

CHAPTER FIVE: THE PROCESS

As we think of the process of church-planting, we need to remind ourselves again of that which is non-negotiable principle, and what is negotiable pragmatism.

Non-negotiable principles can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The church must be a true and faithful representative of her Head, Jesus Christ.
- 2) The church must be true to the written Word, the Bible.
- 3) The church must function by spiritual life, not by organizational rules.
- 4) The church must be an internally-cohesive organism.
- 5) The church must function in structural forms viable to and adoptable by its members in their cultural setting.
- 6) The church must be formed so as to outlast its planter.
- 7) The church must be an effective communicator of the Gospel so as to reproduce itself in other local churches.

We have noted earlier that the process of church-planting is pragmatic within the parameter of New Testament principles, the method which works being the one which should be used in any given situation.

At the risk of appearing to have only one string on my fiddle, I repeat that the one absolutely indispensable element is the working of God's Spirit. The process may vary widely from place to place and situation to situation. But unless our methods, whatever they may be, are enlivened and empowered by the Spirit, they will be ineffectual and fruitless. The process must be carried out from beginning to end in this conviction. An integral part of whatever we do in whatever stage of the process, therefore, will be a continual crying out to God for, and laboring in expectation of, that outpouring of His Spirit which alone will result in true churches.

The process must necessarily begin with the preparation of the church-planter. We will not concentrate on the spiritual preparation here, although that is obviously fundamental. Apart from the character transformation which is the continuing process of any healthy spiritual life, I see three important components of spiritual preparation for planting Muslim-background churches.

First is a knowledge of and ability to use effectively the Word of God; second is a conviction of and practical experience of the ministering work of the Holy Spirit; third is a conviction of and experience in the central place of prayer in ministry.

The practical preparation of the church-planter will include language acquisition and cultural orientation and adaptation. In the initial stage of a church-planting ministry, priority should be given to that preparation. It is a mistake, however, to consider this period as purely preparatory, after which our "ministry" will begin. Relationship patterns will begin to form as soon as the new worker arrives. Long before one is able to communicate effectively in the language of the country, one will become known, either as being open and approachable or as being cold and unwelcoming. I knew a missionary family in Tunisia who, with minimal language facility, had a long-standing and effective ministry to nationals by the warmth of their personalities and home. Relationships are the practical key to ministry in the Arab world. The positive or negative reputation gained while one is struggling with cultural adaptation and language acquisition will, therefore, have a profound effect on one's long-term ministry. The essential pattern of open, friendly approachability in both personal and home atmosphere will largely be confirmed or negated during this initial preparation period.

The initial step of friendship evangelism should begin immediately upon entry into the target country. Arab-Muslims in general are eager for friendship with westerners and are curious about what they believe and how they practice it. Many communicate well enough in English and/or French that building of relationships can begin immediately, regardless of the degree of language proficiency. The casual contacts of everyday living will provide multiple opportunities for friendships, if we show ourselves open for such. We should be continually on the alert for those with whom God wants us to be forming relationships. We need to be careful to treat people as equals, not as "contacts" which we wish to exploit for our own ends.

Individuals quickly sense and are turned off by an attitude of superiority or professionalism in our seeking to share the Gospel with them.

We must realize, of course, as we strive to build open and friendly relationships, that there is a whole multitude of hustlers eagerly waiting to prey upon the naiveté of the foreigner and to exploit him/her for their own material ends. We should not be naïve in our friendliness. Encourage the legitimate desire to practice English, the curiosity concerning Christianity and the Bible, the natural love of discussion. Discourage the overt or covert request for help to get a passport or a job or lodging in Europe or North America. Discourage also the desire to help find a European or North-American wife. And be very cautious in offering or holding out hope of material aid. We should be generous, there are legitimate needs which God would have us help meet. But we need to avoid creating the impression that response to the message of Christ carries with it a virtual guarantee of an improvement in economic state. Exactly the opposite is likely to be true, and increasingly so as the church develops and opposition against it hardens.

The easiest way to avoid being exploited is to withdraw from the people of the land, to consort with Westerners, limiting contacts with nationals to “ministry forays” upon completion of which we withdraw once again into our separate world. But such an attitude will largely annul our effectiveness as church-planters. We should not make ourselves easy and needless prey to exploitation. But we will never develop a 100% sure instinct as to who is sincere in his spiritual search and who is using it as a means to other ends. We will be duped on numerous occasions. Making mistakes and being exploited is a price we will have to pay for developing an effective ministry in this part of the world. A colleague recently poured his life for months into discipling a newly-professed convert, only to have the fellow steal a sizable amount of money from his room one day and abruptly stop coming. So how does the missionary react? He continues to pour his life into discipling other young men, praying consistently for repentance and restoration for the one who robbed him.

