

A Fallacy in Church Planting

By Charles Troutman*



Once upon a time an experienced missionary established two strong churches in a capital city. Each church called a national pastor and maintained several preaching points under lay leadership. It was slow going at first, but some excellent young men were trained, though the problem of their support was never satisfactorily resolved. Five terms of service had produced spiritual leaders, but the believers were still so poor and employment so erratic that mission funds had to make up annual deficits. The city itself was prospering, but the concept of Christian stewardship was slow in taking hold.

The missionary had a pioneer's heart and with nine years to go before retirement, felt that a younger man could handle the support matters better while he moved on to open new areas. His special burden was for the coastal jungle region of his adopted country, recently opened for settlement. The area had no medical services, only a few schools, no churches and just one impossible road. Although it was potentially the richest part of the nation, the government had not yet begun to plan for roads, clinics, schools or police. In spite of this, the area held out to its country's poor people the possibility of eventually owning their own land. This primitive and unhealthy sector contained a growing population for whom Christ died. The missionary couple received permission from their board to spend their final two terms in this coastal region in church planting.

From the beginning, the missionary and his wife found an unusual response to the gospel: "more than we had prayed for," they wrote home. Converts, in the enthusiasm of their new faith, roamed the countryside telling of their own experiences of Christ and explaining the gospel as best they could. Interest was high. In the course of time, however, these new believers began to understand their responsibilities for their Christian families, the proper use of their few possessions and their land, the needs of their churches and especially the education of their children. This meant less time for free-lance witnessing, Nevertheless the good news continued to spread. Self-propagation was never a problem.

Neither was self-government. The people had learned to work together for sheer survival. And the idea of running their own congregations was very attractive to those who all their lives had been put down and shoved to the margins of society. They did an excellent job, although their ideas of organization were so informal that the missionary often despaired of bringing his kind of order into their church life. But, even when he was unable to visit a place for months, the meetings, teaching and study continued. In their own way the elders were fully responsible for their own work.

Self-support for a fully established church was another matter. The people were so desperately poor that, as one government official observed, "There is not enough loose change in the whole coast to pay one of your pastors for a month." The missionary took this as a challenge, for "with God, nothing is impossible."

His report upon retirement nine years later showed fourteen organized congregations and over three times as many regular preaching points. Only two buildings could qualify as church structures, yet every group was growing under its own lay pastors. The board rightly acknowledged this couple's work and made good use of their story to show that God's blessing rests on those who follow the New Testament pattern of church planting and do not get side-tracked by secondary activities. A younger couple was assigned to this coastal area to direct the final steps into a truly indigenous church.

Twenty years passed and these replacements, now veteran missionaries themselves, reported forty-eight organized congregations and an unknown number of preaching points. Many churches had a Sunday attendance of 200. Some North American churches had been persuaded to help erect suitable buildings and they responded generously with donations and work teams. There were now 21 buildings, but interestingly enough, none large enough to hold its congregation. Laymen still pastored the churches, but their size made it increasingly difficult for such part-time activity. Theological Education by Extension had done wonders to improve the effectiveness of these men. The board appointed a national pastor to help the missionary, but the day of fully supported local pastors was still as far off as ever. As it did two decades before, the mission board used this area as a remarkable illustration of church planting and church growth to show that God's work done in God's way always has his blessing.

North American churches seemed glad to support such a successful and biblical work. In fact, a new missionary couple was being sent to help in this showcase of God's grace.

This couple were impressed that after only twenty-nine years the churches were so alive and the believers so spiritually mature. They were effective witnesses and good teachers of the basics of the faith. But as to the stated purpose of the missionary society-to plant indigenous churches-the effort was a miserable, though unrecognized failure. Not a single church existed without aid from North America. They were still dependent on the board's ability to supply what missionaries and funds it could. There was this curious fact that the greater the success of the missionaries, the more money and personnel the board had to pour into the region. Indigenization seemed to be going backwards.

