Why We Should Plant Churches as If There Will be a Coup D'état Any Day *

By Jean Johnson

In 1997, the smell of gunfire, the sounds of tanks, and the sights of troops sent a chill down the spine of every person in the capital city of Phnom Penh. The second prime minster, Hun Sen, hated being second—so he took matters into his own hands. Executions, torture, looting, ransacking, and combat fighting turned the streets into a war zone. This tumultuous coup d'état led to the evacuation of the majority of foreigners, which included vocational missionaries who had started every manner of project, programs, and churches in the years prior. I was one of them.

And so began our conversations outside of Cambodia, missionaries huddling together to pray and to express our deep misgivings. *What if we can't go back anytime soon? What will happen to the people, projects, and churches who are dependent on our expertise and funding?*1

As the smoke literally settled, we realized that for the most part we had birthed baby birds in nests, who must now be wondering if their mothers would ever come back to feed them. The unexpected coup and evacuation of the missionaries was a true test of our success, or lack of success, in church planting and mission strategies.2

Why Do We Plant Living Things Badly?

Within three or four weeks, we were able to return to Cambodia, and our strategic concerns quickly faded as everyone got back to business-as-usual. Again, I was among them. Looking back now, I wish Sidney Clark, who served in Taiwan in the 1950s, had been part of the overall missionary team in Cambodia. Maybe he would have pushed us to follow through on our questions and find solutions together. Clark once wrote,

> The question as to whether work at any point of its development can still be maintained by the people if it is left by the missionary, forms the best test of the soundness of our mission policies. If the answer is in the negative, then we have either planted a dead thing, or planted a living thing badly.3

During the 1997 coup, I believe the majority of vocational missionaries' answers to such a question would have been in the negative. We planted a living thing badly. And I believe the reason we did so was that the majority of our church planting and compassion projects were conceptualized and organized based on our Western worldview, our versions of church and compassion, and our economic standard of living. Perhaps this sounds harmless to you—even beneficial. Yet it creates an immediate dis-ability for the emerging local churches and Jesus-followers, because they cannot easily sustain or emulate such models. In answer to this non-reproducible model of all things church, we in the West begin to subsidize this and that project and ministry so the work can continue. It is during this stage of subsidizing that all the messages of learned helplessness are imbedded in the minds of the recipients. And before you know it, the first generation of disciples and churches within a specific

location are immersed in a type of Christian welfare culture. Since the first generation of disciples and churches can only pass on what they know, they pass on a debilitating welfare mentality to the next churches they plant—and thus it goes on and on for many years to come.

Speaking of the welfare system in the United States, Saranya Kapur shares the main reasons why parents on welfare tend to bequeath a culture of welfare to their children:

> This likely happens because "parents on welfare can provide information about the programs to their children, reduce the stigma of participation, or invest differently in child development" … parents being on welfare is a cause for the child being on welfare, not just a correlated factor.4

We can find this same scenario play out in church planting. The first generation of churches is dependent, and this causes the next generation of churches to be dependent. It is a cause, not just a correlated factor. Unfortunately, what happens is that the first generation of churches provides the next generation of churches information about all the ways to access foreign funding, reduces the stigma for participating in these schemes, and invests indifferently in their own development. Once the original church planters move on from planting dependent churches, churches from affluent countries pick up the pieces and continue to perpetuate the ongoing cycle.

Former missionary Robert Ramseyer, who was on the going side of missions, wrote:

> The stark reality is the subsidization of the church has been a mistake from the beginning. The damage which subsidies have done has far outweighed any good which they have accomplished … In this situation, not a moratorium on mission, but a moratorium on chronic subsidies … is not only justified but essential for the responsible maturity on both sides of the relationship.5

John Mbiti, an African Christian leader who was on the recipient end of missions, wrote:

> African converts have become beggars of Christian spirituality, ideas, cash, and personnel from their "superior" overseas missionaries, church boards, and centers of church organizations.6

In a workbook I wrote called *Standing on Our Own Feet*, I describe an "inherited psychology of dependence," as when a church or churches are conditioned into mindsets and behaviors that are harmful to their self-development. It takes only a few foreign donations or subsidy payments to take away the felt need and drive for local self-development.