As we concentrate on the developing of relationships, we need to be relatively high profile as to our existential experience of Christianity. There will be early and multiple opportunities to express what we believe and how it works in our lives. Practical testimony of what God is doing in our lives, working out problems, meeting needs that we face, will be an effective preparation to awaken the desire of a Muslim to know this same experience. I have met a baptized believer from the deep south of Morocco who began his spiritual pilgrimage through the challenge of seeing the relationships and the attitudes to life manifested in an expatriate Christian family for whom he worked for a period. His quest led him two years later to a national Christian in Casablanca who disciplined and then baptized him. We should avoid too early “preaching” of the Gospel in terms of emphasizing that this is the truth which the Muslim must accept in order to escape the dire consequences of unbelief. This is true, and an essential part of our message. But a too direct and abrupt approach is more likely to drive the hearer to a defense of his own religion than to serious consideration of the faith being presented to him. The facts of the Gospel can be as effectively communicated in terms of “this is what Christians believe”, as in terms of “this is what you must believe.” Personal application of those facts should then be made as the person’s interest develops and he/she begins to manifest spiritual concern. And we must remind ourselves again and again that effective application of the Gospel can only be made by the Holy Spirit. He knows best when and how to bring home personally to an individual the testimonial or doctrinal or applicational aspect of this message.

Our object in evangelism, after all, is not the mere imparting of the facts of the Gospel, but bringing the hearer to a meaningful step of faith. This “step” is more often a process in the Muslim world than it is an instantaneous crisis decision. A “profession of faith” from a North African who hears the Gospel in a friendship context is relatively easy to obtain. Experience proves that this is more often due to the innate cultural desire to avoid disagreeing with the friend than it is to a change of heart conviction. Even where the initial profession of faith has deepened into sincere committal of faith over a process of time, it has come to light months or years later that the expatriate missionary has considered the national to be a true believer a considerable time before the national has. This points up the importance of a private transaction between the individual and God. I very seldom ask a North African to make a decision and pray a prayer of acceptance of Christ in front of me. I seek to lead him to a clear understanding of the facts and implications of the Gospel. I may even suggest a model prayer which he can use as his prayer of

committal. Then I make it clear that the final step is between him and God. And then I entrust him to God the Holy Spirit who alone can regenerate a soul.

The fact that conversion is more often a process than a crisis in this part of the world also means that there is often no clear-cut line between evangelism and discipleship. Whereas the emphasis is obviously different, the one often blends into the other without a clear indication of just where in the process the disciple is.

The main goal of discipleship would be to develop such a relationship between the believer and his Lord and between the believer and other believers as to create the inner spiritual vitality and the intimacy of inter-personal relationships which are essential to the health of a local church. Assimilation of the Word and vital interaction with God, and with other believers, in prayer will be two chief means to that end.

We will obviously use some method to accomplish that purpose. There are a number of such available. Or you may come up with your own distinct method. Whatever method used should depend totally and emphasize continually the work of the Spirit in making it effective. With that condition the methods will vary, depending on individual style of ministry, individual gifts, and individual assessment of what will best bring the disciple to the desire goal.

As to relationship with God, the disciple must be brought to know HIM, not just to know about Him. Seeing God's work for forty years in the wilderness left the Israelites an unbelieving people, unqualified to enter into God's triumphal purpose for them. It is testified of Moses on the other hand that he "knew God's ways". And consequently "God spoke to him face to face as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11). The knowledge of God will lead to the total committal of oneself to Him. The prime goal of discipleship is this total commitment, which will give the Holy Spirit full liberty to reproduce the life of Christ within him/her, and manifest that life in relationships with other believers and to the world of unbelievers. Discipleship in this sense is a lifelong process in which each believer should be at any given time both a disciple and a discipler. The basic pattern of development in this process needs to be set early in the life of faith. Our goal in discipleship, therefore, is the establishing of a continuing pattern, not the final polishing of a perfect specimen.

This central relationship with God must have its outworking in the marketplace of everyday living. Biblical relationships with God will manifest themselves in biblical relationships with other humans, rather than in a monastery of isolation.

In the context of church planting, the first and most important category of relationships are those with fellow-believers. We have spoken earlier of the importance of commitment to the Body as well as to the Head. While North Africans are very sociable beings, innate mistrust of others tends to keep social relationships on a superficial level.

