

Recent or Old Approaches to Church Planting — Has Anyone Found the Key? Lessons from Tunisia

by I.L.

"When God moves we can expect to see almost overnight, not just a second home group started, but many started, maybe within a few months."¹

This is what has happened in Tunisia. These words were written in 1995. The reality then was that there had been over 100 years of work resulting in only one small group and a few scattered believers. Now there are over ten small groups and probably over 300 believers. What happened? What made the difference? No single factor or person was important. Instead, we saw the pulling together of many factors.

1. Vision for many small groups. Until the 1990s, the standard approach was of trying to witness, leading people to Christ, then linking them up with other Christians. Then over several years the vision changed. Tunisian believers were involved in the change. The vision changed to working towards many small groups. Some foreigners started 'model' groups in Arabic, to train for the future and to which locals could be invited. With this was a much greater number of foreigners who became fluent in Arabic and had the vision for small groups. Probably the most important factor though was that the vision was effectively taught to the Tunisians, because when God moved, it was they who were most involved in doing the work.

The growth has been mostly in and near the capital. But there are still major cities without a group, or with an embryo group. The awakening has yet to touch the whole of Tunisia.

2. In forming the vision for small groups, the input from Scoggins² was important. In particular, we saw how the church could exist and grow as a network of home groups which changed with time, need, people and task. These groups form the basis for nurture, teaching, fellowship and prayer. Because there are many informal contacts between the groups, ministry such as music, teaching and witnessing can take place using members of more than one group. Sometimes they come together in larger gatherings.

3. The new groups have worked hard on community. Scoggins encourages people to work along the natural lines of contact — friendship, family, work — that a new believer has, to see nuclei of people find Christ, nuclei who already know each other and can work together. This was, and to a large extent still is, the vision, but because it did not happen that way, and many of the new believers have lost the closeness of their human families, the work put into creating new communities was vital.

4. Tunisian Christians worked towards a united but decentralized

leadership. At one time a few older believers in the original group dominated, and everything was fitted into the existing mold. Then slowly, and often painfully, this changed to a stress on small groups that are interrelated. Decisions concerning more than one group, ideally, are taken by consensus, not by pyramid-style authority.

5. The foreigners were united. Disagreements were worked through. The local believers were able to see this, and two were inspired by the example of cooperation. It has been extremely difficult at times to work through the differences, but groups which have isolated themselves have not grown.

6. God gave some people a vision for prayer that resulted in 'Awake Tunisia'. The credit for this goes to God not man. This prayer impetus grew out of people seeking God and following what He wanted to do.

7. Greater availability of the Word of God. Radio was added to by satellite TV and easier availability of the Bible.

8. Prompt followup of those who showed any interest without waiting to see if the interest was sustained or not.

9. Praise God that there has been a relative period of calm in the country. This has permitted growing space. It has been helped by the wise, stable government and the non-involvement of Christians in politics.

10. Various people started teaching the difference between essential and primary truth which is common to all Christians and on which we are united, and secondary matters where we can agree to differ and maintain unity, love and respect. Not everyone

used this terminology, but the principles were taught and are being patiently applied.

11. Boldness. Some of the new believers decided not to give in to fear, and said that they were ready to suffer for Christ. Therefore, they stood up to intimidation with the effect that the whole church was encouraged and more people became bold in their witnessing.

12. Meaningful worship, with new songs and music, has become an important feature of meetings.

13. There have been various active programs of teaching. The practicalities have varied, but teaching at various levels has been maintained.

14. God has raised up capable visionary leaders among the new believers.

What then Are the Current Challenges?

The basic requirement now is to both consolidate and go deeper, and to continue the challenge to reach out to the lost. A country of ten million needs more than ten or so small fellowships. There are large towns and cities still untouched, let alone the countryside. Tunisians will have to learn to work cross culturally: to communicate to oral rather than literate people, by stories and images rather than by books.

The task appears overwhelming. The existing groups are mainly young. Although the number of families is growing, there is so much to do and not enough time to go deep. Many are overstretched. Many know too that

hard times will come, sooner or later, and they must be ready for them.

In addition to potential future pressures from the society, there are at least four additional pressures waiting in the wings. First, dealing with outside Christian groups who wish to muscle in on what is happening, and who come with their own agenda. However well meaning this is, it often distracts and takes from the growing church. Second, the church must prepare to counteract influence from the sects. Third, it must master the issues which threaten to divide. Finally, out-

side Christian agencies must be convinced that they must stop offering to pay locals to do ministry in country, and must not offer attractive salaried posts abroad. Such financing promotes division, jealousy, dependence and idleness, as well as providing good justification for detractors and severely weakening work in the country.

Footnotes:

1. I.L. *Seedbed* Vol. X/2 21-24, 1995.
2. Dick Scoggins. "House churches in the Muslim world." *Seedbed* XII/4 3-13, 1997.