

The Left Side of the Graph

by Clyde Meador

Were John and Jane disobedient to the Lord's calling? Did they fail to listen to the Lord's direction for their work? Did the Lord not use them? Why is there not yet a church planting movement among the people group they have been seeking to reach?

For the last several years, our organization, as well as many other like-minded agencies, has emphasized church planting movements (CPMs). Church planting movements are those dramatic movements of God when the numbers of believers and churches are rapidly multiplying. The book *Church Planting Movements* (Wigtake Resources, 2004), by Dr. David Garrison, is the definitive work on CPMs. He defines a church planting movement as "a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment."

Certainly all personnel have a great desire to see great numbers of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ and to see many, many churches started. They are giving their lives to the expansion of the Kingdom as they seek to be faithful cross-cultural witnesses.

However, we who are leaders have talked so much about CPMs that sometimes we have caused personnel who are not in the midst of a CPM to feel that they are second-class missionaries, or that they are not adequately carrying out their responsibilities. Yet certainly the great majority of personnel – probably 98 per cent or more – are not yet experiencing a CPM among the population whom they are seeking to reach.

For instance, the missionaries of our organization are working among approximately 1,200 people groups. Yet, there are fewer than thirty ongoing church planting movements among those people groups. These personnel are living on the left side of the graph.

When we draw a graphic representation of a church planting movement, we usually choose to use a beginning date only a very few years before the CPM begins to take off. However, most church planting movements have a "left side of the graph" lasting 20 or 30 or even 100 years or more. That ignored left side of the graph represents many years of faithful labor by often-unheralded servants of the Lord.

I have had the privilege of witnessing a few of the great movements in recent decades. One of the most dramatic church planting movements in Asia has grown to a reported 900,000 believers, with the number of house churches possibly moving toward 100,000. This movement began in the early 90's, with a major focal point being a group of 28 or 29 churches. The graph of that CPM is thrilling.

Yet it is essential that we realize that those 28 or 29 churches were the result of almost one hundred years of faithful service by a small group of personnel from a European Baptist sending agency. The left side of the graph was long for that people group, and foundational for what was to come. That kind of history is typical in many church planting movements.

Also in Asia, a smaller church planting movement among a cluster of related people groups among whom I have worked grew from 100 churches to more than 3,000 churches, in a 15-year period. That growth was built upon a foundation begun by Baptist personnel in 1914. And other evangelicals had worked in that area for many years prior, even in the 19th century. The left side of the graph was long. Personnel and especially local believers had worked faithfully for a long time. Then the day came when God gave the harvest, and a church planting movement began.

When a new people group or other lost population is first entered by those who would plant the Gospel in that place, there is much foundational work to be done. The fields must be cleared of rocks - of obstacles which sometimes make sharing the Gospel an almost impossible task. The ground must be plowed, as pre-evangelism efforts prepare people to hear the Good News.

The seed of the Gospel must be faithfully, massively, effectively planted. Personnel build relationships and seek to sow the seeds of Truth among those whom they meet. And that seed must be watered by the blood, sweat, and tears of His servants.

Certainly there are some people groups among whom the left side of the graph represents a very short period of time, with the Gospel quickly taking root and believers emerging and churches being planted. We rejoice when that is the case, knowing that the Lord has chosen to work in a particular way among those people. However, in many – if not most – situations, that is not the case. Our experience is that most CPMs take a long period of cultivation, of

relationship development, and credibility building before the harvest time for that people group comes.

Paul says: *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor."* I Corinthians 3:6-8 (ESV)

One field leader has said that we have talked so much about a "home run," we have made it seem that a "single" or a "sacrifice fly" is not important. Such an impression has not been intended, nor is it biblical. A missionary faithfully serving among a lost population must not be looked down upon because there is not yet a CPM among those with whom he or she works.

No personnel can bring about a church planting movement. It is God who moves in the hearts of men and women to respond to Him. It is He who gives the increase. While we can, and must, seek to carry out those best practices that have been demonstrated to best prepare the way for a church planting movement, and we can, and must, avoid those practices that have been demonstrated to hinder the development and continuation of a church planting movement, God is the One who brings about a CPM. As followers of Christ, we must be faithful and obedient to carry out our part in the watering and planting. We must trust that the Lord will use that faithfulness as He brings people to Himself. Knowing that it is God who moves, what is the role of the missionary to be while serving in the left side of the graph, in the watering and planting? Documented CPMs have common characteristics: extraordinary prayer; abundant evangelism / seed-sowing; the intentional planting of reproducing churches; an emphasis on the authority of God's Word; dependence upon local leadership; reliance upon lay leadership; planting of healthy house churches, which plant other churches; and rapid reproduction of churches. (Church Planting Movements, pp. 172 ff.) It is essential that our personnel be faithful in the kinds of things that have been demonstrated to be used of God to lead to a church planting movement.

It is of great importance that anyone serving in the left side of the graph, in the pre-CPM phase of work among a lost population, faithfully practice the right things. God graciously uses us as He works. He has given to us individually and corporately specific gifts and talents that we are to contribute to His work. The faithful practice of those elements of CPM strategy constitutes the plowing and planting and watering that God uses as He brings about a great harvest. Likewise, it is essential that personnel serving in the left side of the graph carefully avoid practices that have been demonstrated to hinder the development of a church planting movement. Such practices, for example, include a reliance on outside subsidy; and, introducing non-indigenous cultural practices, rather than relying on biblical principles and the application of those principles to the local culture.

In avoiding practices that hinder CPMs, and faithfully practicing those principles that God uses in bringing about harvest, the missionary is doing the right things to prepare the way for God to shorten the period of the left side of the graph, and bring about a beautiful church planting movement. If personnel practice those things that hinder, and do not faithfully carry out those practices that God uses in bringing about a CPM, the left side of the graph may be lengthened, and one or more generations may fail to experience a great movement of God among their people group. At the same time, no missionary should ever be satisfied and complacent with being on the left side of the graph. We should not be satisfied when we are not yet seeing large numbers of people coming to faith, and many new churches being started. That lack of complacency will spur us to continually evaluate and adjust our work, making certain we are doing the right things.

Most of our personnel are serving on the left side of the graph today. They are not to be ashamed or relegated to second-class status because they are not experiencing a church planting movement. The work of picking up rocks and plowing and planting and watering is a work to be honored. And we must always remember that it is God who gives the harvest!

In the beginning of this article, we asked about the lack of a CPM in John and Jane's work. John and Jane have been doing the right things, following the principles that God uses in bringing about a CPM, and avoiding practices that hinder a CPM. We are thankful for their faithful service. Their responsibility is continued plowing and planting and watering, leaving the growth, the harvest, in God's hands.

It is prior to the outbreak of a church planting movement that the missionary's presence is so desperately needed. And it is while serving in the left side of the graph that personnel must most faithfully plow and sow and water, following the best practices possible. We who are leaders affirm all who are faithfully serving in the left side of the graph. They do not yet see the blessing of harvest, yet they consistently practice the right missiological principles, trusting that in His time God will bring about a church planting movement that will glorify Him.