Discipleship must concentrate on developing relationships among believers to the level of commitment and cohesion required for a viable functioning church. Breakdown of inter-personal relationships among the members of a local fellowship is the greatest barrier to the establishing of churches that I have encountered.

Evangelism is usually more effective one-on-one or in very small groupings of those who already know and trust one another. But getting new believers acquainted and interacting with other believers should begin early in the discipleship process and needs to be one of its main emphases. As these relationships develop, we must encourage patterns of trust. Again we will find ourselves cast on the Holy Spirit to create these bonds between believers. The tendency is for the expatriate missionary to become the apex and fulcrum of fellowship lines. It seems easier for nationals to trust and bond to an expatriate than to other nationals. This pattern should be consistently counteracted.

The critical mass cohesion force will only be reached as strong lines of national-national relationships are developed. As means to that end we should encourage interaction among believers living geographically near to each other; we should capitalize on natural friendship relationships which may already exist (inquirers often come in twos); we should create situations, perhaps in our own homes initially, but

increasingly in national homes, where believers can relate to one another on an informal, non-meeting basis.

In the repressive and antagonistic atmosphere surrounding believers in an Islamic society, there is constant danger of believers, individually and in small sub-groupings, developing isolationist attitudes. Self-preservation and security become higher priorities than evangelism and church growth, and a “ghetto community” mentality results. Biblical relationships with non-believers must therefore also be an integral part of the discipleship process. I do not encourage new believers from Islam to go and tell everyone immediately of their new faith. I have seen this to be counter-productive, both in the life of the believer and in his/her relationships with family and friends. When I first met A., who had professed faith through Correspondence Courses, he poured out a sad tale of continually deteriorating relationships with the other members of his family as he tried to share with them the news of Christ. He was obviously hoping that I had come to remove him from that uncomfortable situation and take him home with me. I listened sympathetically, then advised him to stop trying verbally to convince his family of the rightness of his new faith, to concentrate instead on being loving and helpful. I suggested that his family would likely be much more impressed by the positive transformation of his character and attitude in the home than they would be his efforts to convince them of the truth of the Gospel. Then I left, wondering whether I would ever see or hear of A. again. A few weeks later I received a letter from him, thanking me for my counsel, and testifying to a marked improvement in relationships with the family. “in fact,” he said, “my brother has begun to read the Gospel, and would like to talk to you the next time you come.

I emphasize Matt. 5:13-16 as the first principle, encouraging the new believer to return to his family and social environment as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Neither of these crucial aspects of discipleship/relationship to the surrounding world is primarily dependent on verbal witness. Salt exercises its savoring influence quietly and unobtrusively, without being either seen or heard. Light exercises its beneficial influence in a very visible, but still non-verbal, manner. The emphasis is on “good works.” I emphasize the testimony of transformation in attitudes, speech, actions, and reactions as prerequisite to verbal testimony of faith. This does not mean that we advocate a mere “presence witness.” On the basis of 1 Peter 3:15,16, I teach that the testimony of life will prepare the way for effective testimony of lip. As family and friends notice the change in the life of the new believer, questions will be asked which will give a natural platform for sharing of the faith. This procedure has avoided the ostracism of new believers from their families and friends. And in a number of instances it has led to the subsequent conversion of other family members and/or friends. Ayachi had just professed faith and began enthusiastically sharing that fact with friends and family. The reaction was predictably negative. Ayachi was not firmly enough grounded in belief and character to weather the storm, and totally disappeared from the Christian scene.

Since the discipleship process emphasized relationships so as to build the cohesive and mutually edifying organic structures necessary to a viable church, believers will be learning during this process how to function as a body, even though they may not yet see themselves as a church.

At the same time, a process of forming leaders for the church will also be taking place. Discipling is the logical context in which leadership aspirations, qualities, and gifts will appear. As these become evident there is need for a more specialized training ministry concentrating on potential leadership. The discipleship ministry will be continued to all believers at the same time.

Leadership training should begin with the selection of a leadership team of two or more, depending on the size of the believing community and the number available for leadership. The church-planter should then spend the major part of his time with this team, while they increasingly assume major responsibility for discipling of others. This discipling, in fact, would be an integral part of their training.

The qualities which the New Testament requires in church leaders are outlined in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Tit. 1:5-8. Leadership training should concentrate on the inculcation of these qualities in order to form scripturally-qualified leaders. Leadership training is an active process, not merely a passive hope that some day we will discover someone in whom these qualities are evident.

The principles of the above-mentioned passages can be broken down into three categories of development in the leaders' lives, i.e. pastoral character (moral qualities), pastoral heart (attitudes), and pastoral skills (abilities). The Scriptures place a greater emphasis on character and attitudes than on knowledge and skills. Our leadership training should do the same.

