Fulani youth to settle down for Bible school. A permanent location for a tribe might unravel nomadic life. Perhaps now is the time for the Fulani people, as they move towards a future that is economically, politically and socially uncertain.

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In the 13th Century the Mongol tribes, united under Genghis Khan, thundered across the steppes of Central Asia and terrorized the known world. In a short time, these fierce horsemen had carved out an empire that dwarfed those of Cyrus and Caesar combined.

The Mongol empire was not to endure for long. The Mongols embraced Tibetan Buddhism and became a backward hinterland ruled by a succession of Chinese dynasties. In 1921, a Communist revolution turned Mongolia into the first “independent” Soviet satellite. All missionaries were expelled before any church had been planted, and the darkness of Communism settled over this “closed” country. Mongolia was one of the very few countries on earth with no church, and no known national believers.

Finally, in 1990, Communism released its weakening hold. The doors—closed for so long—began to open. Creative strategies sparked the beginnings. A team of Christian Native Americans entered Mongolia as tourists in 1990. Their visit generated a great deal of interest among Mongols and even in the national press. By the end of their second visit in 1991, they had publicly baptized 36 new Mongol believers. The spiritual landscape of Mongolia would never be the same.

A young Swedish couple, Magnus and Maria, came to Mongolia intending to help plant churches. They settled in the capital, Ulaan Baatar, where they befriended some of the growing number of local believers.
Eventually Magnus and Maria moved to Erdenet, the third largest city of Mongolia. With them went a nineteen year old Mongolian believer named Bayaraa. The first to respond to their evangelism efforts were a handful of teenage girls. It was not a promising beginning, but after teaching on faith and repentance, several of the girls invited their friends to follow Christ with them. In 1993, Mongolians were baptized in Erdenet for the first time in the city’s history. Fourteen were baptized—all of them teenage girls!

The first fourteen converts were quickly organized into three “cell groups.” They gathered for prayer, fellowship and teaching in an atmosphere of support and accountability. Together they learned to obey the two greatest commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

Active, faithful believers were equipped to lead the cells as they multiplied. A monthly “celebration service” formed for all the cells to unite. A year passed: the number of believers grew to 120…still, mostly teenage girls! At this point the embryonic “church” was not multi-generational or family based. It was essentially a rapidly growing youth group.

After a year of language study in Ulaan Baatar, the capital city, my wife Louise, our three daughters and I arrived to join Magnus, Maria, and Bayaraa. We were later joined by others from Russia, America and Sweden.

**Breakthrough into the Mainstream**

We all realized that teenage girls were not an appropriate foundation for starting a church movement. At that time however, youth were only ones responding anywhere in Mongolia. So we worked with the fruit the Lord had provided and prayed for a breakthrough to begin reaching whole families. We established “provisional elders” (starting with two younger men and Bayaraa) in order to begin the process of allowing a Mongolian style of church leadership to develop and to allow us to work more in the background.

**Breakthrough of relevance**

There was a great divide between the youthful, urban circle of friends and the family-oriented heart of traditional Mongolian society. Even our early converts had the impressions that the gospel wasn’t relevant for “real Mongols.” To the Mongol understanding, “real Mongols” are the traditional shepherds and gher (traditional round felt tents) dwellers. A visiting short-term team began to pray for the sick in some of the traditional gher suburbs on the outskirts of town. God answered prayer dramatically. One lame person, one deaf person, one mute person, and one blind person were all healed. These healings provided a seal of authenticity recognized by the older Mongols. The news spread like wildfire and the fellowship was flooded with growth from every age group and segment of the city. The urbanized youth were especially surprised that “real Mongols” were coming to faith. Soon two older men who were heads of households joined the ranks of our provisional elders.

