

NORTHWEST GRADUATE SCHOOL

A GATHERING OF NATIONS:  
ESTABLISHING ETHNIC CHRISTIAN CHURCHES WITHIN A WESTERN  
CULTURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
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BY

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This work is fondly dedicated to the loving memory of my precious wife, Alenoosh, whose encouragement and love was a gift from God to stir my own growth and develop my vision for evangelism.

This work is also dedicated to my children, Natasha and Christopher. Their ability to stand and be strong after the passing of their mother has been a tremendous testimony to the power of God's miraculous love under extreme conditions.

Save us, O Lord our God,  
And gather us from the nations,  
That we may give thanks to your holy name  
And glory in your praise.

(Psalm 106:47)

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## FOREWORD

It is with great joy that I write these words in preface to this work by Rev. Patrick Safarian, a dear friend and colleague in reaching a lost world.

I have known Pastor Patrick for seventeen years. I know his parents, who are people of character and have served many both in Iran as well as the US as a physician and teacher. I was a friend to Alenoosh - Patrick's wife and mother of his two children - and Alenoosh's family, before I came to know Patrick.

Patrick is an extraordinary person. When he met the Lord, he dedicated himself to Him totally. He did not hold anything back. For that reason, the Lord has helped him to excel in everything. He is very much respected in the aerospace industry and is sought out by the FAA, aerospace companies as well as Institutions of higher education. He is loved and respected not only in American, Armenian and Persian churches, but wherever he goes.

Patrick is a caring father to his children, loving pastor to his flocks, a dedicated brother to his colleagues in the ministry and a true friend in all situations. He serves without holding back and is a leader that leads by being an example.

Patrick has not only established the Iranian church and the Armenian fellowship in Seattle, Washington, but is deeply involved in ministry to Iranians in Vancouver, Canada as well. He has encouraged and helped Iranian churches in Iran and other places. He and the churches that he gives leadership to are heavily involved in ministry in Armenia, Nagorno Karabagh, and the Kurdish world. One of the projects with which he and his

Armenian congregation have been involved is the construction of a beautiful church building in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, which seats 1,200 people.

I am glad that Pastor Patrick has written his doctoral dissertation on "A Gathering of Nations: Establishing Ethnic Christian Churches within a Western Culture". He is writing from experience. He knows what he is talking about. The churches that he has established, the quality of his leaders and members are proofs that what he has accomplished could be multiplied many times throughout the US. I firmly believe in foreign missions. Patrick believes in foreign missions, too. But we both believe that God has brought the mission field to our backyard. We can reach the world just in our neighborhood. The church in America has a unique chance to touch the world and change it by reaching those who have come to us from the four corners of the world. I believe that Pastor Patrick Safarian has a very serious and timely message to share with us. My prayer is that the church would take serious note of this message and act upon it.

It is a great joy for me to recommend this book to the reader.

Yours in reaching a world in need,

Rev. Luke Yeghnazar, Senior Pastor  
Iranian Church of Los Angeles

## PREFACE

The document that follows is biblically centered and highly evangelical in its tone and thematic emphasis. This approach is taken purposely because the danger actually lies in the under-emphasis of these two fundamentals. Most chapters are replete with biblical foundations, which may be often considered almost elementary. Also, most chapters carry a strong message of evangelism and how to apply evangelistic principles to the building of an ethnic church at all stages.

To build a church, especially a uniquely missiomed church, on anything but a recipe right from the Bible, is folly. To build any church without an end-game strategy of evangelism is ultimately pointless as well as unbiblical. We are at a new stage in worldwide evangelism. It will likely be carried out in the largely unreached 10/40 region by people who are not only Christian missionaries but also missionaries who are knowledgeable of the language and culture. It is the opinion of the author that the emphasis by missionaries operating in this region must turn much more toward evangelism and less to social programs.

Therefore, this dissertation is aimed less at the social and administrative elements of building an ethnic church and much more at fulfilling the Great Commission via the unique and timely opportunity we have via the ethnic church.

Most people appreciate the real value of practical experience as opposed to the academic theory. This point is important and critical to understanding the opinions

expressed throughout the dissertation. The subject was researched for my needs and the benefit of my readers. But more importantly it was built on a foundation of God given experience as a preacher, an evangelist, and as God's instrument in establishing two ethnic churches.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If this work is of value to any reader, it is because of God's grace and His patience in using an unworthy vessel like me. The content of this work is the result of lessons learned on the potter's wheel, at times painful and frightening but always necessary. It is truly a mystery to me why God has chosen to place his eternal treasure of the gospel and its result of salvation in such frail earthen pots, but I am nevertheless eternally grateful.

Additionally, I owe a debt of gratitude to my late wife, Alenoosh, who was a constant source of encouragement and one of God's greatest gifts to me in the first fifteen years of my ministry. God continues to teach me about Himself after her sudden passing.

Many men and women have stood in the gap and prayed for me. Others have been role models and mentors throughout my life. First and foremost are my parents Dr. Jerome and Mrs. Eugenie Safarian, who have always been my role models for honesty, hard work and a humble walk. I am grateful to my brother Mr. Rodrick Safarian for always supporting me emotionally, especially after my wife's departure.

I am especially grateful to my dear friend and co-minister Mr. Greg Nanadjanians for introducing me to the Lord. I will be for life indebted to him for introducing me to Christ and putting up with me during the unsaved period of our friendship. I am also grateful to Rev. Ezra Stepanian, my first pastor, who taught me how to love lost souls and how to witness to them.

In my ministry, my mentor for twelve years was a theologian, former seminary president in Pakistan and a seasoned pastor, the late Dr. Nazir Yusaf. His efforts in preaching the gospel to Armenians and in pastoring the Seattle area Iranians were appreciated by many. I thank God for placing him in my life to prepare me for His work.

It has been my utmost honor and privilege to have Rev. Luke Yeghnazar's deep friendship. He has been a friend who has stuck closer than a brother and a mentor who has never ceased encouraging me in all aspects of the ministry. Thank you, Luke.

I thank the many pastors at Overlake Christian Church for helping me in my ministry. One of these pastors was Dr. Tom Adelsman, who encouraged me to begin my seminary studies at Northwest Graduate School of Ministry, and who as my former advisor there suggested the subject of this dissertation.

As the responsibility of writing this dissertation drew closer, God sent me Mr. Charles Herrick. He came along side me like an age old friend and made his years of professional writing experience and knowledge fully available to me. He constantly helped me formulate my thoughts and write them in a coherent fashion while leaving them wholly my own. He shares my desire to promulgate the gospel throughout Iran and I believe our partnership to reach the lost souls around the world has just started. I am looking forward to years of partnership.

To the Elders and members of Iranian Christian Church in Seattle and the Armenian congregation, thank you so much for allowing me and encouraging me to follow the call of God on my life. I could have not asked for a more precious group of people to have the privilege of serving. Thank you.

Lastly I thank my beloved children Natasha and Christopher, the two treasures that God has entrusted in my hands. I thank God for your extreme patience as I am always available for others and rarely have sufficient time for you. I pray that the Lord instills in you the passion that He has instilled in your parents to reach your generation for the King of kings, Jesus Christ.

## ABSTRACT

In the midst of the globalization of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is easy to get caught up and forget that the Lord has commissioned the church to make disciples of all the nations. Even though Christianity is by far the most global and multicultural religion today, frequently in the midst of hostile cultures, there is still much more work to be accomplished to fulfill the Great Commission. These challenges have actually presented unique advantages to the church that should not be overlooked. The people from many of the unreached countries, which are often anti-Christian, repressive societies, have come to the Western world. These ethnic people are prime candidates for ethnic Christians to reach their own people through evangelism and discipleship. Despite the need, there are not enough churches working to create a targeted program to reach out to these unreached immigrants. Surprisingly, in a society that likes to celebrate diversity, these ethnic people, who can be evangelized with minimal resources, remain mostly unchurched.

This dissertation intends to present at least a stepping stone to begin discipleship programs for the unreached ethnic groups in the Western world today. The author contends that true celebration of diversity comes when we know that our neighbors of different cultures also know the Truth, and that the Truth has set *them* free as well.

The author has been involved in starting two ethnic congregations and works within a network of ethnic church planters. Using his experience and knowledge he demonstrates how it is possible to go even further than mere evangelism of few individuals and their integration into the Western churches. The dissertation explores the

idea of planting ethnic churches, with a strong emphasis on evangelism and discipleship, and principles for their growth throughout different stages.

The author concludes that establishing ethnic churches in the Western culture will do more than discipling the immigrants of that ethnic group in a locality. His experience proves that the individuals that are saved through the ministries of the ethnic congregations turn out to be uniquely capable of evangelizing and discipling the unreached people of the same ethnicity in the West as well as abroad. In Addition, the involvement of these individuals, with unique cultural experience, and their fellowship in the body of Christ will be the spiritual boost that the Western world needs in 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## INTRODUCTION

Immigrant and ethnic Americans, and specifically those who come from largely repressive, often anti-Christian societies, offer a critical challenge to the Western Christian establishment. While abundant in number and so visible in today's diverse society, they are a largely unreached people. In our attempt to fulfill the Great Commission we have overlooked those of foreign extraction who are nonetheless our neighbors. This document is an attempt to outline the nature of this unique cultural challenge and then provide both a conceptual and practical approach to addressing it as a wonderful opportunity.

Since we will consider only those national cultures wherein the gospel has been repressed, some basic characteristics of these cultures should be provided. The cultures envisioned as the model for present discussion and future application will have most or all of the following characteristics:

1. The prevailing political powers have acted aggressively to suppress or destroy the gospel and/or its adherents.
2. Other religions or atheism dominate the culture. Those influenced by this syncretistic dominance include large churches with a Christian appearance and structure, but which have become secular and political in their nature as opposed to biblical and evangelical.
3. The individuals from this culture speak or prefer a language other than English.
4. Western culture, especially the American culture, may be something they are aware of or have even experienced tangentially, but it is not something with which they have any real familiarity.

Many ethnic Americans feel isolated and desire greatly to be accepted in the mainstream of our culture. Still, they hold dearly to their customs, their speech and their familiar relationships. It often takes two generations or more for immigrants to fully assimilate. In this critical time, it will be determined as to just what they will assimilate into. By the grace of God and through the work of those who are aware of this problem and know what to do about it, they will assimilate into the body of Christ in this country and not simply into secular society. Materialism beckons aloud to those coming from impoverished nations. We must make the voice of God sound above that siren call and we must get there first before “things” rise in importance above the Truth in His word.

