

CHURCH-PLANTING IN THE ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD

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INTRODUCTION:

Compiling a booklet of guidelines as to how to form Muslim-convert churches in the Arab-Muslim world seems a presumptuous undertaking. No one, on the basis of visible results, can yet claim to be an expert in the field. No definable method has so brilliantly succeeded as to become a model of procedure. We increasingly realize that an unprecedented moving of the Spirit of God in these lands is the final and essential secret of effective church-planting. And yet, a generation of experience and of reflection and interchange with others involved in church-planting here will hopefully yield insights and principles which can be of help to others. Such we share, not as the method, but as an aid to further realization of our shared commitment to see local churches established throughout this part of the world as viable, visible, victorious expressions of that entity of which Scripture testifies, "...Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for her...".

CHAPTER ONE: DEFINITION OF TERMS:

CHURCH:

When we speak of the Church in our context, we certainly do not mean the building in which a congregation of Christians meets for corporate functions as believers. Most Muslim-convert churches across North Africa meet in private homes. The Church is people, not buildings or organizations. A.J. Wiebe has defined the Church Universal as follows:

"The church consists of all who, through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ, have entered into the unique spiritual position of being 'in Christ' and thus related to the triune God (2 Cor. 5:17, 1 Cor. 12:13, Eph. 1:22,23). Through the action of the indwelling Holy Spirit, each believer, by virtue of his being 'in Christ', is brought into spiritual union with all other true believers, who thus constitute the Body, or the Universal Church (Eph. 4:4-6)."

The greater need is for clear definition of the time and space concretization of that universal, spiritual Body, in the visible church in a given locality at a given time. What does this entity look like and what are its functions?

We in NAM have sought progressively to clarify our common definition of the local church. The simplest definition is found in Matt. 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst." We praise God for each one of the multiple demonstrations across our fields of the church in this embryonic form. The goal we have set as a mission goes beyond the embryo to the formed and functioning entity which we expect to develop from the embryo. In defining this entity, we have sought to avoid both the vagueness of concept which would paralyze progress toward a goal, and the structural rigidity which would prevent the diversity of expression in autonomous local churches in harmony with their ethnic and cultural identity.

In continuing development of the above definition of the Church, Wiebe states,

“The spiritual position and spiritual unity referred to lay the groundwork for a new relationship, not only between the believer and God, but also between the believer and fellow-Christians, the world, and non-believers. It is the corporate manifestation of this relationship, involving privileges and duties, which is commonly called ‘the local church.’”

It is this corporate, visible, indigenous social entity that we are seeking to help come into being.

A local church, then, is a grouping of members of the Universal Church with sufficient structure to demonstrate its corporate identity within its given social and cultural context and to carry out its corporate functions of worship, edification and outreach.

We have defined what we believe to be essential elements of an autonomous functioning local church as follows:

1. Baptized believers
2. Christian families
3. Scripturally-qualified and locally recognized national leaders
4. Meeting place(s) independent of the expatriate church-planter
5. Assumption of responsibility for finances and ministry by the local group.

A few words of explanation may be in order for each of those elements:

- 1) We specify “baptized” believers because this seems to be the biblical means and mark of corporate identity as a church. Ten such would perhaps be the minimum number for a functioning group, although there is no biblical basis for setting a minimum number.
- 2) Worshipping groups in North Africa have historically been composed primarily of single young people. Experience indicates that only Christian families can provide the necessary stability, maturity, and ability to understand and minister to all the members. The Christian home is an indispensable place for fellowship, prayer, study of the Word, and counseling. Single believers, many of whom are isolated islands in the hostile sea of their Muslim environment, need a haven in the atmosphere of a home away from home. The access of young single believers to such a home in Algiers is perhaps the greatest single reason for a functioning indigenous group in that city today. Prayer, counseling, encouragement, and vision were always available in a sister’s house, even though her husband was not a believer. The missionary family, being a foreign element, cannot fill the gap. Only national families can provide the atmosphere necessary for a church to develop properly.
- 3) Seeking to make groups function as churches without scripturally qualified leaders has led to three problems:
 - a. Expatriate leadership has become the quasi-permanent pattern, and the church has never developed into an autonomous, indigenous, independently-functioning church. A long-standing member of the worshipping group in Casablanca once said to me, “The church in this city will never function without the missionaries.” The expectation of an independent church, if ever fostered, had apparently died.
 - b. A democratic form of government has been introduced where all believers have equal authority. Against such a precedent it is next to impossible to establish biblical leadership. A young brother gave as his reason for defecting from the evangelical group in Casablanca to the Seventh-Day Adventists, “At least we know who is in charge over there.”
 - c. Nationals who do not have the support of the local group are thrust into the role of leaders. This creates unstable and factious groups, unable to grow because continually falling apart. A missionary nearing the end of a long career in Morocco confided that he felt one of the key reasons why repeated attempts to establish an independently functioning church in one of the main cities of Morocco had failed was the repeated missionary recognition of leaders who did not have the confidence and support of their own people. Qualified leaders formed according to the model outlined in 1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1 will have the loyalty of the local group, and will not shrink from assuming responsibility for that group.
- 4) The missionary’s home being the church meeting place in North Africa has proved an effective deterrent to national leaders truly making and carrying out their own decisions. The group must meet in