One of the most critical steps in church-planting is the transfer of responsibility from the church-planter to the local leaders. Doing this too soon, too late, not at all, or in the wrong way may frustrate the emergence of a viable church.

The church-planter should provide occasion for each prospective elder to exercise each of the different responsibilities of an elder (teaching, preaching, counseling, organizing, disciplining, etc.), under his own guidance and supervision with subsequent evaluation. The phrase "not a novice" in 1 Tim. 3:6 indicates the necessity for previous practical experience before an individual begins to function officially as an elder.

During the process of leadership training the community of believers will have been meeting together in some manner. Providing opportunities for exercising the responsibilities will be greatly enhanced by small house gatherings, each one needing the exercise of such leadership. This will provide natural rather than artificial situations.

A slight digression on the importance of house groups to the above-proposed leadership pattern may be helpful here. We have mentioned earlier that the size and type of believers' meetings should be that which will meet the corporate needs of worship and edification while at the same time being viable within the socio-cultural setting of the believing community.

As westerners, we tend to be too highly meeting-oriented and to push the believers too quickly into too highly-structured and formal church meetings. The normal pattern set in North Africa has been to gather believers as soon as possible into the expatriate church-planter's home for worship and edification meetings. As the group grows, the church-planter seeks increasingly to involve prospective national leaders in the administration of and ministry to the group. The long-range goal is that the group will someday transfer to national homes or to an independent meeting place under national leadership. I have seen this pattern to be largely self-defeating. Patterns such as hymn-singing are established which come to be regarded as essential to a church meeting, but are not reproducible in national homes under national leadership. National leaders tend to feel permanently inferior to the expatriate professional. Groups meeting in missionary homes have disintegrated upon the departure of the missionary. A notable exception may be the church in Algiers. From meeting in the Bonne Nouvelle, an independent meeting place, the church has apparently transferred successfully to meeting in several different national homes.

My own conviction is that the only viable future for the church in the Arab-Muslim world is a multiplicity of small house groups of from ten to twenty members. Experience indicates the wisdom of beginning church meetings in national homes under national leadership. This will both encourage quicker assumption of responsibility by national elders and avoid the necessity of eventual transfer of meeting place(s). So as to avoid calling premature and unnecessary attention to these home gatherings, I advocate that they be composed entirely of national believers. The normal elders of the church would then be the heads of the households in which the church met. The expatriate church-planter or church-planting team can have a significant input by individual and small-group discipleship and leadership-training sessions, while leaving the church group as such to meet on its own.

The culminating step in the establishment of a functioning autonomous local church is the investiture of the designated leaders with full responsibility and authority by some means acceptable to and recognized by all concerned (Acts 14:23). As low key and informal a designation as possible will lessen the vulnerability of the leaders in periods of intense opposition. Muslim authorities will be looking for the political implications of such a grouping of people, and will be concerned to discover the ringleaders. Formally-appointed leaders are more easily discovered and therefore in more jeopardy. Informal, relatively non-structured organization and leadership makes a church less vulnerable to hostile action against it. There must, however, be general recognition and acceptance within a church group of those who are in leadership.

Once local leadership is functioning, the church-planter would assume an advisory role, concentrating his prime efforts on the forming of a new church or churches. As Paul did with the churches of the New Testament, he should maintain his link with the just-established autonomous church by correspondence, occasional visits, and temporary delegates.

In the pattern suggested above, i.e. multiple house grouping forming the cellular structure of the local church, the relationship of the church-planter to that local church will be primarily with the leadership group ministering to those groupings, rather than with the house gatherings as such. This pattern should be established from the outset of the house meetings. This leadership core will then provide the chief liaison linking between groups, and will give the church-planter his prime opportunity for input to the church's being established on a sound scriptural basis. He should, however, be careful to let the house groupings with their national leaders decide matters concerning arrangements, furnishing of meeting rooms, and format of meetings.

The danger of fragmentation will always be present in a decentralized church such as we have proposed. Several measures can be taken to guard against this. The regular meeting of group leaders among themselves will foster a united family spirit among groupings. Visiting among members of different groups outside of meeting times should be strongly encouraged. Special occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, or national holidays should be utilized to have larger gatherings comprising several smaller house groupings. Holding such gatherings on occasions such as those listed will place them in a culturally understandable and acceptable mold. They will therefore be much less risky to the Christian community. An occasional forest or beach party could also be a non-volatile setting for a larger gathering.