Upon that first gift toward chronic subsidy, the local leaders who receive the help unconsciously find themselves trying to please their donors and copy foreign models beyond their local reach. Those under their leadership decrease their giving and volunteerism because they believe their pastors and leaders have access to foreigners and foreign money—and because they now view their own churches as their patrons (a place to meet their needs, rather than to serve one another). Churches nationwide start to believe they have to find sponsors and become beggars of Christian spirituality, ideas, cash, and personnel from those who are superior to them. Those who are not Jesus-followers watch all this happen, and from their position as onlookers, they don't find the messengers' message very credible or convincing. Why should they? It seems to them that the local Christians are hirelings of foreigners who are bringing a competing religion or buying coverts among the poor. The consequences run four layers deep, touching 1) the point of contact and recipient of the subsidy, 2) those whom this leader leads, 3) churches countrywide, and 4) the nonbelieving community.7

By the time we turn around to test the soundness of our mission, church planting, or partnerships due to a coup or another such enlightening event, we find that we have planted a dead thing or a living thing badly—that the first generation of churches we have planted will bequeath a culture of welfare to the next generation of churches.

I wish I could say that Ramseyer's and Mbiti's words describe the days of old. But from what I see in countries around the world due to globalization (which creates easy access with little cross-cultural effort), the *inherited psychology of dependence* is only increasing through the mission efforts of affluent countries.

Let's consider how we can move to responsible maturity in regard to our church planting strategies.

How Can We Plant Living Things Well?

I am convinced that those reading this article do not want to plant a dead thing or a living thing badly. I am certain you do not want to condition first-generation disciples and churches into a welfare mentality. And I believe one of the key solutions is to plant new churches as if there could be a coup (or another

unplanned emergency) at any time—even if you are in a setting where you think you could easily stay indefinitely.

How would you plant differently or more creatively or wisely if you believed you were dispensable—that you, in fact, could be thrown out at any time? How would you go about ensuring that local disciples and churches could not only sustain every point of development, but that they could multiply as well?

In *The Voice* translation of the Bible, the apostle Paul writes, "Keep to the script: whatever you *learned* and *received* and *heard* and *saw* in me—do it—and the God of peace will walk with you" (Philippians 4:9). With Paul's words in mind, David Picton Jones, who served in East Africa, once wrote to the secretary of the London Mission Society: "Our life is far above them, and we are surrounded by things entirely beyond their reach. The consequence is, that … they cannot follow."8

It is unfair to expect our hosts to keep to the script—to follow what they have learned, received, heard, or seen in us—when we plant churches with things that are entirely beyond their reach. It is unethical to then subsidize and keep propping up the development of such efforts as if we are indispensable, thus creating a welfare mentality that plants living things badly.

The answer of how to plant living churches well is embedded in Paul's and Jones's statements. We can do it by ensuring that whatever local people learn, receive, hear, and see in us is doable for them, using things that are within their reach. This puts the cross-cultural work back on the planters' shoulders, rather than on the host communities. We are the ones who will need to use what local people have to create what we need to plant churches.

When the coup awakened me to this paradigm shift, I started to move from using and doing what worked for me and started using what the local people had. For example, before the coup, I tended to rely on highly Western print communication and teaching styles as I trained Cambodian church planters, as described in Table 2.1.9

One day the Cambodian church planters said to me, "People lose interest so quickly and cannot process what we are sharing." They seemed to lack peace about their role and effort in teaching. Since we were jumping into a truck to head back to the city, I gave their comment little thought. But once we started our long and bumpy ride home, I prayed under my breath, "What am I doing wrong that they cannot follow?" At that moment, I started to pay attention to the environment. Every Cambodian in the truck was speaking with excitement and passion. There was a constant stream of animated communication and exchange of ideas. I thought to myself, "Seems very unlike what they described to me in regard to their church planting experience. Hmmm. How are they sharing and receiving meaning right now in this communal environment?" It dawned on me that they were communicating through proverbs, song, mnemonics, storytelling, and riddles. "Hello, Jean! You created a script they cannot follow. They don't communicate and process the way you do!"