some place for which they themselves, not the expatriate church-planter, are responsible. The Scriptures support this thesis. The church in Corinth met in the house of Gaius (Rom. 16:23). It is significant that, although Paul used the house of Titius Justus as his center of ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:17), there is no mention of this as a “church home”, either in the epistle to the Corinthians, or in that to the Romans, written from Corinth. Again in Ephesus it is the home of Aquila and Priscilla which is mentioned as the “church home”, (1 Cor. 16:19), not the school of Tyrannus, which had been Paul’s center of ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:9). In the Arab-Muslim world, these independent meeting places will commonly be private homes, rather than public halls.

- 5) Internal responsibility is important for continuation of the group independently of the church-planter. Finances is perhaps the most delicate area. Although indigenous financing is a long-established church-planting principle, it tends to be lost sight of in the smallness of groups and the generally low economic standing of believers in this part of the world. John Nevius remarked nearly a century ago in his book, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, that the church will be strong in proportion to what the members do with what they have. She will be weak in proportion to what they do with what the foreign worker provides. While indigenous financing does not preclude all forms of material sharing in the needs of churches, it does mean that nationals themselves must assume the predominant role in meeting the financial needs of the local group, and that control of the local group’s finances must be in the hands of the leaders of that group. It is the giving, not the receiving church which will be stable and mature.

The entity of the local church in the Arab-Muslim world will be a group of ten or more baptized believers, demonstrating corporate unity around the nucleus of a Christian family or families, loyally supporting and following national leaders(s), most likely gathering in national homes, and assuming internal responsibility for both finances and ministry.

CHURCH-PLANTER:

Although this term has certain biblical support in 1 Cor. 4, where Paul say, “I planted, Apollos watered, God gave the increase”, the term itself is extra-biblical. It is used today in a much broader sense than the scriptural connotation of the initial sowing of the seed through the preaching of the Gospel. The term as used today refers to the whole process of evangelizing, discipling, training, and organizing until a group of believers comes to a level of development permitting it to function as a viable church, independently of the agent(s) which have brought it into being.

Following from the above definition of church-planting, we conclude that a church-planter is the catalytic human agent of the divine process of church development from the point of planting the seed through that of seeing believers gathered in Jesus’ name to that of seeing the viable entity function apart from the catalyst.

In a field strategy outline in 1975, NAM’s General Director described our mission goal as follows:

“To evangelize Muslims in North Africa and Europe, nurturing them in the faith, with a view towards establishing local churches in North Africa, which will be indigenous and self-propagating.”

This definition leads to the following conclusions:

1. The church-planter’s role in a given locality is temporary, the church is permanent.
2. The culmination of the church-planter’s task is the transfer of authority and responsibility for the local church to men qualified to lead (see 2 Tim. 2:2).
3. The church-[planter’s top priority should be finding and preparing the individuals whom God has chosen to lead that particular church (Acts 20:17-35).

CHURCH LEADERS:

In the light of our diverse and primarily western backgrounds, a definition of church leaders also seems necessary. In the New Testament, leadership of the local church is invested in a plurality of men called

elders, bishops or overseers, pastors and teachers. These terms are used interchangeably of the same body of leaders, but stress different aspects of their leadership roles. Cf. Acts 20:17-28, where we find “elders,” “overseers,” and “to shepherd” (i.e. pastor); Tit. 1:5,7, where we find “elders” and “bishops” (or overseers); 1 Peter 5:1,2 where we find that “elders are to “feed the flock” (i.e. pastor), and “take the oversight” (i.e. bishop, overseer). The verbs being used here rather than the corresponding nouns.

Plural leadership need not exclude the possibility of a full-time pastor. Acts 12:17; 21:18 and Gal. 2:12 indicate that James may have filled such a role in the Jerusalem church. It does exclude, however, the possibility of one man assuming dictatorial authority in the oversight and care of the church. Acts 21:18 qualifies the emphasis on James with “and all the elders were present”.

Deacons are also mentioned, both in Phil. 1:1 and in 1 Tim. 3:8-13, as a category of church leadership distinct from and presumably subordinate to, the category described above. Their functions are not clearly outlined in scripture, however. Nor is it clear that they were a regular and permanent feature of church leadership. Their place and function in the present day New testament church will therefore be determined by local desire and need.