

## Editorial

What a challenge to follow in the footsteps of Sam Schlorff, Wen Evans and Abe Wiebe as editor of *Seedbed*! Already my thinking is stimulated by the articles, letters and book reviews submitted for this first issue of 2005. My goal is for us to continue to interact on essential and gripping questions related to the establishment and growth of local churches in the Arab world.

We are indebted to the East Area Women's Conference for material from their recent seminar topics. In this issue we have the first part of Um Ithnayn's paper with practical suggestions for friendship evangelism. Oum Mark again examines questions related to finances and the national church but this time she comes from the perspective of our providing a model of work. Her earlier article on finances brings yet another response. See what you think about Basheer Abdulfadi's letter to encourage even more drastic action. Our contributing editors point us to matters of answering Muslims about the prophethood of Muhammad, practicing pain-bearing leadership and examining definitions of *church*.

Keep your articles coming. I am looking for your input on issues related to our desire to see vibrant and healthy local churches in our regions. Let's help each other in taking the Gospel to Muslims and in building up followers of Christ. Continue to write about evangelism, discipleship, modelling, leadership training, transformational development. Share with us what you are learning about Islam in relation to your ministry. Here is a question to think about: how did your national friends react to the tsunami disaster? And how did you talk with them about God at that time? Don't forget to send along your review of a book that you would recommend to colleagues.

Let me also call to your attention our notice about the need for respect of copyright rules. If you decide to republish any articles, remember to write for permission. We plan to follow the pattern of three issues per year. Don't forget to tell us if you prefer the hard copy and/or the electronic copy.

*Donna Smith (Editor)*  
editor.seedbed@wornet.org

## COPYRIGHT 2005

Please note *Seedbed*'s copyright policy as set out below:

- To reprint any article that has been previously published elsewhere and so acknowledged in *Seedbed*, contact the original publisher and the author for permission.
- To use any other article from *Seedbed*, ask permission of the editor. The text must not be altered and an acknowledgment must be made of both the author and *Seedbed*.

The above procedures apply whether you wish to publish the material as hardcopy or post them online.

## Letters to the Editor

In the first issue of *Seedbed* in 2004 (XVIII No. 1), Abe Wiebe invited response to the article 'Reflections on Finance and Ministry' by Oum Mark.

My overall reaction is that the analysis of Oum Mark regarding foreign recruitment of national workers is penetrating, convincing and prophetic. Most field workers, especially those in the poorer countries of the Arab world, will immediately identify with the phenomenon she addresses. For example, parallel trends are beginning to develop in Yemen, although the church situation is not nearly so developed as in Morocco.

Among the points made by Oum Mark, I would specifically single out the issue of dependency for comment.

It is a common perception that the most negative legacy of denominational missions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the promotion of theological sectarianism. However, a strong case can be made that the most negative legacy was, in fact, paternalism and dependency. The goal of establishing self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating churches was seldom fulfilled. The result is not churches fighting over theological turf, but over financial turf. It is frightening that modern non-denominational ministries, which presumably give lip service to these principles, are now threatening to reproduce dependency on an even bigger scale by the practices Oum Mark exposes. The influx of money from

outside agencies to buy believers (sheep stealing) and leaders (shepherd stealing) in order to jump-start a ministry ensures that whatever is established will be self-destructive. If the damage were contained, the issue might not warrant a campaign, but the practice, by its very nature, spreads like a cancer, affecting all ministries.

A closely related issue, not directly mentioned in the article, is the issue of sending believers outside the country for conferences and training. It is a common occurrence now in Yemen for outside ministries and churches to swoop in looking for local believers whom resident workers have been discipling – sometimes for years – and to invite them for short or long-term trips out of the country for training.

Oum Mark noted that '[m]oney tends to drive these churches to go beyond their level of experience and maturity in their ministry. They attempt things that need greater maturity more than money.' She was speaking of new, local churches. But the principle applies to long-established churches, too. *External money makes things possible that are ill-advised missiologically and that would otherwise never have been considered.* In one example, a church in South Africa suggested and funded an initiative with a large church in the Arab world to hold a conference in South Africa for the purpose of encouraging MBB leaders. Among

the invitees were young, unemployed MBBs from poor countries, not all of whom were in a leadership role. They were given free tickets and payment for their expenses. This attracted the attention of a national security organ in at least one case; they would have been remiss to have ignored it. The result was official scrutiny and a compromised witness. Outside money made this ill-advised conference possible.