Our faith touches more than just a part of our lives. As human beings, created in God’s image, we are rather complex in our nature. One simple way of dividing up this complex creation is to think about it as the outer and the inner person. What we believe determines the way we think, the way we feel, and the way that we act and respond to our surroundings. These elements combined with our upbringing and our cultural aspects constitute our make up.

To penetrate someone’s world and reach out to him or her with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must communicate with the total person. Christ Himself, being God, had to enter into our setting and culture to communicate with us effectively. As a perfect example, Christ left us a legacy and established a model to follow in evangelism and disciple-making. Regarding His passion for reaching the lost, we see Him travel city by city spreading the Good News of the Kingdom of God, not allowing anything to deter Him from His goal of laying down His life for all of us. The Apostle Paul, following that passion, eagerly tells the church in Rome: “I am obligated both to Greeks and non-

Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.” (Rom. 1:14, 15) To the church in Corinth he writes: “Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.” (1 Cor. 9:16) He then expresses to the Corinthians his attitude toward preaching the gospel cross-culturally and breaking down the walls that have separated us from each other:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law ..., so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law ..., so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

These verses summarize the model that the Apostle Paul followed. In return, he asks us to follow *his* model: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Cor. 11:1)

*Culture* is defined by Adam and Jessica Kuper as “the social practices, expressive forms, and language use through which meanings are constituted, invoked and often contested in human societies.”<sup>1</sup> Along with this definition, there are beliefs, customs, arts, and institutions of a society at a given time which plays a vital role in defining the culture of a group of people.<sup>2</sup> People of a specific culture are bound to some beliefs, causing some customs to be acceptable and naturally some to be unacceptable. To each one of us, a set of principles constitutes our way of thinking and our beliefs. These principles need to be brought into line with the Word of God. Based on practical and biblical observations, we see that the best way to accomplish this transformation is to first penetrate a person’s culture (or world) and help that person change from the inside out.

Individuals from the ethnic groups described above, living in North America, are among the most unreached people in the world. Despite the need, there are not enough churches working to create a targeted program to reach out to the unreached immigrants. Some, at best, have classes for the immigrants to learn the English language. Surprisingly, in a society that claims to be politically correct and likes to celebrate diversity, these ethnic people, who can be evangelized with minimal resources, remain mostly unreached.

In the early church the Apostles faced a real problem. While the church was increasing in number "...the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."(Acts 6:1) The twelve Apostles did not panic. They knew that there would be a spiritual solution for their seemingly fleshly problem. They appointed men, but not ordinary men. They were "full of the Spirit and wisdom." (Acts 6:3) They were turned loose to be responsible for taking care of the matter. This approach led the Apostles to form, in an innovative manner, the office of Deacon. Later, Paul provides qualifications for people that would like to assume this responsibility.

I strongly believe that we are at a junction in time in Western culture such that, much like the Apostles of the first century church, we need to come up with a spiritual strategy to the challenge of reaching out to ethnic groups among us. The mission field has moved to our doorstep and we should avail ourselves of this unique and historic circumstance.

This dissertation intends to present at least a stepping stone to begin discipleship programs for the unreached ethnic groups among us. True celebration of diversity comes

when we know that our neighbors of different cultures also know the Truth, and that the Truth has set *them* free as well. I do not take credit for what the Lord has done through this servant and his colleague, since only He knows that I am perhaps least worthy or capable of this task in which he has graciously involved me.

My prayer is that the Lord would raise up Davids who are after God's own heart and who will step out of their comfort zone to do everything God wants them to do. These people can shine for God when they serve Him and His purposes in their own generation, as David pleased God. (Acts 13:22)

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper, *The Social Science Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 1996), 156.
2. *Ibid.*, 161.

## CHAPTER 1

### BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL BASIS FOR BUILDING ETHNIC CHURCHES

#### **From Abraham to Jesus Christ**

In Genesis, God called Abraham to leave his father's home for a promise, a promise in which not only he but also all the nations on the earth would be blessed. (Gen 12:1-3) God promised Abraham that through his Seed all nations would receive access to enter a place that "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived" for that is "what God has prepared for those who love Him." (Isa. 64:4, 65:17, 1 Cor. 2:9) This Seed, according to the New Testament, is the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> (Gal. 3:16)

Even though God has promised certain earthly blessings for the Jewish nation, God ultimately will shower His blessings on all the nations equally. "For God does not show favoritism." (Rom. 2:11) In obedience to God, Abraham, the friend of God and the father of the believers, acted on faith and left his homeland for a place that God was to show him, a place that his Seed was to be introduced to the nations of the world some four millennia later. To those attentive to the Old Testament prophecies, it was not surprising that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which appropriately means "house of bread," since Christ is the Bread of Life for all mankind.

The primary focus of Christ's early ministry was the proclamation of the gospel of God's Kingdom to the Jewish nation. However, when the Jewish leaders rejected Him, He extended His invitation to the people of all the nations. Jewish rejection and gentile

invitation was also in accordance with the Old Testament prophecies. These events are also introduced in the transitional passage from Chapter 12 to Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew, where the text reads, “That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake” (Matt. 13:1), and culminate in the parable of the “wedding banquet” in Matthew 22. It is noteworthy that during His early ministry Jesus was moved by the faith of the Gentiles in two recorded instances, despite his focus on the Jews. In both instances He immediately acknowledged His surprise and appreciation for the “great faith” that the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman demonstrated. (Matt. 8:10, 15:28) What Christ was seeking from the Jewish nation, who had had Moses and the prophets, was faith in God. Nothing else moved Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The Kingdom that He introduced is much bigger than anything else in this world. This Kingdom is bigger than all the angels, all the people and all that is contained in the visible and invisible world put together. This is God’s Kingdom, where He rules with all His majesty and glory and His perfect will is done all the time. No one can enter this kingdom by an individual’s works and efforts; no not even one. But by God’s love and grace, which was demonstrated on the cross of Calvary, the door to this kingdom was opened to all nations.<sup>3</sup> Everyone from every tongue and every tribe can enter this kingdom as long as he or she enters by faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.<sup>4</sup>

During His earthly ministry, Jesus chose twelve disciples and poured Himself into them. For three years He taught them all they needed to know about His Kingdom and its mysteries. Then He charged them to take the message of His Kingdom to the four corners of the earth and to preach it to all the nations; so that those nations and peoples might be saved and become His followers. He commissioned His disciples and equipped them with

the Holy Spirit; telling them to "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:19, 20)

Just before He ascended to heaven, Jesus reminded them of the task before them, this time with more specifics. They were to start preaching and teaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God to all the people in Jerusalem, then in all Judea and Samaria, and to continue to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8) Their audience was going to be from every nation, every ethnicity and every people group in every language. They were not to learn a new language, nor to get acquainted with a new culture. They were not to learn apologetics, but to go and to preach the gospel. His promise to them was that He would be with them "...always, to the very end of the age." (Matt. 28:20)

### **Apostolic Foundations**

On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended over the church, this seemingly impossible task suddenly became possible. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Peter the Apostle preached the first sermon to a large congregation of Jewish immigrants. On that day, three thousand people were cut to the heart, asking, "Brothers, what should we do?" (Acts 2:37) The answer was simple: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." (Acts 2:38) These Jews had migrated from thirteen different regions of the civilized world at the time to reside in Jerusalem. This way the gospel would become known by people of various tongues. The book of Acts suggest that it was the 'Hellenists' (Greek speaking Jewish Christians) who were scattered by the persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen

who first began to preach to gentiles en mass and to welcome them into the church. (Acts 8:4, 11:19-21) This was the start of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.<sup>5</sup>

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus told His disciples that the timing of His return would happen once the gospel was actively preached to the nations around the world: “And this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matt. 24:14)<sup>6</sup> Thus, the history of the world would not be complete until the gospel was proclaimed to all nations as a testimony to all people.<sup>7</sup> In the writings of the New Testament authors we see that the Apostles, including Paul, were under the impression that Christ’s return could have taken place in their lifetime. They were determined to complete the task at hand, and join the Bride Groom to live with Him in the Celestial Jerusalem. But their time did not allow the completion of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Today, more than ever, the church is eagerly waiting for the return of the Bride Groom, but what is she doing to bring that day to pass? It is clear we are to work toward that end and further that we can influence when the Parousia will take place. Apostle Peter says: “...What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming...” (2 Pet. 3:11 and 12)

Christ has a master plan to build His Church. The foundation of this building is Christ the “Rock.” In this master plan He is also the “Chief Cornerstone.” (Eph. 2:20) To complete the building, Christ uses the believers as the “living stones.” (1 Pet. 2:5) This building is joined together in Christ and rises to become a holy temple in which God dwells by His Spirit. (Eph. 2:21, 22) It is in this building that God fulfills His promise to Abraham.<sup>8</sup> God takes people of different nationalities and creates a new nation, a holy

nation unto Him, and in this building He makes them one in Christ. Furthermore, they no longer are citizens of this world, but fellow citizens of the Heavenly Jerusalem and members of God's household. In fact, they are "aliens and strangers in the world." (1 Pet. 2:11)

These living stones come from all four corners of this world and from all walks of life.<sup>9</sup> People from every nation, tribe, ethnicity and language join together in this holy temple of God. The people of God, represented by the twenty-four elders, according to John's vision recorded in fifth chapter of the Book of Revelation, referring to the Bride Groom, will sing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on earth." (Rev. 5:9)

Disciples of Jesus took their commissioning by the Master very seriously.<sup>10</sup> Most of them carried on their calling to the point of martyrdom. Several of them were put to the most cruel and shameful deaths; for example, Peter was crucified in Rome near the St. Peter's Church, in Vatican, Rome. Andrew was purported to have suffered on a decussate cross for days and did not stop praising God and preaching the gospel all the while he was dying. It is generally believed that he was bound, not nailed, to the cross, in order to prolong his suffering.<sup>11</sup> Paul wrote several of his epistles to the churches and to one individual from his prison cell, all the while witnessing to the prison guards. (Phil. 4:22) Paul's combined letters constitute nearly half of the New Testament books.

Christ's disciples traveled most of the populated world known to them in their time and personally preached the gospel to the people from every nation. A popular

legend ascribes to Thaddeus and Bartholomew evangelization as far north as Armenia where they preached the gospel and eventually were put to death by the Armenian king.<sup>12</sup> This traditional belief was noted recently when the Pope sent two plaques commemorating their martyred apostleship to the Armenians. Second century tradition holds that the Apostle Thomas preached in Persia and India and after martyrdom is buried in Edessa.<sup>13</sup> The Apostle Paul traveled throughout the Middle East, Europe and Asia Minor repeatedly. He went to Rome on his fourth and final missionary journey and spent the last days of his life there.

