

Learning...Growing...Collaborating...Phasing Out

by Gailyn Van Rheenen

Introduction

Many "trained" missionaries begin their work in a cross-cultural context without a clear understanding of the missionary task. From a personal perspective this statement was partially descriptive of our missions team. We were well prepared to learn new languages and cultures. We had basic preparation to lead unbelievers into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. We effectively struggled with contextualizing the Gospel in a new and different culture. Our team, however, consumed hundreds of hours trying to determine what to do next. And because we did not adequately understand the process of missions, we made many mistakes along the way.

Generally, the problem is not the content of the training but the nature of training. The study of Missiology is frequently more topical than sequential. Curriculum focuses more on development of knowledge rather than of skill. For example, it should be axiomatic that courses on church growth or leadership training are best taught as tasks to be learned in a sequence rather than a body of information to be understood about a discipline. The major tasks of missions are sequential and thus must be taught and modeled as process.

Also, related to the problem of the nature of training is breadth of vision. For example, two missions teams enter the same area. One team's purpose is to *plant a church* in one sector of the city or ethnic group. The second team aims to develop *church planting movements*. According to Erich Bridges of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, a church-planting movement is "the rapid multiplication of churches among a people group that enables them to reach their entire people--then to reach out to other peoples" (1999, 7). Limited vision leads to limited results. Results are generally commensurate with the breadth of vision.

This article attempts to outline the broad process of establishing such church-planting movements from the missionaries' initial entry onto the field to the passing of the baton of leadership to the national church. It was written for two major reasons. First, this article enables missionaries to visualize the broad process of missions and the roles and skills required of missionaries during each stage of planting and developing a new missions movement. A central assumption is that missionaries should be long-term servants willing to grow with their missions movements and develop new roles commensurate with the needs of their developing movement. Missionaries are ideally *identificationalists*^(footnote 1) developing new skills as they personally relate to people within their culture. Second, the article challenges those who equip missionaries to focus not only on the initial stages of church planting--the "learning" and "growth" periods--but also on the final stages of church planting--the "collaborative" and "phase-out" periods. Traditionally the study of church planting has focused more on church initiation rather than on church maturation.

(footnote 1) Identificationalists, as contrasted to extractionists, assume the role of learners in a new culture, reciprocally relate to those of the new culture as equals, learn their language and thought categories, and personalize their ministry (Van Rheenen, Zondervan, 1996, 59-61).

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