

CHAPTER FOUR: STRATEGY

Having identified the key elements to the founding of New Testament churches, we now need to think more practically about how we should go about creating, or facilitating the creation of those elements.

Church-planting strategy must logically begin with effective EVANGELISM. In the Muslim world, this is usually a more slowly moving process than in the Western world. We will deal more with the process in the next chapter. Effective evangelism is that which brings individuals and families to an unequivocal transfer from Islam to Christianity with a full commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Multiple approaches and methods may be brought into play. But the strategy must be one, i.e., bringing people to 100% allegiance to Jesus Christ. Society in the Muslim world is family and group oriented, rather than individual-oriented. Effective evangelism, then, will also be aimed at family and friendship groupings, rather than just at individuals. The Gospel needs to be presented clearly, and the issues involved spelled out clearly so that a meaningful choice can be made. And then we trust God for the indispensable regenerating work of the Holy Spirit without which evangelism can never reach its goal.

Effective evangelism then naturally moves into effective DISCIPLESHIP. The strategy here, in terms of church-planting, must be the forming of the critical mass, the cohesive nucleus of the church.

For more than ten years, I have observed the ministry of an elderly Moroccan who has a strong gift of evangelism. But he has been consistently unable to maintain relationships with his fellow-believers because of a deep-seated and easily expressed mistrust of other Moroccan Christians. In speaking of the church in another city, several of the members of which had suffered for and maintained their faith under severe trial, he dismissed them all as hypocrites. Such an attitude is obviously not fertile ground for growth of churches. Therefore, building trust and in-depth relationships among believers and families or other sub-groupings of believers will receive as strong emphasis as the individual character building that we have historically concentrated on in discipleship programs. Lack of trust is perhaps the single greatest barrier to creating and maintaining the cohesiveness factor in Muslim-convert churches. Only as there is a sufficient core group with strong bonds of mutual trust and loyalty will the church continue independently of its planter. And only when church members have the mind-set of risking the placing of trust in new believers will the church grow. Without this mind-set it becomes a closed, inward-looking, ghetto-complexed group. In-depth relationships are rare in the Arab-Muslim world, outside of the family grouping. Even within that grouping, relationships are more often cemented by fear and necessity than by love and trust.

Discipleship must seek to set in motion a new web of in-depth relationships within the spiritual family, cemented by trust, loyalty, and love.

As the critical mass of cohesive nucleus is formed and we are ready to move forward into conscious functioning as a church, we must seek to create and encourage VIABLE STRUCTURES which will last independently of the church-planter and in the face of intensive opposition.

Of capital importance in this is a continuing emphasis on organism relationships rather than on organizational structures. The visible form and structure of a church group without sufficient relationship strength will produce a lifeless shell at its best, and will unavoidably disintegrate under extreme pressure. Strong relationships will weather the storms of opposition and will continue to function informally as a body, even when it may become impossible to function on a formally-organized church meeting level. Personal visiting and caring relationships are hard for a hostile government or society to ban.

These relationships must be developed on a national-to-national level. Too often has the church-planter become the axis of relationships. It seems easier for nationals to maintain strong relationships with the expatriate missionary than with their national brothers and sisters. A. was a young single, known and accepted as a Christian by the church in Casablanca, where he had recently moved for study and work. He commented, "When I need counsel and encouragement, there is not one of the national homes here to which I feel free to go. The only place I am sure of a welcome is in the missionary's home." But having the web of relationships pass through the church-planter as the hub will not be a structure which will last. That pattern, usually the easiest to establish, should therefore be studiously avoided.

As concerns meeting places, I believe that the only viable lasting structure for Muslim-convert churches is the private dwellings of church members. Whereas we agree on the principle of the house church, we have tended historically to apply that concept as a transitional expediency rather than as a permanent principle. As long as the total Christian community in a given locality is small enough to be contained in someone's living room, we have a house church. As the group grows, we look for a larger meeting place, be it a rented hall, a borrowed church building, or whatever. I believe that the house church of from 10 to 20 members should remain the basic unit around which we should expect the church to develop. Growth would then be expressed in terms of multiplying groups, rather than in terms of an ever expanding group. This pattern would permit unlimited growth, regardless of how large the total Christian community became in a given locality.