Not much is known about the fate of Christ's twelve Apostles from the Bible, with the exception of James, the brother of John, whom King Herod put to death by the sword. (Acts 12:2) However, the Bible provides us sufficient detail to allow us to learn the life and the ministry of a disciple of Christ. Paul's Epistles, and sometimes the letters of others, are windows that assist us to understand his approach to missiology and evangelism and to use it as a model. Without a doubt, after Christ, Paul ranks highest in being influential in spreading the gospel throughout the world.<sup>14</sup> Several books are written on Paul's strategic approach to missions. Paul's obedience to the Holy Spirit by not continuing in Asia Minor, but rather accepting the Macedonian call, could be the most fascinating part of his ministry. (Acts 16:9) According to Dr. Martin Robinson, professor of Gospel and Culture at Northwest Graduate School of Ministry, this single move could be why Christianity is still alive in the world. All the other regions that Paul and his entourage had evangelized went under the reign of Islamic rulers after the rise of Islam in seventh century. Paul had no way to foreknow the implications of his obedience, and how it fit into God's strategic plan – neither do we.

Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul penned the most authoritative sources of direction for the church to carry out the essential principles that Christ set for His church. Paul's epistles, along with the ones from the other Apostles, teach us a great deal about the approach the first century Christians took in reaching the lost world. The nuggets left behind in the epistles from Paul alone provide a rich source of inspiration and strategy for us to embrace and follow.

Tailored preaching of the universal gospel to the different nations has its roots first in the gospels and later in the Pauline letters. As we know today, each gospel is written with different emphasis for a different people group.<sup>15</sup> The Gospel of Matthew communicated the gospel of the Kingdom of God through a carefully selected series of Old Testament quotations. Matthew documented claims of Jesus Christ to be the Messiah, an emphasis of primary importance to a Jewish audience. Old Testament quotations used as proof for Jesus to be the Messiah are not interesting to a Roman or a Greek audience. The Gospels according to Mark and Luke came side by side and completed the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospel according to John then further provided the full view of the personality of Christ for every reader.

As the Gospels were written to different people groups, Paul also wrote letters to meet the needs of different people groups living in different localities. Language was not an issue, since all the churches were located in the Greek speaking regions of the world. However, some peculiarity of every culture played a vital role in understanding the instructions that Paul was about to provide them. Each church needed to receive the application of the universal gospel in accordance to their worldview and cultural settings. Tailored letters to the churches helped the leadership to find maximum benefit from what

was written for them. The churches to which Paul addressed his epistles were already in existence. They were founded either by Him or by other Apostles. In his letters, Paul communicated the specific needs of each church as he was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Additionally, he warned the readers of problems that could potentially hinder the effective spread of the gospel in their region and/or could stop or delay maturity in their walk with Christ.

These issues were many times cultural. For instance, the Greeks approach to comprehending God was through wisdom, while the Jews looked for miracles. (1 Cor. 1:22) Paul identified these tendencies and addressed them to the Church in Corinth in his first epistle to them. He told them that the faith in the crucified Christ was their only way to know and to fellowship with God. (1 Cor. 1:23, 24) He warned the Galatians not to follow the oppressive theology of certain Jewish Christian legalizers, which had caused the believers in Galatia to trade their freedom in Christ for bondage to the Law. (Gal. 1:6-9) These legalizers were pushing the members of the church in Galatia to seek salvation through keeping the law. He used analogies familiar to the specific culture to illustrate his point. For instance, to illustrate the absurdness of the Gentiles keeping the ordinances of the law to achieve salvation, Paul suggested that the Gentiles not stop with circumcision in their zeal for ordinances but rather go on to full castration. (Gal. 5:12) Sacrificial castration was known to citizens of the ancient world; it was frequently practiced by pagan priest as in the cults of Attis-Cybele, which was prominent in Galatia.<sup>16</sup>

Peter, being familiar with "...the empty way of life handed down to [his Jewish readers] from [their] forefathers," (1 Pet. 1:18, 19) warns them to remember to keep their faith in the One who shed His precious blood for their redemption.

As the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul opens his Epistle to the Romans by stating that "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish" to preach and to teach the gospel of God's Kingdom. The word "*obligated*", or "*debtor*" in New King James version of Bible, carries a heavy implication of unceasing and unwavering commitment that is necessary in evangelism. This commitment was first demonstrated by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is not even fathomable for us to understand what it meant for Christ to leave His glory in the heavens and to come down to earth and die for us sinners. His commitment did not cease or attenuate until He performed all that His Father had asked Him to do for our salvation. Nothing deterred Him from the cross. Maybe this is the reason why the single-minded Apostle boasted so much by the cross, which was the most important object on Christ's mind during His earthly ministry; for He knew He was to give His life in atonement for all sinners on it. In the opinion of the author the sense of obligation or indebtedness toward the people of the world is what is lacking from most Western Christians today. To most Christians, evangelism of the people near by or far away is the work of the few elite people that have a special calling in their lives. To this crowd, winning people of a different religion, ethnicity or language is the work of the missionaries.<sup>17</sup>

## **Pauline Principles in Modernity**

I recently had the privilege of meeting the Rev. Arthur Simonian, a senior pastor of one of the mega churches in Armenia. He is 37 years old, and received Christ only 14 years ago. His strong Communist background was shattered and now it stands beneath his love and dedication to the Lord, whom he once persecuted. Does this sound familiar? His evangelical church of ten thousand members is less than ten years old. They are a visionary church, very similar to the first century church. They have taken the Great Commission seriously. They have trained more than one thousand missionaries and deployed them to the unreached world of the former Soviet Union republics and Islamic countries around them and are winning souls to Christ's Kingdom daily. All the ministries of his church are bathed continuously in prayers. They have nearly eight hundred prayer groups that pray 24 hours a day, everyday non-stop for the Lord to give the missionaries and ministers of the gospel victory over the forces of darkness. They are winning the battle, and he is very optimistic. Groups are periodically given direction in which the missionaries are ministering, so as they work, the prayer warriors lift them up before the Lord. Every one in his church is involved in a ministry, without exception. He visits churches in various countries and encourages them to equip their saints to do the work of the ministry. He referred to the members of the Western church as ones who are "baptized" into their rocking chairs! Of course this does not apply to the minority which takes care of the majority of the work.

Access to the comfort of modern technology has made us insensitive to the needs of people around the corner, let alone people around the world who are dying without hearing about Christ. We leave the missionary work to the few who, in our mind, have

the call; not knowing that Christ's calling is for every one of the members of the Body. (Acts 1:8) We are all to be witnesses for Him and His Kingdom. Apostle Paul said "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel." (Rom. 9:16)

Additionally, Paul saw beyond the nationality or the mental and educational capacity of the persons that he came across. To him, witnessing for Christ was a privilege and not a duty or means to get God's favor. He boasted to the chains that were placed on him for preaching the gospel of the Kingdom. Those chains made his preaching more effective and viable. Even in prison he did not cease preaching the gospel, even to the guards that were chained to him. In his epistle to the church in Philippi he sends greetings from the guards that were chained to him for protection. (Phil. 4:22) They would hear Paul dictating the words to the scribe, and the guards would ask him to send their greetings to the church members! Paul's approach to reaching others was simple, yet it required a lot of sacrifice. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians he briefly stated his evangelism strategy in his personal example to the readers:

"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law, so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law, so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings (9:19-23)

### **Conclusion**

While the fulfillment of the Great Commission appears to be purely a New Testament development, it is clear from Scripture that the basis for it is as old as the patriarchs. God's desire to set aside a people for Himself intensified with the death of His

son on the cross. The rejection by the ethnically chosen people was foreseen and prophesied in the Psalms, Isaiah, and elsewhere. This rejection led to retaliation against the early Apostles which led to the Diaspora which continues to this day.

The fulfillment of the Great Commission was never for the few but for all Christians. Even more spectacular successes are being recorded today than at any time in history as the Armenian Church now demonstrates in the post-Soviet era. We can all participate, even if we don't get on an airplane and depart for distant lands. Beginning with prayer and continuing on to financial and logistic support, we can form an extended bucket brigade to quench the fire of secularism, paganism and atheism in a spiritual war that is rapidly heating up.

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#### ENDNOTES

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## CHAPTER 2

### RELEVANT REFLECTIONS ON MODERN AMERICA IN MINISTRY

#### **Understanding the Modern Church Setting**

The accelerating pace of social change in modern America must be taken into consideration when viewing the development of the ethnic church. There are three significant factors that an ethnic church must contend with that were of minimal or no importance only fifty years ago, but each of which now have become the proverbial “elephant in the living room.” Nobody talks about them but almost everyone feels their presence all the time. These three factors are:

1. Modernism and its current offshoot post-modernism
2. Secularism and its pseudo-theological offshoots
3. Influential trends in the established or ‘traditional’ churches which are neighbors to and surround the ethnic churches.

American society in general, not merely its religious population, has continued on with an established trend of isolation from other cultures, if not outright indifference to those other cultures. Americans assume that the American culture is not only winning the culture wars (which it is) but is probably justified in doing so. Moreover, it is assumed that American culture is not only the established norm, but the desired norm being adopted by all other world cultures. Anti-American statements, positions or demonstrations are often viewed with surprise and disbelief. Let us first look at how such

a view came about and discuss the implications thereof, and then we can look at the effects of the three key factors listed above.

Constant transformations of the societies have become one of the remarkable characteristics of the Western world, especially in America. Urbanization, pluralism, materialism, scientific discovery, technological breakthrough, media domination, and relativism indicate a changing world. We live in the age of micro-electronics, instant worldview communication, exploding technology, sophisticated weaponry, family breakdown, and information overload.<sup>1</sup> Seated in our living room, we can see the action of a war on the other side of the globe in real time. While overseas, travelers realize the mind-boggling cultural differences around the globe; but even traveling across town, there is sufficient evidence of vast cultural diversity.

Most modern urban churches are comprised of members from many cultures. Evangelists in the West, more often than any other time in history, come across people of different cultures, with different ethnicity, background, and sometimes considerably different religious doctrines. The cultural variety of the people that serve in health service, food industry, department stores, even in city or federal government agencies has painted a beautiful picture of God's creation of people and all their differences.