In the absence of a convincing refutation, Oum Mark's article deserves not just written responses, but actions. My only criticism of her article is that the proposed action steps were too modest for the severity and importance of the problem she exposes. Three further, but also minimal, steps follow:

- Our own organization should officially eschew, in writing and in practice, the hiring of local believers to do ministry in country, and the funding or facilitation of outside funding to regional churches. I am aware that this runs counter to the Five-Year Plan.
- Oum Mark should consider revising and submitting her article to a publication with wider readership, such as the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*.
- A task force should be formed and funded by our organization in order to accomplish two objectives:
  - Inform churches and agencies that hiring local believers to do ministry and funding training trips are destructive to church planting.

– Convince fellow agencies to abandon these practices.

The task force should use all available means including extensive publication, consultations and visits to these agencies. Its makeup should include some influential members (well-known board members, directors, etc.) in order to gain the ears of policy makers, and some field workers in order to win credibility with field workers in these agencies.

To do any less is to guarantee the perpetuation of practices that work at cross purposes to the establishment of churches in the Arab world.

*From Basheer Abdulfadi, AP*

Dear Editor,

On one level, I do not feel I have the right to speak into the situation of those who are struggling with on-the-ground discipling and church formation ministries. I don't have to live with the limitations and realities that the author of 'Water Management and the Kingdom of God' obviously grapples with first-hand. Nor have I ever planted a church anywhere (although I have pastored two churches). But I do want to respond to his thought-provoking article. In doing so, I am approaching the issue of 'What is *church*?' more theologically. I feel that adequate reflection on that basis can inform our missiology (and ecclesiology) helpfully without introducing too many western biases, although one is never free from one's own ethnocentricity.

That being said, here are a couple of comments triggered by the article.

One is that, in actual fact, the New Testament (NT) does not describe or define church in propositional terms but in imagery. That should comfort the person who wrote the article. There are ninety-six biblical analogies or metaphors used to describe the Church – the most familiar one to us likely being that of *body* (1 Cor. 12). Others that immediately spring to mind are *bride of Christ* and *household of God*. There is no single image or definition of *church* that claims to encompass all that it is meant to be. This may be part of the problem that we face in church planting. (We cannot agree on what it is we are supposed to plant because we latch onto the NT image that suits our personal preference or situation. In doing so, we simply fail to see that different images emphasize different things. One image is not complete in itself to fully explain or define church.) I think it is essential, therefore, that we reflect on and balance all the images used in the NT as we apply them to our various Arab-world situations.

A little problem with taking the river analogy too far (an image not used with respect to the Church in the NT as far as I can tell) is that it seems to undermine the sense of community. I feel that relational relatedness is a repeated emphasis in the analogies or metaphors used in the NT and in the historical development of the early church. Agreed, our emphasis should not be on *where* the church meets – as if it were a building – or on *how* it meets. The Church is the *living stones*

joined together, not the bricks and mortar. But if the river spreads everywhere and has no inherent identity (even if the identity is only for those who call themselves part of a particular Jesus community), then it undercuts a fundamental aspect of *church* – one that enables MBBs to have a sense of belonging to an alternative community where they are loved and helped to develop. Furthermore, we need to constantly ask ourselves if true discipleship can occur in isolation from other believers. Being accountable, learning to love and serve each other, giving and receiving encouragement: these are all essential ingredients of spiritual growth. I also remind the writer that the letters in the NT are addressed to specific churches and that the thrust of teaching is on the local church, rarely on the universal church.

The idea of being gathered in community should not detract from other functions and features of what the NT indicates a healthy church should be and do. Gathering is, for example, in order to flow out revitalized to the world in witness as salt and light. I suspect that edification and evangelism emphases need to be held in a healthy tension in an emerging house church in the Arab world. Other NT analogies show the church's outward-looking qualities. We ought to be planting missional churches, not inward-looking ones. That missional aspect of church is captured nicely in the water/river analogy, I admit.

Similarly, the NT images of *church* (and the nature of the Trinity) balance out diversity and unity. I do not see how healthy church plants can pick between the two. In the short term, it might be more constructive in discipling MBBs to meet with two guys in the café – since they are eager to grow. However, even though the other five people who are interconnected in some form of embryonic worshipping group are quite different from the two guys, and even though the two guys don't get along that well with them, something of the essence of what we should be aiming at in church planting will be lost if we do not respect the unity of the worshipping group. I agree that our motive in gathering together as a larger group should not be about numbers or about having some sort of internal sense of success,

but I don't see how any context in which churches are planted allows us to choose diversity over unity as we form communities of followers of Jesus. Should not both aspects of relationships be fostered to avoid dysfunctionality? Again, 1 Corinthians 12 is instructive here in emphasizing both diversity and unity. Ultimately, the triune nature of God (three Persons in One) speaks to us of the collective relational nature of *church*.

Building an understanding on one image can unwittingly lead us to too pragmatic a perspective on what the Arab-world MBB church should look like. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the article does usefully keep us in conversation about just what we mean by *church* where it is struggling to emerge in any form!

*From David Lundy*