

PART 2: ASSESSING NEEDS, ARAB CINEMA & TIPS FOR CONVERSATION

Need of the Hour

J. Ted Esler, PhD

Esler served among European Muslims before working in mobilization leadership. He is part of a church planting network in the US and is executive vice-president of Pioneers USA.

Your mission is to initiate a church planting movement amongst a pioneering, resistant people group. The odds are overwhelmingly against you. The churches here are like the teeth of that old man you just passed on the street – few and far between. Decades of evangelism and church planting by others have resulted in a relatively small group of believers. The expatriate missionary community works almost exclusively with this small group, conducting leadership development programs, theological training, group Bible studies and a host of platform ministries enabling access to visas. The idea that one works with the national church, a missiologically sound idea, has resulted on a focus aimed squarely at this small group of believers.

Upon entry into the culture, your mission seemed clear. The path to getting there, however, has been tough. Yet you labour on, knowing that after all, God is responsible for the results. In moments of weakness, you ask yourself: *Is labouring on the best strategy?* Unfortunately, you see no other alternatives.

I have had the great blessing of experiencing first-hand dozens, if not hundreds, of distinct missionary efforts. The above paragraph roughly describes the situation in which many UPG-focused missionaries labour today. The ministry that I worked to create had taken a similar path over a few short years. The task is hard. We often have no choice but to work with the small handful of national believers, planting a church person-by-person from the bottom up, grinding away because there are few, if any, alternatives.

Assessing the need of the hour

The problem with this scenario is that among many people groups the type of ministry described above may not be the ‘need of the hour.’

Last year I was corresponding with a gifted field leader about strategies of church planting. We were discussing via email the pros and cons of a training program being offered within our organization. He used a term that I have found very helpful for thinking about the task of church planting. He contrasted ‘church initiation’ with ‘church development.’ *Church Initiation* (CI) is what

happens when the starting of new congregations is the primary focus. *Church Development* (CD) is what happens when the primary aim is to build up existing congregations.

Looking back at the ministry described above we find a focus on 1) leadership development, 2) theological training, 3) group Bible studies and 4) platform-related ministries for visa access. Contrast the list with 1) developing disciples, 2) ministry-related skills training, 3) evangelistic Bible studies and 4) access ministries that further evangelism. These two groups of activities are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Strategies are not quite this black and white. Yet these two models have a very different focus.

Jim Collins tells the story of Walgreens. At one time, Walgreens had thousands of stores that were evaluated on a store-by-store basis. They grew along with the industry growth rate, slow and ponderous. In 1975 something unique happened – profitability rose dramatically. Walgreens began outperforming their own industry and many others. What happened at Walgreens can be explained in part because of a change in what they evaluated. Instead of assessing how much profit they could make on a *store-by-store* basis, they began to look at *each individual customer's visit* and how they could make that visit more profitable.¹⁶

Stores found they were no longer in competition with one another and began cooperating. If the Walgreens on 1st Avenue was out of a highly profitable product then the Walgreens on 5th Avenue quickly sent it down the street to them. Shipping was streamlined, workers began to think about the experience of each customer's visit and advertising was changed to reflect customer tastes instead of an individual store's agenda.

What changed at Walgreens was how they saw the goal. Their activities were rearranged around a goal that better organized their work toward success. Similarly, we might consider how church planters see their goal and if their activities are fulfilling that goal. In the vast majority of unreached people groups, the greatest need is for CI. Yet, my experience is that instead of CI most workers focus on CD. *Often, that CD is not moving toward the goal of CI.*

Objectively assessing the need

I have visited people groups that number in the millions with a small church of just one thousand believers *and three seminaries*. At other times, I have walked through buildings worth hundreds of thousands of dollars serving a church of just a few dozen people. Some works have a focus on training even though the trainees are few. I myself had roughly the same circle of non-Christian friends

¹⁶ James C Collins, 2001, *Good to Great : Why Some Companies Make the Leap--and Others Don't*. 1st ed, New York, NY: HarperBusiness, pages 92-94.

over a four-year ministry in Bosnia. These are examples of CD efforts that might not be appropriately focused.

Both CI and CD are valid church planting strategies *depending on the stage of development of the national church*. For example, three seminaries in one country may be appropriate if the leadership needs of the movement demand it. In the case I am citing, however, the training available outstripped the training need. At the same time, few resources were being allocated to CI.

Why was training so readily available? I believe it was because missionaries were struggling to offer something of value to the church based on: 1) who they were as people (their gifting and abilities), 2) what was possible or more likely to be successful within their context (it was a resistant Muslim people group), and 3) they lacked ideas, solutions, or the will to attempt something different.

I contend that if we look objectively at the progress of the church among unreached peoples, the greatest need is for CI, not CD. Exceptions to this will occur if a church planting movement has grown rapidly. Unfortunately, that is not the experience of most church planters.

I have visited people groups that number in the millions with a small church of just one thousand believers and three seminaries. Some works have a focus on training even though the trainees are few.

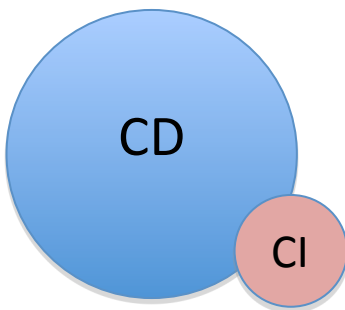


Figure 1: CD out of proportion to CI: Is this what we see happening in most people groups that need a bigger focus on church initiation?