**Breakthrough of understanding**

The second factor for the sudden acceptability of the good news by the older traditional Mongols was the decision by our team and the “elders-in-training” to begin using the Mongolian term “Burhan” to refer to the God of the Bible. Many centuries before, when the Buddhists arrived in Mongolia, they adopted the term “burhan,” the generic Mongolian term for “god,” for their purposes. In the early 90’s, nearly all the believers in Mongolia used another term for God, Yertontsiin Ezen, which was a brand new term composed by a translator in an attempt to avoid any potential confusion or syncretism with the erroneous beliefs of Buddhism. But the new term, which can be translated “Master of the Universe,” sounded unfamiliar and unreal to the Mongol’s ears. It had no intrinsic meaning and was essentially a foreign word made up of Mongolian elements. Although the Erdenet elders-in-training were used to using the term Yertontsiin Ezen, they decided the traditional term Burhan would be more appropriate and acceptable and was capable of being filled with biblical meaning.
Developing Indigenous Leadership

During this period of explosive growth our team deliberately stayed in “behind the scenes” roles, giving on-the-job training for the emerging leaders. Care was taken to do everything in imitable fashion—baptisms were in bathtubs, worship songs were not imported, but written by church members, etc.

The team recalled what we had learned from veteran missionary George Patterson before coming to Mongolia. He got to the heart of discipleship saying, “People are saved to obey the Lord Jesus Christ in love.” So in the new church, Jesus’ basic commands were taught in practical ways. The cells provided the atmosphere of loving support and accountability. Believers helped one another to “be doers of the word, not hearers only.”

Yet there were serious problems from our point of view where the cultural norms of Mongolian society conflicted with some of the moral teaching of the scriptures. The elders-in-training were encouraged to search the scriptures to find solutions for sin problems in the emerging church. Cultural blind spots in the areas of sexual purity and courtship were dealt with by defining principles, then teaching and enforcing them. The solutions that these Mongol leaders crafted were both biblical and culturally correct—much better than any we missionaries could have crafted.

The emerging Mongolian church looked far different from any of the team’s home churches in Sweden, Russia or America. Dramas and testimonies quickly became prominent features of the large celebration meetings (which went from once to twice a month; and eventually weekly). The “drama team” wrote and produced their own skits, plays, and dramatic dances from Bible stories and everyday Mongolian life. This became a powerful teaching and evangelistic tool. Time was always set aside for testimonies from “real Mongols”—often new believers in their 60s just in off the steppes. These long and, to Western ears, rambling stories of salvation gripped the fellowship in a state of rapt wonder and awe. God was on the move among their people—dressed in the most traditional of Mongolian clothing. Worship rose from their hearts as they sang new songs that had been written by their own people in their own language and unique musical style. This was no foreign fad or import!

About a year and a half into the church’s “life,” the Mongol “provisional elders” decided to politely decline further funds from supporting churches abroad. The funds had been used to provide some of the Mongol church worker’s salaries for about a year. Their own people were now giving and that would suffice. When the foreign church insisted on sending the funds, they were passed along to the daughter churches for their church workers, with the understanding that this too was only temporary.

The expatriate team concentrated our efforts upon discipling, equipping and releasing Mongols to take the lead in building up the church and reaching the lost. A school of discipleship was formed and by its third class was entirely Mongol led.

With the emphasis upon “learning by doing,” new leaders were trained locally in the ministry rather than being sent away. The leadership of the cells had been placed into their hands almost immediately, and soon the local believers also carried the majority of the responsibility for the weekly services.

Overcoming

All of this progress and growth was not overlooked by the Enemy. Beginning in November of 1994, our team and the fledgling church endured two solid months of unrelenting spiritual attacks: three cult groups targeted our city, the church was almost split, leaders fell into sin, some were demonized. Our team came close to despairing and pulling out.

Finally, two sudden and unexplainable deaths rocked the missionary team and the church. My only son, Jedidiah, had been born on November 2nd. On the morning of Christmas Eve our apartment rang with screams when my wife discovered Jedidiah’s cold and lifeless body—dead of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at two months. We buried our boy and a piece of our hearts in the frozen soil on a cold windswept hillside outside of town.

The next day a young girl in the church died of no known cause.

In response the believers and our team came together for 24 hours of prayer and
fasting in our office apartment. At three in the morning, a breakthrough occurred and everyone knew it. The church has never been overwhelmed by an episode of spiritual warfare like that since.

**Explosive Growth**

One of the beauties of the cell church model was that, where other churches in Mongolia were sorely hindered by government harassment that usually took the form of evictions from Sunday meeting locations, the church being planted in Erdenet was largely unaffected by such moves—since worship mainly took place in living rooms all over town!