It was the United States mission board that first noticed this contradiction. The field workers were so absorbed and busy with their growing work that they resented this questioning of an obvious spiritual success. How could North Americans, most of whom had never visited this part of the field, know what was going on? The board finally asked for an evaluation-survey, but nothing surfaced to criticize, or to suggest either. It did, however, take action. It established a target for the churches of fifty percent self-support in six years and appointed another couple to concentrate on a stewardship program. The new man had majored in Bible and philosophy in college and in missions in seminary. His wife had an elementary teacher certificate. There was every reason to expect to reach this goal.

Yet, when the target date passed, although church growth continued, the lay pastors improved their work and more congregations were organized, the financial picture had only improved slightly. The board now finally had to face its dilemma: How long could it afford to support a growing success?

Unfortunately, the above is not a fable! Three things went wrong:

1. The missionaries and their board assumed that the North American pattern of church organization-pastor, building and program-was the only one available. There are other models. What they did not see was that the social and economic conditions of this particular area did not provide for this type of self-support. This meant that stewardship was thought of solely in terms of motivation. If the believers could only be taught to give liberally, there would be no support problem. Holding to this unachievable goal, the lay pastors were only stepping stones, temporary expedients to be eventually replaced by full-time pastors. As a result, these laymen were never fully confident or secure in their leadership, nor did they ever take the missionary's ideal too seriously. Instead, they turned their efforts to what they could do better: initial evangelism. National leaders often use this method of getting around missionary miscalculations.
2. The missionaries did not see how the social system in which the believers were trapped made them unable to become self-supporting. There were no health services available in the area, so that often disease and malnutrition left whole families too weak to get to services; it was not because they had backslidden. When the crops had a good year, they had no way to get them to market; the people were not lazy. Not seeing the intimate connection between these social problems and the self-support problem, the missionaries considered the believers to be unspiritual and lacking interest. Yet the mission continued to send more couples into this area, and to their other fields, to plant churches, couples trained for North American pastorates at that.
3. The missionaries misread the absence in the New Testament of specific social and economic instructions to mean that they have no part in church planting. Actually, the social and economic structures of the first century Mediterranean world were such that they favored the establishment of nondependent churches. Paul was able to concentrate on evangelism, teaching and leadership training. Thus in the power of the Holy Spirit, a new congregation could become self-propagating, had the educated leadership to become self-governing, and lived in an economic situation in which it could become self-supporting. The missionaries in this coastal area had several strikes against them and did not know it.

If church planting is the goal of missionary endeavor, as it should be, then why are evangelism, teaching, organizing and leadership training not always enough? These activities are sufficient in most home missions. The confusion lies partly in the past two centuries of the modern missionary movement. Evangelicals have always been rightly suspicious of mission boards that concentrate on education, medical, social or economic ministries to the exclusion of or downgrading of evangelism and spiritual development. Yet in most fields, there exists one or more of the following conditions, which if not attended to, will inhibit the development of nondependent children.

- Where public education is absent, church planting must include education to enable members to read the Scriptures.
- Where sickness and malnutrition sap energies beyond the struggle for mere existence, church planting must include public health and nutritional services.
- Where there is just enough food to survive, church planting must include agriculture and related sciences.
- Where there are inadequate means to get products to market, church planting must include road promotion and perhaps even road building.
- Where individual initiative is not enough, church planting must include organizing agricultural cooperatives and credit unions.
- Where there is artistic or technical abilities, church planting must include the development of these talents and, where necessary, the distribution of products.
- Where small businesses are possible and needed, church planting must include training in business practices and perhaps even financial help.

The list could go on, depending on local conditions. In other words, in order to fulfill the church planting purpose of most missionary societies, a church planter must have to engage in more than evangelism and leadership training. Is it too hard a thing to say that it is criminal to go on establishing organized churches that are condemned in advance to be indefinitely dependent on foreign money and personnel, simply because we neglect those factors in their society that make self-support impossible?

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