Pastors must lead their churches in the penetration of the society with the gospel- an impossible task for those lacking cultural sensitivity. James E. Mean points out that "cultural ignorance enfeebles ministerial efforts."<sup>2</sup> Effective evangelism is accomplished when the gospel is presented to the individual in a culturally sensitive manner. The word *culture* identifies ideas, emotional responses, customs, traditions, and patterns of behavior shared by people in a given society. If pastors fail to discern and appreciate these

intricacies, they cannot relate the gospel effectively to the communities they serve. Many modern pastors, because of their upbringing and educational deficiencies, suffer from the effects of the indifference stemming from cultural insensitivities.<sup>3</sup>

For most of the past century, the English language has dominated the world as the international language. The author recollects from his life in Iran and his family's life in other areas of the Middle East that when Americans and other Westerners traveled for trade, special assignment or other business to certain countries of the world, they lived in havens that they made for themselves away from the locals. For the most part, they had their own social clubs, stores, radio and television channels, which did not require them to mingle with the indigenous people of the land. Their homes were filled with the objects and appliances that they brought from their homeland. They rarely ate at the regular stores and rarely shopped at common markets. Their conversations were mostly among one another and they rarely had a need to communicate to the locals. In some places such as Iran and other Middle Eastern countries they even received a special "hardship compensation" which further discouraged them from coming together with locals and learning their culture and worldview. The tragic isolation which resulted from this type of lifestyle caused most Westerners to return to their countries without any real education of the culture which for so long they were immersed in and now cannot even relate to.

Now that the Western countries are receiving non-Westerners, the invisible yet real walls, which were erected in the past, are carried over. The experience and observation of the author indicates that the two sides know little about each other. This isolation, on the one hand causes the minister of the gospel not to be effective in reaching

the various people with the gospel in order to win them for Christ, because of his or her lack of knowledge of the guest culture. The unbeliever sees the minister as untouchable due to the invisible walls which he or she remembers from the past. On the other hand the minister feels inadequate in fulfilling his or her calling and grows cold toward his ministry.

Cultural insensitivity often causes city-bred pastors to flounder in rural areas and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> Since the early part of the twentieth century American cities have become the melting pots of diversity. In the latter part of the twentieth century, due to hurried globalization, America has become extraordinary in its diversity. Many high-tech companies hire their work force from foreign countries and transfer them to cities in America. Many foreign students come to America to receive an education in higher institutions. Owing to their persistent efforts, a great majority of these foreign students become highly educated. Given the market value and tough competition, some of them opt to stay in America and become part of the work force, but a large number of them return to their homelands and assume key positions in various private and public sectors. On the other hand, many of the third world people flee to Europe to escape the persecution of their governments. They are in search of a better life for themselves and a brighter future for their children. These folks are kept mostly in refugee camps, which are rarely visited by Westerners.

Missionaries soon learn - sometimes painfully - that their cultural idiosyncrasies and preconceptions must be radically altered in order to work effectively on a foreign field. Paul realized the immense importance of cultural adaptation. When he spoke at the

meeting of the Areopagus (Acts 17), he revealed his cultural awareness by his adaptation to - but not compromise of - the gospel message.<sup>5</sup>

Effective pastoral training should include equipping students with tools for the study of their target culture.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, here in America, pastors must be made aware of the challenges before them. They should be taught that presenting the gospel message without compromise can be effectively done with cultural sensitivity. The needs of people from various cultures are often substantially different.

Any pastor who wants to be effective in his or her ministry must discover the cultural characteristics of the ministerial locale, draft a strategy for the penetration of the community with the gospel, muster resources, and lead churches toward effective ministry in their communities- whatever cultural traits and peculiarities they encounter. Such a colossal task demands the best trained leaders the church can produce. Since the number of the people groups is many, in each group there might not be an abundance of individual churches that could create a network to reach out to the individuals in each of the people groups. Cultural sagacity is a necessity in our pluralistic world.<sup>7</sup>

### **Modernism and Post-Modernism**

In his book on the subject of post-modernism and its effect on the theological landscape, *The End of the World as We Know It*, Chuck Smith, Jr. makes the point that post-modernism came about as the result of the failure of both Modernism and more specifically, the failure of organized religion to deal with modernism. As we shall see, today's ethnic church must contend not only with the rationale of established and

accepted modern constructs such as Darwinian evolution and secular humanism, but now must operate in the standard-free world of multi-culturalism and New Age theology.

Post-modernism is not limited to any single cultural arena such as religion but has crept into politics, education, and even the legal system. It is an unavoidable factor in Western life.

Modernism held that a theory remained unscientific and therefore invalid if it could not be tested, developed from collected data or examined by one of the five senses. This notion created a platform for the eventual derision of the Christian doctrine of creation and ultimately the derision of moral philosophies based on a God who remains beyond our direct sensory contact and verification. This type of derision was a greater burden to bear for Americans than for many recent non-Western immigrants. So often, Third World, Eastern European and Asiatic immigrants were quite comfortable in a world of both Christian and pagan spiritualism. Christians in American society were skeptical or marginally accepting of things not seen such as Hell, miracles and angels.

With the advent of post-modernism, reality is defined by the individual. One man's truth may not be the same as truth to another. Often, philosophical and even historical debates end with one or another of those engaged stating, "It may be true for you, but not for me. Who are you to judge?" If no one can even agree on a common reality, what does this mean for ever agreeing on standards of evaluation, let alone what is right and what is wrong. The motto of Generation X is stated thus by Smith, "If morality is something that humans create, then morality also is relative."<sup>8</sup>

The impact of this phenomenon has been to de-emphasize Western Traditions and reduce the role and stature of the Western Christian church. As a result growth in

traditional churches is declining and the evangelical energy of many evangelical churches has been compromised. As Chuck Smith points out, it is hard to convince someone to free himself from the bondage of sin if you cannot agree that sin even exists, or even if you could, that what you view as sin is not necessarily sinful to me (witness the debate on homosexuality in many American denominations.) This trend has opened the door further to an already existing factor, secularism. All of these factors have had and will continue to have a profound influence on the establishment and development of the ethnic church in America and elsewhere in the Western world.

### **Secularism and Its Pseudo-Theological Offshoots**

The proponents of modernism have long sought to remove God as a key factor in human reasoning as it relates to science, philosophy or culture. What the modernists were unable to complete, the post-modern secularists are advancing with considerable success. The natural offshoot of an anti-Christian strategy is the de-emphasis of Christianity by giving equal weight to all other religions, beliefs and cultures. This approach is known as pluralism in theological circles but today it is often referred to as multi-culturalism by secularists in our society in order to de-emphasize the importance of religion – especially Christianity. Surprisingly it is even practiced in many American churches today. Some churches are modifying their missionary work or curtailing in terms of spreading the gospel for fear of creating a cultural *faux pas*. “Who are we to force our culture on another group of people?” is the reasoning. Short of this extreme, the over-sensitivity to this phenomenon is having its impact and creating an “all roads lead to God” mentality. With the de-emphasis on religion by our society and the increased stature of non-

Christian religions and cultures, the immigrant does not feel the pressure or see the need for blending in with the once cultural norm of “Christian Society.” In fact, if one watches television news coverage, it sounds like Christianity is under attack by politicians, lawyers and educators. It’s starting to sound like the place *not* to be.

For some ethnic churches, this can be a reason to seek out Christian fellowship from the “old country” with its comforts and familiarity. For other groups from non-Christian cultures, such as the Middle Eastern, Asian or former Communist countries, the attack on Christianity and the marginalization of Christian beliefs and values, can be an obstacle to overcome that formerly was not nearly as substantial a barrier as it is today.

### **Influential Trends in Established American Churches**

One of the fundamentals of American culture is “keeping up with the Joneses.” Modern churches have established trends which stem partly from post-modernism as stated above but also from such things as advanced communication, advanced graphics and display, the entertainment mentality, the culture of success and even the pop music culture that began in earnest in the 1960s. Elements of all of these are seen in churches today.

How many proper ways of the recent past are followed in churches any more?

1. Have an accepted formal dress code
2. Hold one service and then Sunday school
3. Use a hymnal or even a Bible
4. Sing only traditional songs
5. Have primarily a male-based management team or even pastorate

6. Hold a common Sunday service
7. Have traditional door-to-door community outreach
8. Have a choir with just a piano and an organ

It is clear that two trends are emerging that threaten the success and growth of the ethnic church in America:

1. The consumer/ marketplace mentality
2. The need for “critical mass” to afford to compete with, and hence be like, the modern day “Mega-Church.”

First generation adult immigrants may find the above unappealing initially, but with immersion in the American media-based culture, added to the first two factors of post-modernism and secularist multi-culturalism, the lure of pop culture and technology-based presentation is alluring. It is not long before substance falls victim to form and what was once a way of life on Sunday becomes a test of and testament to one’s cultural inculcation.

This environment is a huge challenge for the leadership of the ethnic church. If leaders attempt to be in every way the same as the modern American church in its offerings and appearance, they will fail versus the more financially strong mega-churches. If, on the other hand, the ethnic church holds the line on traditionalism, they can become too much of a contrast with the rest of American culture. It is quite a dilemma.

When the Apostle Paul made his famous remark of his being all things to all people, it was for a noble purpose. He would do what was necessary to avoid creating a cultural wall which would make it difficult or impossible for him to effectively and understandably present the gospel. His goal was not necessarily to be liked. In fact, if you

look at his letters to the Corinthians and certainly to the Galatians, he was clearly not aiming for personal popularity in the sensitive subject matter he pursued. The modern American church appears to have lost the purpose of cultural adaptation in many respects. If the goal is to fill seats on Sunday and to tread lightly in matters that might threaten the main aspirations of contemporary church goers (namely personal peace and affluence) then many churches have succeeded. If the goal is to build an effective group of Christian soldiers ready to do spiritual warfare while spreading the gospel, then perhaps there has been too much cultural adaptation and not enough challenge. After all, the prince of this world has not changed from Christ's days on earth and this is still occupied territory.

All of this poses a challenge to those who aim to gather their ethnic compatriots into a unified church. It is an interesting and often disheartening backdrop. The same forces are beginning to pull at ethnic churches as once pulled only at modern religious institutions. The leadership of the congregation must provide an element of cohesion that will be stronger than the divisive forces of modern day American and Western secularism.

In the chapters that follow, we will look at the forces that draw ethnic Americans together, how the congregations come into being as a result, and how a growing body of believers continues to progress against the issues mentioned above along with those which are unique to their culture and to a degree, their cultural isolation.

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## CHAPTER 3

### EVANGELISM REVISITED: NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

#### **Stating the Clear Need**

In the evangelical wing of the church, in recent decades, few other subjects have been the focus of more attention, discussion and inquiry than the subject of evangelism.<sup>1</sup> This topic was also the major focus of the early church after Christ's ascension. The disciples knew from Christ's teachings, that Christ's return and world evangelism were two items that are closely related.