Growth was constantly taking place in the cells and going months without “celebration services” didn’t slow things down. When the cells did gather, united in God’s presence, the believers were encouraged, seeing their numbers continue to grow.

By early 1997, the celebration service had grown so that no building in the city could house the 750 people who would attend! So they held two services. Recently appointed Mongol pastor/elders lead their church made up of over 57 cell groups. A healthy multi-generational Mongol church had become a reality.

**The Beginnings of a Church Planting Movement**

Was this the mission breakthrough we had been looking for? To stop with a single church in a city of 70,000 and a country of 2.6 million would mean we’d have gained almost no ground in the task of discipling the Mongols as a people. Our goal had always been an indigenous movement of multiplying churches that would spread throughout the once spiritually barren land of Mongolia.

From the beginning we made it our aim to help the new leaders catch this vision. We taught them to treat their church as an organization rather than thinking of it as an organization. All healthy, living organisms grow and reproduce. The Mongols saw that their church should become a “mother church” giving birth to daughter churches and that could reproduce granddaughter churches. The local leaders presented the vision before their congregation: “God wants to work through our church to create another new church!”

In 1993, the church sent teams of Mongol deacons to a town 60 kilometers away. They were commissioned to plant a daughter church and, the next year, an elder was sent to lead it. As fellow Mongolians it was easy for them to relate to the people in the new community. God blessed their efforts as they shared the gospel and discipled new believers. A daughter church was born, and soon, two of the new leaders got busy planting granddaughter churches in other places that were even more remote from Erdenet.

**The End of The Beginning**

The work progressed to such an extent that in 1996, after just three years, our team realized we had reached an important landmark. Actually, we had been anticipating our “phase-out” from the beginning and had kept it in the forefront of all our plans and activities. But that bitter-sweet time had come.

We reported to our supporters: “We were blessed to hand over the authority in the church to the elders we had trained...this was the crowning moment for us.” A special service was held on Easter Sunday, 1996. In the midst of worship and prayer the team followed the example of Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders: “Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance....” Half of the missionary team left Mongolia that very day. The others remained through June as distant advisors while they finished secular teaching contract commitments.

The newly independent Mongol church moved ahead in faith and action as the Holy Spirit led. At Christmas 1996, 101 new believers were baptized! On Easter 1997, the first anniversary of the “passing of the baton,” 120 more were baptized.

The church is finding ways to bring blessing in Jesus’ name to their city. One ongoing effort was initiated and is carried out by Mongol believers: Every day many of the city’s cast-off street kids are offered food and clothing (not a small matter in frigid Mongolia). A prison ministry is also flourishing, as is a cell group among the garbage dump dwellers!

The movement continues. At last count, the mother church had given birth to 13 daughter churches in towns scattered across
the province. The church they planted in Darhan, the second largest city in Mongolia, has over 100 in 11 cell groups and is quite unique in Mongolia because it has mostly families and older people as members. This young body has reproduced two grand-daughter churches. A very satisfying report considering we started five years earlier with only teenage girls!

This movement has also begun to work cross-culturally, having planted a church among Erdenet’s Russian population. Teams of Mongols have recently been sent to culturally distinct peoples in two other countries, to an unrelated animistic forest tribal people, as well as to several remote Mongolian provinces. A missionary training school has opened in Erdenet to train the church’s emerging mission force. Some of the expatriate church planters have returned to lead the school, but exercise no authority in the indigenous church.

God seems to have made the spiritual soil of Mongolia especially fertile for church planting. The gospel continues to do its life giving and community-changing work. Churches continue to grow and reproduce. A conservative estimate states that the number of believers has grown from two in 1990 to over 10,000 believers in 1998. Given the zeal of the believers, Mongolia will eventually shift from a mission field to being a powerful mission force. As in a previous age, Mongols will again thunder off to the nations beyond their barren hills—this time under the leadership of the “Khan of Khans”—King Jesus!

Dean Hubbard (a pseudonym) has served with Youth With A Mission in the Pacific and Asia region for over 20 years. For the last eight years he has lived in India with his family, serving an indigenous ministry among the poor, helping develop church leadership. Names of persons and people groups have been changed.