Before going any further, let me say once again that CD might be the best and most appropriate strategy in your context. It is a valid church planting strategy and is particularly important as a movement grows and begins to have greater leadership needs. I am questioning what appears to me to be an over-emphasis on CD instead of CI within most unreached people groups.

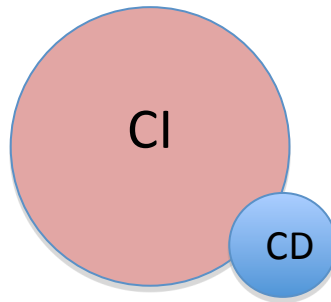


Figure 2: CI as a primary strategy: Is this what we see happening in most people groups that need a bigger focus on church initiation?

Exclusive models?

A valid criticism of this observation may be that it sets up a false dichotomy. If a church is being developed (CD) according to biblical guidelines, one might assume that CI will be the natural result. Perhaps this is true in some cases but it most certainly has not been in others, where decades of CD continue with relatively little significant CI in evidence. Yet, could there be a 'best of both worlds' strategy that would use CD to generate CI?

There may be a small church that is meeting within your people group. Helping them consider how to be involved with CI is an obvious strategy. This may take the form of training them to break out of existing church patterns or practices, taking them to see CI happening in a neighbouring people group, or simply modelling CI before them.

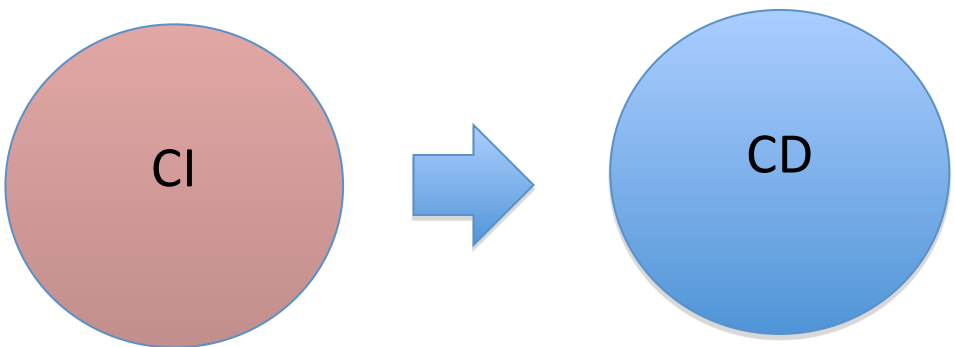


Figure 3: CD to CI: Is this the best way forward for many of our ministries?

Another way to implement this may be to motivate the ‘culturally near’ church (sometimes called the ‘proximate church’) to begin focusing on CI within a less reached people group. Occasionally, historical issues between people groups make this a challenge. Most often, however, missionaries overlook the culturally near church because they are not members of the focus people group. Training them to be effective CI missionaries to the focus people group takes an intentional commitment of time and resources. It may be a less direct route to CI among the focus group but may pay the biggest dividends.

There was a key leader within the reached people group who had the vision to plant new churches both within his culture and into others.

A recent trip to an African country revealed the beauty of this CD-to-CI strategy. Numerous workers from the majority people group were actively involved in reaching out to the many minority Muslim people groups around them. There were few non-indigenous missionaries among the majority people group. Yet, with just a small handful of missionaries, they had been able to leverage the numbers, expertise and resources of the majority culture into a multi-people group CI focused strategy.

I observed a number of powerful factors that made this effort successful. There was a key leader within the reached people group who had the vision to plant new churches both within his culture and into others. There was a base of Christians within the reached majority people group from which to draw workers. There were outsiders (in this case, Western missionaries) who had taken on the role as resource providers. They were assisting with training, funding and strategic thinking.

Application

There are many ways in which God moves to initiate movements. No single training, strategy, funding, or model will unlock the hearts and minds of those whose hearts are closed to the gospel. Yet we are called to work toward this end and it is our desire to do so with effective means.

As we evaluate our ministries this question of CD versus CI should be one that is considered. I suggest an honest assessment with your team asking the following types of questions:

1. How are we spending our time and resources? Compare and contrast CD and CI as you make up your list. Be brutally honest.
2. What role are culturally proximate people groups playing in your strategy to catalyse a movement? CD-to-CI may be an option if you have no culturally proximate partners.

3. Which indigenous workers do you envision someday leading the work? If you cannot readily name a few, than perhaps CI should be your primary concern. How about culturally proximate leaders?
4. Are you lifting your eyes beyond the motif of 'missionary as pastor/church planter' and instead envisioning your role as 'coach and mentor?' If you are pastoring you are probably more focused on CD.
5. How much of your schedule is consumed with visa and platform specific issues? Is this a good balance? My observation is that many visa platforms are so consuming that neither CI nor CD can be accomplished. Continuing in them reveals a strategy of *presence* only.
6. What are your benchmarks? How do you evaluate your work? What are your stories of success or failure that indicate what you value?

These are tough questions and issues. Striking an appropriate balance is just one of many issues that we face in frontier missionary work. Ultimately, we want to do our best. Let us work toward making sure that the solutions we provide are answering the right questions. What is 'the need of the hour' in your ministry?