Clearly, it was a felt burden. The Apostle Paul stated, "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16) The first century church carried on its task to the best of its ability, after God allowed the persecution to scatter her members in all four corners of the earth.

The times have changed. Persecution and lack of opportunity in the third world countries have contributed to immigration of many people from foreign lands to come to our front door in the Western world. In our cities many of the people that are unreached by the gospel of Jesus Christ live in our neighborhood. Our children go to the same school as theirs. As the popular evangelical saying goes, "The nations have come to our front door."<sup>2</sup> Now that we have the opportunity to reach the unreached, two questions demand answers:<sup>3</sup>

1. What more can be learned about effective communication of the gospel?
2. What can we do to communicate the gospel effectively in the target areas?

The paramount goal of evangelism is to communicate the gospel clearly to every individual in the circle of our influence. Our persuasive presentation of the gospel message bears fruit when the hearts of the individuals have been specially prepared by the Holy Spirit. Jesus stated “When the Holy Spirit comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regards to sin and righteousness and judgment.” (John 16:8) This verse combined with the Great Commission lays out the total ground work for the minister of the gospel and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in preaching and conversion of the unbeliever. Since the Holy Spirit is to convict the individual who is not yet in God’s Kingdom, then the preacher of the gospel must preach along the lines of sin, righteousness and judgment. To emphasize the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism, Rev. Nazir Yusaf once pointed out that the “Book of Acts” should have really referred to the “Acts of the Holy Spirit” in oppose to “Acts of the Apostles.”

The meaning of these words is rather obvious and straight forward. Through Christ all the sins of mankind have been atoned for and thus forgiven by God. (Isa. 1:18, Eph 1:6, 7) The only sin that must be confessed and turned away from is the sin of unbelief in Christ’s sufficiency for our salvation (John 16:9); righteousness refers to the need for Christ’s righteousness instead of our righteousness. (John 16:10) There is no comparison in the righteousness that Christ gives us and the one that man has outside Christ. Isaiah the prophet spoke of this “... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” (Isa. 61:3) This kind of righteousness is the only righteousness that pleases the Father. Judgment refers to the ultimate judgment of the head of the world

system under whose authority every human being is born, and from whom Christ redeems them. (John 16:11) In the comprehensive wisdom of God, He appointed the converts to act as “Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Cor. 5:20) by working side by side with the Holy Spirit to reach the lost nations around the corner and around the world.

### **Elements of Church-Level Evangelism**

In this strategic partnership with the Holy Spirit in evangelism, the practical issues to overcome can be categorized and individually tackled. Our focus is on the part that the minister of the gospel assumes in this partnership, since the Holy Spirit has His perfect way every time. The minimum list of the issues that the human side of this partnership has to consider can be outlined as follows:<sup>4</sup>

1. To mobilize individuals and effectively deploy them to evangelize the target audience
2. To relate the gospel of Christ to the audience in a clear, convincing and compelling fashion
3. To utilize the most suitable methods for effective evangelism
4. To use the most appropriate communication means for the target audience

The effective way that the early church found to address the above issues are delineated in the Book of Acts. The disciples either were the eye witnesses or had heard first hand about Christ and the Great Commission. There was very little doubt in anyone’s mind about the relevance of Christ’s invitation to a world that had just experienced the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of its savior. Everyone had heard about the person of Christ, His teachings and His miracles. All the disciples had to do was to go and evangelize, preaching the gospel in towns and villages among the people that had already had background knowledge of Christ. The commonality of the Greek

language and customs of the general area in the Middle East provided a relatively smooth path for evangelism for nearby regions. The Apostles used the synagogues, streets, market places, and at times higher philosophical forums, such as Mars Hill, to preach the gospel.

In today's society, the diversity of the culture makes the task of evangelism much more complex than it was in the first century. Christian anthropologist G. Linwood Barney thinks of culture as being something like an onion. At the core is the concept of a worldview. The worldview is what constitutes the remaining layers. The next layer that grows around and comes out of the worldview is that of values. This layer is the value system of the culture. Next to that comes the institutional layer, comprised of such things as education, law, and marriage. The final, outer layer consists of material artifacts and observable behavior. This last layer by itself cannot be changed by evangelism, yet it is what inhibits us from evangelizing the people of the various cultures around us. Because their behavior is very different from ours and we are hesitant to penetrate it, we ignore it. We have learned to celebrate what we call diversity, without reflecting what causes different people to act differently. Christ in His time penetrated into the history of man's worldview and changed it forever. Barney draws our attention to the need for communicating the gospel in such a way that influences and ultimately changes non-Christian worldviews. Changing some behavioral pattern, religious affiliation, or even some values is only superficial and does not give birth to a disciple. To be Christian is to have a biblical view of God, the world, oneself and others - a biblical understanding of the plan and purpose of God in the world and in history.<sup>5</sup>

Christ's approach in His ministry was unique and unprecedented. His arrival, even though it was predicted by the prophets of the past, caught everyone, even his own immediate family, off guard. His mother, step father, and the rest of the people of Israel, including the Pharisees were shocked by this baby called Jesus. He was rarely welcomed in the religious or political circles, even though he was wise and eloquent. Yet he never ignored the needs of the people that rejected Him, and He availed himself of every opportunity to relay the message that He had been sent to bear. In the Sermon on the Mount recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 5 through 7 Jesus began talking about what was going to change mankind's worldview forever. He gave every listener a glimpse of a worldview that was bigger than anything they had ever seen before. He began showing the common man a view that was not obscured by sin. Sin, at the core being of the descendents of Adam, has distorted their worldview and they are unable to see or detect the true Light of God. Man's religion and worldview crucified Jesus but God's plan raised Him from the dead and He lives forever. In the three days, which began with the crucifixion of Jesus and ended with His powerful resurrection, God showed that His power and plan will always prevail over man's destructive power and evil plans. He also proved that the nature of His power, unlike man's, is not destructive and self-centered. God's plan is centered on a self-sacrificing love, which at its core delights in reaching out and loving the sinner, but His righteousness hates the sin of the sinner.

This is why God used the malicious plan of mankind to cleanse the sin of His supreme creation, all of whom were created in His image, and to redeem them from the same power that caused the worldview that crucified Jesus. To resurrect Christ was far beyond overcoming man's plan of destroying god-man Jesus. He justified mankind by

the death of his Son, which seemingly was a defeat for God, and then raised Jesus to make Him the firstborn over all creation, and the firstborn among many brothers through Him. Our hearts as Jeremiah expresses it are “deceitful above all things” (Jer. 17:9), and our behavior that stems from it is nothing but “filthy rags” before God. (Isaiah 64:6) Christ came to regenerate our hearts, where the core of each of us had been stained, so we can have a godly worldview. From there we receive a set of renewed life values, which then affect our institutional priorities, and finally alter our behavior.

The Apostle Paul states these changes to the Corinthians in his second letter by saying “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.” (2 Cor. 5:17) Our good works are no longer done to gain God’s favor, but they stem from a regenerated heart (core) to glorify God and to speak of His goodness, according to the worldview that God created in us. The works are further done not in a self-satisfying and self-gratifying fashion, but rather in self sacrificing and God-glorifying manner. In this way Christianity is different from all other religions.<sup>6</sup> The change comes from the inside out.

### **Ethnic Evangelism Applied**

Communicating the gospel among ethnic groups could be challenging from various perspectives. The best strategy is to utilize the same approach that God used in inspiring the Scriptures and ordering their use. The work of Trevor McIlwain, an Australian missionary, who went to the Palawano people of the Philippines with New Tribe Mission in the 1960s provides a good illustration of the importance of effecting the worldview in order to produce effective disciples. There had been something of a popular

movement to Christ among the Palawanos after World War II. Numerous Palawanos had converted and a number of churches had been planted among them. Over the years, however, it became apparent that, in spite of the sincerity of the believers, neither they nor their churches were growing spiritually. Christians would fall back into the old ways, experience revival and renewal and, after a time, fall into the old ways again.

This cycle kept repeating itself in spite of the prayers and efforts of the missionaries. McIlwain himself met with discouragement until he realized that the Palawanos' understanding of Scripture was distorted because it was based on piecemeal instruction. In short, they had never developed a truly Christian worldview. It was then that McIlwain began teaching chronologically, starting with the Old Testament and going completely through the Bible. The results were so amazing that New Tribes Mission charged McIlwain with the responsibility of putting his studies in a form that now become the basic pattern for New Tribes' church-planting strategy worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

Later, another Australian theologian named Harry Wendt, developed material to help Western Christians grow toward maturity. Wendt developed an illustrated Bible study on the large plan of God in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>8</sup> His seminars and material continue to be offered across North America and worldwide. Unlike McIlwain's approach, which was developed on the mission field, Wendt's approach was developed in North America for the Western Christians. However, since both employed the approach God himself utilized in inspiring the Scripture and ordering its use, their approach was effective in producing mature and stable disciples among the Christians in the Western culture as well as around the world.<sup>9</sup>

Today, more than ever, the gospel needs to be preached in a way that is relevant to the culture. To learn the most effective approach to communication of the gospel message we need to examine the Bible. Examination of material in the Book of Acts and the Epistles reveals at least four distinctive features in communicating the gospel. First, the evangelist set his communication in the context of the nature of God and the history of God's dealings with mankind. Stephen began his testimony to the masses in this way (Acts 6:2). Second, the evangelist took the audience from known to unknown. This means when the audience had knowledge of Scripture, special revelation provided the context for the messenger of Christ. When they were without Scripture, general revelation provided the context for the message about Christ and His work. Paul used this approach in his discourse on Mars Hill with the Greeks (Acts 17:16-34), and in his Epistle to the Romans. (Chapters 1 and 2) Third, to allow better communication of the gospel, the communicator further adapted to the culture. For instance, Paul circumcised Timothy before he took him on his missionary journey to the Jews. (Acts 16:1-4) His sensitivity to this particular issue was a key reason that "the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers." (Acts 16:5) Lastly, in all communication the objective remained unchanged. The communicator presented the gospel with persistence and urgency for repentance and faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the last information available to us from the Book of Acts, the Apostle Paul is at his initial hearing in Caesarea. In his defense in Caesar's court, he is clearly persuading the judges and inviting them to come to faith in Christ. In his discourse about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, he made Governor Felix so uncomfortable that he dismissed Paul. (Acts 24:24-26) Because of the persistency of his Jewish accusers Paul

was tried again for the same crime before King Agrippa and his wife Bernice two years later. Again, in his defense, he availed himself of the opportunity and testified before the audience regarding his encounter with Christ and the call that He placed on Paul's life. His defense was so persuasive that the King exclaimed "do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28) Paul jumped at this and replied "short time or long- I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." (Acts 26:29)