This concept is biblical, first of all. The New Testament presents the picture of the church in a private home on at least five different occasions (Rom. 16:5,23; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2). We have no way of knowing, of course, how large were the groups meeting in each home. Perhaps they had large courtyards in which a hundred or more could meet. We read of 120 gathered in the upper room of John Mark's family home just before Pentecost. We can be quite sure, however, that the 3,000 converted on the day of Pentecost did not all meet in the same home at the same time to break bread. The principle is that the space available in the home should determine the size of the group meeting there. The size of the total number of Christians in a given locality should not determine the type of meeting place required. Whether we have 10 or 10,000, we still meet in homes, as many as needed to accommodate the total number.

Secondly, such groups would be more suitable to the low profile essential to Christian meetings for Muslim converts. I have seen semi-public meeting places invaded by police in all three countries of North Africa in which I have worked. Further meetings have been forbidden and the leaders harassed and threatened. Although private homes are also vulnerable, a meeting-hall designed and known as such will be more highly vulnerable. Relatively small groups in private homes are much safer from police interference than are semi-public gatherings in special buildings set apart for that purpose.

Thirdly, this concept of house churches would encourage greater assumption of responsibility by nationals and would, therefore, more quickly develop national leaders. It must seem unnatural for nationals, just beginning to feel their way in their new faith, to function alongside of, or take over from, foreigners whom they see as more highly trained and specialized. But fifty believers in a given city, meeting in three to five different homes, would open an immediate and obvious need for at least that many leaders, each one with a vital responsibility and ministry without appearing to usurp the place of someone more qualified than he.

The danger of fragmentation in such groups should be countered by stressing from the outset the concept that the house group is not an independent unit, complete in itself, but rather one cell in the church body of the given locality. Opportunity should also be provided for periodic wider fellowship groupings, such as:

- 1) An "open house" on special occasions, when people could move in and out freely all day. This would be less volatile than a regularly-held large meeting.
- 2) Reciprocal visiting on an informal basis beyond the bounds of the particular group with which one regularly meets.
- 3) Picnics, beach parties, birthday parties, etc., giving socially acceptable occasions for larger gatherings.

As concerns lasting leadership structure, I believe the only viable model, at least for the beginning of the Muslim-convert churches, is that of self-supporting, national lay leaders. We have seen that this is the most commonly mentioned form of leadership in the churches of the New Testament. These will be less vulnerable in times of persecution if they do not have official titles and formally designated positions. They do, however, need to be clearly recognized and respected. Their being self-supporting is vital to a strong testimony in Muslim lands where the suspicion reigns that professed conversion and Christian service are always with a view to economic and/or social gain.

The church must function on a principle of voluntary rather than paid service. The almost automatic reaction among Muslims to one of their own countrymen beginning to exercise a Christian ministry is,

“How much are you being paid for it, and by whom?” This principle holds true, not only at the leadership level, but right down through the membership also.

A church which will survive and grow must develop culturally acceptable forms of worship, government, and function. Should worshippers squat on floor mats, be seated in rows or around the walls of the room on padded benches which form the common seating in a Moroccan living room? Should seating be mixed male/female or segregated? Should singing be part of worship? With or without instruments? These are all areas of liberty within the afore-mentioned parameters of the New Testament church. It seems that very little anthropological research has been done to find any other than purely subjective answers to such pragmatic questions. Suffice it here to state the underlying principle which should govern both research and application. The forms adopted must be conducive to four purposes:

- 1) They should foster a spirit of worship and encourage participation in that worship.
- 2) They should make nationals feel at home in a church gathering.
- 3) They should be such that nationals themselves can easily adopt and carry on without the presence of the expatriate church-planter.
- 4) They should communicate a clear Christian message without syncretistic confusion.

And finally, the church will best develop and grow in that language or dialect which the members themselves feel most comfortable with, whether literary or dialectical Arabic, one of the Berber languages, French or English. In many churches there will perhaps be a mixture of two or several. We should encourage that.

Our strategy can be briefly summarized as follows:

- 1) Effective evangelism which will produce wholehearted, meaningful commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
- 2) Effective discipleship which will emphasize depth of relationships and the forming of a critical mass of believers committed to one another as well as to Jesus Christ.
- 3) Establishing local worshipping and witnessing groups, stronger on organism relationships than on organizational structure, and functioning in viable forms which will take root and grow in native soil beyond the watering and cultivating activity of the church-planter.