A Movement of Christ Worshipers in India

Dean Hubbard

Before 1991 the gospel had managed to attract very few converts in a particular district in Central India. Seven years later hundreds of newly baptized believers from at least 24 different people groups are learning to follow Jesus. They are gathering regularly in village level churches under the name, “Krista Bhakta Mandali”—“The Gathering of Christ Worshipers.” How did so many people suddenly turn to hope in Christ from centuries of practicing animistic spiritism blended with Hinduism?

A Key Leader

Bhimrao was a local, third generation Christian who had been a social and political activist for impoverished farmers, serving, suffering and going to jail with them over a several year period. Believing God wanted him to address the deeper spiritual needs of the rural peoples among whom he had grown up, he cooperated with an Indian mission organization to open avenues for the gospel among the Kowadi people. As an agrarian peasant group, the Kowadis have largely adapted their animistic traditions to the religious practices of the surrounding rural Hindu culture. They had resisted previous mission efforts, viewing Christianity as a religion for peoples of lower social standing than themselves. To present the gospel to the Kowadis in a way that they could understand and value, Bhimrao first confronted the failure of the two sources of power in which they had placed their hopes for social and economic upliftment: the government and their traditional gods. His message to them focused on Jesus: Since Jesus had created the Kowadis, Jesus has always been their rightful Lord and God. He loves them and is concerned about every dimension of their lives-social, economic and spiritual. Yet they had never
known his blessing because they had placed their hope in others. He had made the way for them to again come under his Lordship and know his blessing, but only if they would put their hope in him.

Bhimrao spent three months explaining this message in 150 Kowadi villages. Finally, a large three-day gathering summoned the Kowadis from these villages. The days were filled with Kowadi songs, dances and presentations of Jesus’ teaching in their language. At the end, 41 Kowadi affirmed Jesus as “Their Lord and Lord of the Kowadi” by taking baptism. Several of them were village leaders who were now convinced that Jesus was the true answer for their people.

Opposition Tests Faith and Attests to Credibility

Hindu religious zealots immediately disrupted the intended plans for follow-up and establishment of churches. The Kowadi people, known for their timidity, appeared to withdraw from further contact with the missionaries working with Bhimrao. Bhimrao had to leave the area temporarily for the birth of his first child. When he returned three months later he discovered that the other Indian missionaries themselves had withdrawn, discouraged and uncertain how to proceed. Upon further investigation, Bhimrao, realized that there had been some confusion following the persecution, but no lack of resolve. The converts still wanted to follow Jesus. With few resources and little support, Bhimrao had to form a new organization to facilitate the larger intent of serving the spiritual, church formation and socio-economic development needs of the Kowadi. He called it, “Din Sevak — Servant to the Poor.” Bhimrao was joined by a non-Indian, Dean, and Bhimrao’s brother, Kishor, and their wives. Still, limited resources and personnel required that from the start the new believers would do most of the ministry in the villages. As a result of the witness of village locals to their own friends and family, and partly helped by the publicity brought about by the initial persecution, many approached Bhimrao for an explanation.

Bhimrao’s earlier social activist work had earned him great credibility in their eyes. The false accusations of the Hindu nationalist me-
short-term team of young Scandinavian women who could not have been further removed from them in almost every way.

While discussing Christ with these young women with pale skin, bright blond hair and blue eyes, the Poharis began telling about a particular priest in their village. Five years prior he had passed through a period when most of the people thought he was crazy. He often seemed tormented by spirits. They brought him repeatedly before various gods & goddesses for healing. All the while he kept saying, “People who look like angels will come from around the world to our village. They will tell us about the real God. We should follow him.” So the team asked him what he saw in his vision. He said, “I saw people like you, white kind of people—they were angels. They will come and tell about God.” When they asked, “Do you think that we are those people?” he responded, “I don’t know yet.” But after four days of listening he trusted the Lord Jesus Christ and received him as his savior. In the end, most of those residing in that particular village were baptized.

In spite of promising beginnings, the general timidity of the Kowadi and the remote location of many of their villages continually inhibited healthy church formation. The transient hunting activities and almost universal illiteracy of the Poharis severely undermined effective church leadership development. But the bold, settled situation of the Bansaris proved a different story.