In preaching the gospel message, the context in which communication occurs is significant. Even though this concept was well understood from the time as far back as ancient Greece, the term "contextualization" was coined in the 1970s to highlight the backdrop in which the communication occurs.<sup>10</sup> As proposed by its initiators, contextualization had to do with encouraging Christian theologians and communicators (especially foreign nationals) to allow a much larger place for cultural traditions in the determination of even the content of the gospel. Evangelicals took exception and tended to redefine contextualization in terms of making the biblical gospel more understandable, meaningful, and effective in the various cultural contexts. In the multicultural and fast-changing world it should now be clear to Christian communicators that it is not sufficient to simply learn the language and translate culturally sensitive material and hope that the gospel will then be effectively communicated. The traditional gospel must be communicated among the nations around us in new ways that engage the attention, employ the thought forms, enhance the understanding, and merit the consideration of people acculturated in a system very different from our own.<sup>11</sup>

Rev. Luke Yeghnazar, in his article titled “The Difficulties of Integrating Muslim Converts into the Church,” tells a moving story that speaks volumes for the need for special attention in reaching the ethnic people in our communities.<sup>12</sup> He delivers a moving story in this article. In 1997, during his visit to Sydney, Australia, he met a Lebanese pastor who served the Lord among the Middle Eastern people in Australia. That pastor shared with Rev. Yeghnazar how years ago, he had rung the bell of the Australian pastor of the church where he held his meetings. He had a simple question. The answer could have been a simple yes or a no. But the pastor told him, “*This is my tea time. Come back in one hour!*” This pastor continued, “I went to the park and sat on a bench for one hour. This would never happen in Lebanon where I came from. I was shocked and humiliated. I just sat there, speechless. An hour later I knocked on his door once again. I asked him the same simple question. He answered with a yes or no and off I went.” Then this Lebanese pastor told Rev. Yeghnazar, “The majority of Australian pastors are like this.”

It was sad for him to hear this story but he had to do something. A few days later Rev. Yeghnazar was invited to address about forty pastors in Sydney. As he was sharing about God’s work in Muslim nations, he asked them a question, “How many of you would like Muslims to come to your churches and find salvation?” Everyone raised their hands eagerly. “Then you need to forget your tea-time!” and he shared with them the story of the pastor from Lebanon. They all got the point.

If the church in the Western world decides to reach out to the people that have come to her, she needs to change many of her strategies. Our fundamental beliefs never change yet our approaches can and should change. For instance we need to make certain

changes in our approach to missions. Rev. Yeghnazar writes: “For many Christians, to be a missionary is to pack and go to another country, to evangelize people. Though this is true, it is not the whole truth. To be a missionary, you do not need to go to another country. A missionary is on a mission, the mission is to make Christ known to those who do not know him. Those to be reached could be thousands of miles away or live next door. Though I believe there is still a need for missionaries to go to far away countries, a change is needed in our missionary outlook and in the way we do missions.”<sup>13</sup>

The few changes that Rev. Yeghnazar, with over 30 years of ministry among Muslims, offers us are as follows:

1. We need to change our minds about this that only a few in the church are called to be missionaries. Every follower of Christ is called to be a missionary.
2. We all need to consider ourselves missionaries, as the Lord has brought the mission field to us. The mission field has come to our schools, colleges and universities, workplaces and neighborhoods.
3. The unreached people, such as Muslims, are at our door steps, and can be reached. Many of them are already responding to the gospel. They are coming to Christ in the Western world in the hundreds. It will take changes of attitude and approach, as individuals and churches. The reward is to see the unreached come to the Lord in the thousands.
4. Humanly speaking it is hard to reach some people groups. A good example of this is the Muslim population. In countries like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan there is not a single church building. Bibles are illegal to possess in several Muslim countries. Yet there is so much freedom as well as opportunities to reach millions of Muslims who in God’s sovereign plan live next door in our own country.<sup>14</sup>

To have culturally sensitive churches for individual people groups work best for most ethnic groups. Rev. Yeghnazar in his article tackles the important issue of the difficulties of integrating Muslim converts into the Western Churches.

He said: “First of all, we must realize that the culture of a Muslim is a *community culture* whereas the culture of a Western Christian is based on the *individual*. When a Muslim makes a decision, his family and community are on his mind, whereas a Western Christian makes most of his decisions individually.”<sup>15</sup>

When Muslims comes to the Lord, probably they will lose their former community. They might even lose contact with their own families, the ones that have been there for them all their lives.<sup>16</sup> They come to our church and we want them to attend the meetings, listen to the sermons and grow in the Lord. But after the meetings are over, in a few short minutes, everyone is out of the church. Where should they go? One or two hours in the church do not give them the sense of being a part of a new community. In many cases they cannot talk to the pastor, as the pastor has so much to do. There are three things that could happen to such people:

1. Fall back from their Christian faith and go back to their old community as they have not been embraced into a new one.
2. Always resent the fact that they are like spiritual orphans.
3. Become exactly like Western Christians for whom the individual is more important than the community.<sup>17</sup>

Among the above three points, the third one could offer the best scenario. But there is a sad truth in it. Muslim converts who have lost the concept of community, cannot effectively reach their fellow people especially on their home turf. These converts have lost the worldview of their people and all that it is associated with it. They might speak their language but they have forgotten their *heart* language.

The Western Christians and the Western churches need to change their mind and change their approach in order to be able to reach and convert Muslims, and then to see

them be used greatly by God to reach their own people both here and in the Muslim world. Let me add some practical suggestions.

When Muslim converts come to a Western church they need to feel welcome. They need to have a family or two in the church who will call them, talk to them, fellowship with them, and address their questions, fears, rejections as well as their aspirations. They should have a family or two to whom they can go visit or who invites them for a cup of tea. Remember that those who come from Islamic countries have a culture closer to early Christian culture in areas such as friendship, hospitality and visitation than our Western individualistic culture that has influenced our churches so.

The Muslim converts should be in a small community in the church such as a prayer meeting or a cell group where they will feel intimate with people and where the converts may ask questions about their families and their needs, and let them know that the church is concerned about their parents and other family members who need to be saved. This kind of setting provides the new convert a non-threatening environment, which allows him or her to grow and overcome some of the cultural issues that are debilitating in Christian growth. More time and special attention need to be invested in them to properly train them to be Christ's disciples.<sup>18</sup> The goal is to help them mature in the Lord and then to catch the vision to reach their people for Christ.

Experience has shown that the best people to reach the unreached people, such as Muslims, are former unreached people who are filled with Christ's love. If the Western church creates a community for a Muslim convert, it will be much easier for other family members and friends to join.

To continue with the practical points, the new convert from an unreached people group should not be baptized immediately. They need to grasp the gospel. Their saying that they love Jesus is not enough, as they may love others too. They need to accept Jesus as their only Savior and Lord. The individual discipling the new convert needs to be careful that he does not become proud. Deal with them in a normal way but give them more attention, as they need it, but as tempting as it might be, do not go the route of spoiling the new convert.

The Muslim converts have probably seen a lot of hypocrisy. They come from a community where white lies are common and there is jealousy, anger, hatred and backbiting. The Muslim converts should see transformed believers. They should see and be taught integrity. They should be guided into receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit and into how to live a spirit-filled life everyday. They should see how the fruit of the Spirit is manifested in other Christians and he should be taught to manifest it in them. They should see how difficulties and tensions are dealt by means of a Christian attitude, firmly yet lovingly. They should see models that will teach them practically what kind of relationship they should have with his spouses, how to raise godly children and how to invest in God's work.

The author's experience and the network among Iranian pastors in the world indicate that in the past few years, hundreds if not thousands of Iranian Muslims have found eternal life in our Lord Jesus Christ in Western countries. We have also seen that Muslims from other nations are coming too. We believe that many more thousands will come if we come out of our comfort zones and show our willingness to serve and help them become like Jesus.

The Lord has a plan for the Islamic world as he had and still has for the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. We can be a part of God's great plan in reaching the Muslim world in Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, Toronto, London, Paris, Hamburg, Sydney and other towns across the Western Hemisphere.

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14. Ibid., 1.

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## CHAPTER 4

### CONGREGATIONAL ETIOLOGIES: CASE HISTORIES OF EXISTING ETHNIC CHURCHES

Four ethnic churches in Seattle will be examined in this chapter to understand their beginnings and how they have evolved to date as congregations. There are striking similarities in their early stages of development. However, as with any complex entity, the later periods of growth are marked by significant distinctions. People, businesses, and towns often start out with almost identical patterns of incipient activities. Children attend similar schools with similar curriculums, businesses scrape to make their first dollar of profit and towns open their first stores and hold town councils. Thirty years later, there may be huge differences between them and other members of their respective categories.

This chapter hopes to identify what the fundamental elements are that determine start, growth and then direction of a maturing ethnic church. As with the other categories of entities listed above, choices have a significant effect on successful development but also other factors including background, locale and opportunity.

The four groups considered were: Kenyans (Kikuyus), Romanian, Armenians and Iranians. The first two were examined by church visits and interviews. The Armenian and Iranian groups are discussed from my extensive experience in the founding and leading of a church. Some additional insights have of course been gained by my relationship with other west coast Armenian and Iranian churches with whom I have regular contact and

correspondence and with whom I work on certain joint activities here in the United States and internationally.

Each group will be discussed in a similar format. However, the focus in terms of detail will be on the Iranian church. The format will be as follows;

1. Relevant background and cultural insights
2. Founding activities and brief history
3. Current disposition and outlook

### **The Kenyan Church, Rainier Beach, Washington**

#### Background

Kenya is a country established by colonial partition in the 1800s. It is in East Africa bounded by Ethiopia and the Sudan to the north, Uganda to the west, Tanzania to the south and the Indian Ocean on its eastern shore. It is composed of some twenty-eight major tribes all of whom have their own language and culture. English is the official language of country as a result of British rule, commercial and institutional development. Swahili is the trade language. However, the most common language usage is a given tribe's original tongue – even in such developed areas as Nairobi, the capital and largest city.

The Kikuyu tribe is by far the largest and most influential of all the tribes of Kenya, comprising some 42 percent of the population. The Mau-Mau rebellion which led to Kenya's independence was started by Jomo Kenyatta, a British educated Kikuyu.

The congregation in Rainier Beach, Washington is made up entirely of immigrant Kikuyus. Many of the parishioners grew up in the modern developed areas in or adjacent to Nairobi but ultimately moved into city jobs in Nairobi. Through interaction with

Americans and other Westerners and with other relatives in the United States, they each sought to move to America and become citizens. Most were compelled to leave by the worsening economic and political environment under the Moi regime, which only ended in 2003, after more than twenty years of rampant corruption.