As soon as I arrived home, I grabbed all the different books I'd written in the Cambodian language using my preferred teaching and learning styles. I opened the door of a cabinet and locked the materials inside. From that point on, I began to do the hard cross-cultural work of learning how to use what the Cambodians had in reach to create what I needed to plant and encourage the planting of churches. I got busy practicing the preferred style of communication of the majority of Cambodians, as signified in Table 2.2.10

Table 2.1 Print Learning Preferences

Process	Print Preference
Receive message	Words carry meaning; therefore, communicators carefully prepare and read words
Reason through message	Learners take notes on main points, principles, and definitions. Use logic (such as syllogisms) to create meaning
Remember message	Learners view notes, written handouts
Recreate message	New communicators refer to written outline

Table 2.2 Print vs. Oral Learning Preferences

Process	My Highly Print Preferences	The Cambodians' Primarily Oral Preferences
Receive message	Words carry meaning; therefore, communicators carefully prepare and read words.	Mental images, symbols, gestures carry meaning; therefore, communicators paint mental pictures and create an experience
Reason through message	Learners take notes on main points, principles, and definitions. Use logic (such as syllogisms) to create meaning.	Learners respond to people/events and visualize mental pictures. Use metaphors to create meaning.
Remember message	Learners view notes, written handouts.	Learners review mnemonic devices (music, proverb, story, symbol, ritual, dance).
Recreate message	New communicators refer to written outline.	New communicators guide a journey using storyboard, "chunking" information, and memory palaces.

Peace and freedom began to enter the hearts of the Cambodian church planters as they were released and encouraged to use what was natural and in reach for them. Now they were able keep to the script, and if another coup occurred, they could carry on quite well without me.

Solid Suggestions
If you want to avoid planting a dead thing or a living thing badly, I suggest you do the following:

1. Plant as if there will be a coup any day, and those who are left to do life in the village, town, or neighborhood where you are working will need to be the ones to sustain and multiply all things church (making disciples, planting churches, training leaders, showing compassion, giving, breaking bread, praising God, teaching, etc.).

2. Constantly ask Clark's question to test the soundness of your methods: *Can the work at any point of its development still be maintained by the people if I/we leave?* If the answer is in the negative, make the difficult adjustments as soon as possible.

3. Avoid creating a church planting script that local people cannot follow or with means and resources that are beyond their everyday reach.

4. If your life and ministry is far above the local people, pray about how you can put the cross-cultural and sacrificial work back on your own shoulders rather than expecting them to learn how to adjust to your worldview and imported version of church and compassion.

5. Adopt these "They can follow, because I" statements:

They can follow, because…

- I plant a biblical version of church instead of my own version.
- I use their language instead of making them learn mine.
- I learn and understand the culture and work within that framework.
- I use what is readily within their reach instead of what is within my reach.
- I write a script that they can follow at every stage of development.
- I may have to leave any day due to a coup or other reason.
- I do not condition the first generation of churches into a welfare mentality.

What other statements would you add to this list?

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Notes

1. To see a video animation of "What a Coup Taught Me About Missions," please visit: https://vimeo. com/264646156.
2. The book *We Are Not The Hero*, the Participant's Guide, and videos are available at fivestonesglobal.org.
3. Sidney J. W. Clark as quoted in *The Money Problem* by Allen Swanson, *World Encounter*, Volume 6, June 1969.
4. Saranya Kapur, "Parents on Welfare Are Bequeathing a Culture of Welfare unto Their Children," *Business Insider,* http://www.businessinsider.com/children-of-parents-on-welfare-are-more-likely-to-be-on-welfare-2013-11. Kapur based her article on Gordon Dahl, Andreas Ravndal Kostol, Magne Mogstad, Family Welfare Cultures, NBER Working Paper No. 19237 issued in July 2013.
5. Robert Ramseyer quoted in Glenn Penner by Ronnie Hahné and Wouter Rijneveld in their paper "Dependency in Missions," April 2005.
6. John Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development," *The Gospel of Frontiers People,* ed. Beaver (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973), 81.
7. Jean Johnson, *Standing On Our Own Feet Workbook: How to Encourage Indigenous Churches to Operate from a Place of Dignity and Sustainability in Global Mission* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2018), 126.
8. Quoted in Jonathan Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem . . . Revisited* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 11.
9. W. Jay Moon, "Fad or Renaissance? Misconceptions of the Orality Movement," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, No. 1 (January 2016), 11.
10. Moon, "Fad or Renaissance?," 11.