The Bansari number in the millions and also observe a mixture of folk religion and Hindu practices. Continued hostility toward conversions from the local press had acted like free publicity resulting in a young, educated Bansari man coming to Bhimrao seeking help. Experiencing severe depression and contemplating suicide, he finally found deliverance in Christ. Returning to his home in a distant area of the district he soon led 14 friends to trust Christ. Of these, the roles of three proved especially effective for the extension of the gospel. One was the leader of the Bansaris in his village. Another was a leader in a family that extended into many villages throughout that area. The third was a tailor near the central bus stand where people come from all the surrounding vil-

Seekers were called to follow Christ, not to become members of the Christian community, which has generally come to be perceived simply as a caste in contrast to other castes.

By this time “Servant to the Poor” had initiated a weekly time of fasting, prayer and teaching. These men were invited to join with men and women from other people groups who gathered weekly to learn how to better serve the needs of the churches that were forming in their villages. Very soon there were too many villages with new believers for them to care for. In the earliest stages they were required to identify potential church leaders. These also participated in the training and soon groups were meeting for regular worship in villages that were led by converts of the first convert.

Following Christ Without Betraying Family

The earlier experiences with other people groups, both successes and failures, resulted in critical lessons that shaped the approach taken with the emerging Bansari Krista Bhakta Mandalis. Seekers were called to follow Christ, not to become members of the Christian community, which has generally come to be perceived simply as a caste in contrast to other castes. To worship Christ was not to betray, but rather to fulfill their people group’s highest destiny. This destiny was for their entire group, not just a few individuals. New seekers from different communities are routinely welcomed into these fellowships, but are encouraged to focus their witness among people of their own family and caste.

One reason that the Krista Bhakta Mandal has not been perceived as a new Christian caste is that the small gatherings of worship
and teaching have been primarily people-group specific. Occasional celebrations are held in which Christ worshipers from diverse castes come together to worship and partake of what is referred to as “the Lord’s Meal.” For some it is the first time in their lives that they have shared bread with people from any other caste community. The joy of sharing Christ together affirms all the finest of what they now have in common without requiring them to abandon the identity with their community. Leadership for potential churches was identified early and allowed to carry significant responsibility for the discipling of others. Those potential elders were identified primarily on the basis of initiative, faithfulness and effectiveness in imparting the gospel. Then they were brought into the weekly training process that focused on learning foundations of a Biblical worldview and simple obedience to Christ. Practical help would be given on how to break from old behavior patterns and to cope with the struggles of living for Jesus in an environment that was often diametrically opposed to his values and teachings. All the while they would be active in witness and bearing responsibility for the welfare of new believers—not because they had been told to do so, but because they believed Jesus wanted them to do so. They were held accountable to their own declared commitment through regular reporting and coaching visits to their area of work. The role of the “Din Sevak” team members was not primarily to direct, but to encourage, support and coach the village leaders. The support was given in several ways. Regular and special training opportunities were arranged. Both Indian and multi-national teams were channeled to help them minister in their villages. Language and culture specific tools were made available; and if none existed, they were created, including scripture translation, and the publication and promotion of appropriate worship forms. Seed loans for farmers and income generation skills training for women were also implemented to limited degrees.

Persecution: Purging Then Multiplying

Unfortunately, hard lessons had preceded the later successes. A self-sustaining church has yet to develop among the Poharis. It is clear that even supernatural, prophetic preparation does not supersede the need for ongoing discipling and development. Opposition eventually took its toll on Kowadi leaders. The Bansari leaders have until now stood firm in the face of persecution, and they seem to be demonstrating the greatest potential for an actual movement of self-reproducing churches. Perhaps it is for this reason that they are now experiencing some of the greatest persecution, not so much from within their own group, but from the more traditional Hindus that surround them. Religious nationalism is gaining ground in India’s places of power. What were formerly verbal threats from local groups have given way to physical violence against some KBM village groups.

Yet, perhaps one of the most important lessons from seven years of ministry has been that opposition has invariably resulted in a “purging then multiplying” effect on the overall movement, especially when the leaders stood firm. What is intended to destroy this young movement may in the end make its spontaneous multiplication unstoppable. May it be so!