They represent a broad range of careers and educational backgrounds. The church is made up of more women than men. There are 60+ regular attendees and a dozen of these are minors. Approximately half of the children were born in the United States. Virtually all of the adults became Christians or attended church in Kenya. While they did learn to speak English in Kenya, their preferred tongue remains Kikuyu and the services are conducted primarily in Kikuyu in deference to some of the older members who have weak English skills.

The most important aspect of modern Kikuyu culture for the purposes of this discussion is the family. In almost all Kenyan and African households, the mother is the center of activity. She often works outside the home and then does virtually all work around the house such as cooking, cleaning, child rearing and gardening or crop rising. Men work outside the home and socialize. While Christianity has influenced the structure of a Christian home, the woman is still the center of activity even while deferring to her husband or other men in situations where leadership is involved.

Men typically have a weak or non-existent relationship with their children in the early years and then pay more attention to them as they reach maturity. The focus of the family is on the boys since they will inherit land and carry on the family name. Girls will marry and often move away for reasons of genetics to avoid inbreeding in tribal areas. Children are obedient to their parents and especially submissive to the father who can be

physically harsh to all family members with total impunity. The European concept of a multi-generational extended family, for the most part does not exist.

### Founding<sup>1</sup>

As with all the other congregations described in this document, the Kenyan church began as a Bible study. In this case, one woman called another couple of women who were Kikuyus she had become acquainted with in Seattle's south central area. Over time, they sought to expand the group and began looking in the phone book for familiar sounding last names and asking at local churches in the Rainier Beach area. Gleaning from the local churches and word of mouth proved to be the best method for finding other Kikuyus.

Initially, it was an all-woman Bible study and they met in one another's homes. Over time, they encountered a reluctance to merely meet in an in-home program and they began looking for a place to meet while trying to interest a large enough number of participants to be able to have a more normal Sunday service.

When discussions became serious about finding a church, the men became more involved. They had already started attending the Bible studies, although in fewer numbers and less regularly than the women. However, when it came time to make this a more formal endeavor, one of the men agreed to take a leadership role. Stephen Maina had considerable Bible training, although he was not an ordained minister, and he agreed to become pastor.

The group approached Rainier Beach Presbyterian Church and asked if they could use the facilities. They are officially part of the greater Seattle presbytery even though

they are not yet a physically separate church. An arrangement was reached whereby the Kenyans could use the facility, initially free of charge for afternoon meetings. The congregation now meets Sundays from 4 to 6 PM.

### Current Disposition and Outlook

The congregation has been meeting regularly for three years and has grown from an initial gathering of twenty people to more than three times that size. Most of the growth has been due to active outreach on the part of the women and Stephen Maina. The services are lively with almost one hour of song, testimonials and prayer, forty-five minutes of sermon and fifteen minutes of announcements and administration. When English speaking people are present who do not understand Kikuyu, the sermon is done mostly in English. The English translation is not done very often as most of the services are not attended by outsiders.

The children will represent the biggest issue for the church. It is unlikely it will expand into a multi generational gathering since the children are very rapidly adapting to American culture and appear to be much more heavily influenced by inner city goings on than by church activities. Even in Kenya, the pull of American culture in music, dress and entertainment is strong. American rap music and R&B are featured on the programs of the predominant radio stations for young people. With the exception of a few older girls who grew up in Kenya, the children sit at the rear of the church and do not participate.

The church is raising funds to build their own small church. Tithes and offerings alone will not do it. Often, the weekly collection is less than \$100. Hence, a separate effort has been started to focus specifically on creating an independent church with its

own building. The leaders are hopeful but recognize a challenge is ahead of them. They must continue to grow in population but they acknowledge they will likely lose their second generation to Western churches or apathy. They believe it will take years to accumulate the funds needed to splinter away physically.

The outlook is guarded at best for this congregation. The Kenyan heritage is not known for strong family bonds and is less likely to maintain even normal strength bonds in America where many more outside influences are pulling at the children as they grow up than what the families experienced in Kenya. The group has not been active in building any kind of youth ministry. The ages of the children are spread out and the focus is definitely toward adult issues in Sunday services. Many of the younger children are growing up with limited knowledge of the Kikuyu language. Even though some of the sermons are in English, all the songs, all the prayers and all testimonials are in Kikuyu. The children are literally waiting out the service in many cases.

The church itself has very limited evangelical outreach and it is aimed almost entirely at Kikuyus. East Africa is very tribal and inter-tribal rivalries are strong and often unfriendly. What appears to Westerners as a likely expansion of outreach for church participation is viewed as improbable by those who are more familiar with Kenyan sociology. Although many tribes participated in the anti-colonial revolution, their rallying point was their hatred of British rule. Both Kenyatta and Moi, the two leaders who have been the successive presidents since the end of colonial Kenya were strong on tribal favoritism. The Kikuyu benefited greatly at the expense of surrounding tribes.

Thus, there is a huge cultural gap that must be overcome by both the local Seattle Kikuyu and any non-Kikuyu that might be considered for membership in the group. The

Kikuyus must be willing to conduct their services in another language and the non-Kikuyus must be willing to take on a further minority status and get past biases against another tribe. For those who think Christianity should be sufficient for this to happen, they are scripturally correct. However, past history will dictate otherwise.

The Kenyan church in Rainier Beach has an uphill battle in their attempt to flourish. They have not matured to the point where they have an evangelism program to sponsor missionaries in Kenya. The next three to five years will determine whether this church can grow where growth is measured not just in population but in ethnic mix, programs for the youth, evangelical outreach in the Seattle area and evangelism support in Kenya.

### **The Romanian Baptist Church, Kirkland, Washington**

#### Background

Romania is another country with an interesting cultural background and a troubled spiritual past. The people of Romania have only recently come out from under the yoke of Communism and brutal dictatorial rule. During that time, the primary church continued to operate as did two sham political parties. There was significant cross pollination between the dictatorship, the political parties and church leadership. Suspicions ran high among the common people as did an intense hatred. With the fall of the rest of the Eastern bloc, Romania's leadership was exposed. A march on the capital by disgruntled miners from Targa Jiu resulted in the overthrow of the Ceausescu. Unfortunately, he was immediately tried and hung three hours later. As a result, many of

the links to people and money went undiscovered and the distrust of those in power continues.

Baptists are one of the few growing denominations in Romania. They are highly evangelical and are willing to undergo persecution to get the gospel out. One example of such a persecution will provide insights on several issues relating to Romania and the Romanian Baptist Church in America.

Transylvania and the surrounding regions are doing better economically than most regions in Romania. There is also less persecution of Christian evangelicals due to its nearness to the borders of Hungary, Serbia and Russia. The region is accustomed to many different religions practicing their beliefs. One year ago, a young Baptist pastor and his wife decided to become church planters in the poorest region of Romania, in and around Targa Jiu where the mines have shut down and there is 35 percent unemployment.

Upon arrival, they began a small Baptist church through door to door witnessing. Eventually this small church began to go to small villages and hold outreach programs where they would invite the villagers to meet at a certain time and sing. Romanians love to sing and attendance is usually good. On their first such effort, just as the singing was to commence, the local Eastern Orthodox priest arrived with some thugs and threatened the evangelicals with baseball bats. The Baptists agreed to leave to avoid violence and went to their cars. The thugs approached their open windows and doused them with buckets of water. The Baptists drove off. The townspeople were then told they should return home now that the heretical troublemakers had been driven out.

The people thus had a chance to compare directly the two denomination's approach to worship and behavior. The result was a sudden swelling in the ranks of the Baptist church which now has over seventy attendees where once there were none.

People who come to America from Romania are distrustful of authority and are even slow to trust one another. They seek to keep differences to a minimum. And they still fear the secret police or other agents. They came from an environment where oppression could come from the politicians, the police, mafia-like gangs, the wealthy and the church. Most Romanians fled the country after the fall of Ceausescu because persecution continued but the borders were no longer a deadly crossing.

Once here, they have congregated socially and religiously along, mostly along denominational lines. In the Seattle area are Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, Unitarian and Baptist congregations. The most active in outreach are the Pentecostal and the Baptists.

### Founding<sup>2</sup>

Romanian Baptists originally began meeting in the Renton area. The gathering was started as a Bible study which was founded by local couples reaching out to one another. Soon, they were reaching out to Romanian speaking people in Tacoma. They originated as a more formal congregation in a small church in Renton and continued to meet there for more than three years.

Almost from the beginning, they had plans to form a church, and they moved from Bible study to a church in less than a year. Pastor Jean Boldor, after completing his seminary work in Canada, moved to the Seattle area and started the Romanian Baptist Church. He was active and evangelical. They reached out to all Romanian speaking

peoples and eventually built a congregation of over 100 people. All services were conducted in Romanian.

Once a critical mass had been achieved, the congregation assessed its demographics and made a decision to split along ethnic and geographic lines. It turned out that most of the people commuting up from Tacoma were Moldavians who preferred to congregate with other Moldavians. The ethnic Romanians were mostly from the Kirkland/Redmond area in Seattle's eastside. The decision was to start two new locations: Moldavians in Tacoma and Romanians in Kirkland.

The pastor chose to stay with the smaller, Moldavian group because he felt they needed greater support. In his opinion a change in meeting place, splitting off from a familiar, albeit different group and then a change in leadership would have been too much. Despite the fact Pastor Boldor is an ethnic Romanian, living in Seattle, he makes the commute each Sunday to Tacoma to lead the Moldavians in worship.

The Romanian Baptist Church has worked out an arrangement with a Korean church in Kirkland. They now meet there under the leadership of Pastor Cornell Tercu. The congregation considers themselves to be an evangelical church with a desire for evangelism here and back home. However, their evangelism has competed for time with their efforts in gathering and gleaning to build critical mass. Still, they call frequently on area Romanians they find via referral or who contact them via the internet. Often these immigrants are of a non-spiritual background due to the secularization of the Eastern Church during Communism. Steadily, new converts are won and the body of believers is growing in the Seattle and Tacoma areas.

### Current Disposition and Outlook

A major concern each of the pastors have is the next generation. They feel there must be programs to get the children involved or they will lose them. In order to run effective programs they must have leadership and that leadership must be drawn from the body of believers. The size of the organization must be sufficient to have enough families with school age children and the leaders to run them; hence the emphasis on population growth.

The other concern they have that is unique to ethnic churches is false piety. This concern is especially sensitive in the Moldavian congregation. Moldavia is a separate country and has essentially re-elected the old Communist regime. Religious persecution is very real and very brutal. Since most Moldavians are here on a temporary status, they will do what is necessary to avoid returning to this very backward and oppressive country. Religious persecution is grounds for amnesty. The most persecuted religious group is evangelical Christians. Both pastors suspect they have people feigning Christianity to get their permanent status. They are still going to make every effort to make these conversions real and permanent.

The most overriding, ever-present concern is the issue of Western materialism and the “good life.” One of the reasons these people congregate in the first place is because they are struggling to get along and become part of their new country. Over time, they adapt. As this adaptation progresses, the pull of the secular American way is considerable. Sundays, they suspect, will come under pressure. As of now, they are three hour affairs. They feel the older people will continue to participate but they are concerned about those under 40 years of age.

The biggest impediment to growth in the estimation of the leadership is immigration. At times the number of immigrants to the Seattle area is sizeable. At other times, it is meager or non-existent. They view it as a numbers game where a certain percent are going to be interested in religious services, a certain percent are open to evangelical discussion, and a certain percent are hardened secularists and view religion as form of mysticism a la the teaching of last forty years of government controlled education.

Both these churches see the need for strong evangelical efforts and both have dedicated sufficient resources to such efforts. The outlook for these churches is cautiously optimistic.

### **The Armenian Fellowship, Redmond, Washington**

#### Background

Armenians are proud of their heritage as the world's first Christian state, dated to A.D. 301. However, the author and the other Armenian evangelical pastors believe, that the Armenian people have endured decades of spiritual bankruptcy brought forth by the Eastern Orthodox Church. The number of evangelicals in Armenia is currently under 5 percent, but because of recent developments in the freedom of religion it is on the rise. Armenia suffered for more than fifty years under the dictatorship of the Communist regime. As a result the people are mostly atheists, and the public and private corruption of morality is rampant. Out of nearly six million Armenians in the world, less than half live in Armenia. The other half is divided equally among other former republics of the Soviet Union and 120 other nations around the world.

Armenia underwent a violent upheaval politically and culturally in the twentieth century. More than 1.5 million Armenians were massacred by the Turks in 1915; their land was invaded by the Russian Army and parts of it were annexed to form the republic of Azerbaijan. What was left of the land for the Armenians was divided into two parcels, called Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict between these two republics and Azerbaijan continued after the fall of Communism in an eight-year long war, and even after the cease fire the tension still has not diminished. The people of these two sister countries are still bitter over the events of the last century and have not forgotten the brutality imposed on them.

Armenia is landlocked and is only 10 percent agricultural, so it depends heavily on the industriousness of the people. The neighbors are Georgia to the north, Azerbaijan to the east, Iran and Nakhjiravan to the south and Turkey to the west. This country is comprised mostly of Armenians, and minority of Yezidi Kurds. People from other former republics of the former Soviet Union reside there as well. Poverty has caused large numbers of Armenians to leave the country for a better future, and this has caused many splits in the families adding to the downward spiral of this once culturally strong country.

In 1988, an earthquake in the northern city of Spitak helped to bring about a powerful revival in the entire country with a sense of national repentance before the Lord and a resurgence of interest in the Scriptures. Many aid agencies went to their rescue and some are still involved in humanitarian work among the people. The evangelical churches in Armenia are very fervent in their faith, and their style of praise and worship is very powerful. The signature of these churches is that they are very passionate about reaching out to their neighbors and each congregation has missionaries among the atheist and

Muslim countries of the area. Armenia is a key country to reaching out to the least reached people in the world because of its geographic location and the freedom of religion.

### Founding

In 1988, through a local pastor, my family was introduced to another Armenian Christian family in the suburbs surrounding Seattle. We had been here for about a year. Shortly after the first meeting we began to meet in a home Bible study, and we invited other Armenian Christian families to join us. These weekly gatherings continued for many years while my wife and I focused our efforts on the Iranian ministry and did not really have time to think about reaching out to the Armenians. In late 1991 the Lord prompted me to share my burden for the lost among the 5,000 Armenians in the greater Seattle area with my fellow believers in our Bible study group. My brother-in-law and other key members of the fellowship saw the vision and agreed to cooperate.

We moved our Bible study to Overlake Christian Church, and started a fellowship for Armenians under Overlake's leadership and authority. With the experience that we developed working with the Iranian group it was not difficult to see the future, especially since we had a group of about fifteen people to start with. Overlake Church asked me and my brother-in-law to assume the leadership of the group. This fellowship had a great start and continues to this day. The group has not grown to a very large number, but our intention was not to form a large group. Our vision was to reach out to Armenians in the greater Seattle area and to partner with other ministries to influence the nation all over the

world, especially in Armenia, where more than 90 percent of its three million people are unsaved.

As a result of our local evangelism, several hundred people have heard the gospel message and about fifty individuals have converted to Christianity. Since many of the converts are not fluent in the Armenian language they attend Russian speaking churches. The group meets twice a month on Saturday evenings. Evening programs are similar to a worship service where there are songs, prayers, testimonies and preaching of the Word. The services are conducted in Armenian with simultaneous English translations. The children and the youth remain in the service during the worship time and then the children are dismissed to have a special program afterward while the youth stay through out the service.

#### Current Disposition and Outlook

Unlike the Kenyan and the Romanian congregations, the Armenian Church here has viewed itself as part of the worldwide body of Christ literally and therefore set its programs and goals in a much greater context. As a result, the Armenian fellowship has had a profound effect outside the Seattle area. By partnering with other ministries, especially Love Armenia, we have had a successful ministry among Armenians and others such as Kurds back in the motherland. Through three missionary trips to Armenia our fellowship members have had highly effective and productive ministries among the people there. Through collaboration with other key people and ministries, we have been able to purchase musical instruments and recording devices so the Christians in Armenia can be more effective in worship. Other financial support has been provided to the

national leaders so they could carry on the gospel among the people. We have sent them money and bought them cars and motorcycles to aid them in their own outreach. Church buildings have been renovated by our offerings. In the poverty stricken area of Yerevan, the capital city, where a strong church is flourishing, we provided the majority of the funds for a 1,200 seat church building. This building, in addition to housing a vibrant church congregation, will be used for a Bible college and a youth club to reach the younger generation that has very little in the way of healthy amusements.

During the last visit, four of us teamed up with a large group of evangelists from the local churches to reach out to the people of Yerevan with the gospel message. Several people were reached with the gospel message through these efforts, and over a hundred people made decisions for the Lord. Among them were business owners, orphans, and prostitutes. More than one thousand New Testaments along with other Christian literature were distributed during that trip and excellent relationships with different church leaders were established. We are continuing these efforts and I believe it is through our expanding key partnerships that Armenia can be won for the Lord. From there the Lord is going to reach people in several Muslim and atheist countries in the region.

### **The Iranian Christian Church in Seattle, Redmond, Washington**

#### **Background**

Iran, the second largest country in the Middle East and at one time with the largest military force in the region, was the superpower of the region during much of the twentieth century. During the reign of the former Shah, the Iranians enjoyed the latest advancements of the Western culture and were the object of envy to neighboring

countries. With a mild climate in most cities and some of the most beautiful mountains and beaches in the world, the prosperous people of Iran enjoyed a glorious time during this period.

In February of 1979, the powerful and legendary kingdom of Iran, which was once again on the rise, after more than 2,500 years of continued existence, came to its knees before the forces of Islam led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shah was forced to go into exile due to his illness, and the government was overthrown in what is now known as the Islamic Revolution.

In a matter of months the country of Iran, once known for its progressive developments, went backward in time at least 150 years in almost every aspect. The women were forced to cover their hair with the veil and wear long robes in accordance with Islamic law. The attire of the men was changed from the latest European fashions to the miserable and sad garments that Islam demands its followers wear as sign of humility. The political leaders either fled the country or were executed without proper trial. Many of the elite and the educated class found ways to flee and take up residence in Western countries. Others were executed or subjected to ongoing persecution by the government. There was no aspect of the society and people's lives that remained immune to the brutal policies of the regime.<sup>3</sup>

All of this was done under the name of Islam. The Christian churches were barred from evangelism. The key leaders of the churches were put to death, and blame was placed on fanatic groups. The personal hatred between Khomeini, a Shiite, and the dictator of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Baathist, turned into an eight-year war. This

conflict left over a million Iranians dead while others lost their arms and legs or were permanently damaged by chemical weapons.

In all these efforts the regime did not realize the extent to which they were fueling the fire of hatred toward Islam. Currently the people, especially the younger generation who attend universities, are taking a hard line against the government and are constantly seeking ways to protest the regime. The government, in an effort to balance the situation, is reducing the tension by allowing certain freedoms. But many believe this may be too little and too late. The younger generation is examining other belief systems and is no longer satisfied with what they have lived under for more than twenty-five years. Now the sixty-five million Muslims who live in Iran are ready to hear the gospel message.

### Founding

My wife and I moved to the Seattle area in October of 1987, immediately after our marriage. We soon began a Bible study in our home to honor God, and prayed that He would use it for His glory. In early 1988, we met a young Christian couple. The husband was American and the wife was Armenian from Iran. They both had a heart for evangelism. They joined our Bible study, and we began praying for the Lord to use us to reach the Iranian Muslims in the greater Seattle area. These meetings were entirely different in every aspect from the Armenian Bible studies, which were taking place in someone else's home. In February of 1988 God honored our prayers.

Through an American woman we met a very open Muslim family, ripe for the gospel. Soon after this family heard the gospel they received Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, and our Bible studies turned into more discipleship and outreach programs.

This family invited their friends to join us and hear the gospel. Our home was open on Friday nights for this occasion. Other evenings were used for more individual evangelism. Through word of mouth, a couple other Iranian Christian families heard about us and decided to join us.

Soon our house was filled with over twenty Iranians every Friday night. Everyone was eager to know more about Christ and His teachings. It was then that I felt something more was happening than just few people coming to the Lord and some others being evangelized. This was a church that was about to be planted. According to Getz, “In order to restore us to fellowship, God designed and unfolded a wonderful mystery called the church.”<sup>4</sup> So I asked the people to pray that these meetings would continue under the authority of the Holy Spirit through a local church. They agreed and began to pray fervently. They were truly open and willing to any direction that I led them. Their passionate compliance compelled me to follow the biblical model closely. With the agreement of the members my wife and I placed this ministry under the auspices of a local church, and became personally accountable to their leadership. We all agreed to do this until the time that the Lord would bring a church out of this group of people.

The Lord miraculously answered our prayers. He opened the doors of Overlake Christian Church and I shared my vision with their elders. They fully embraced the vision and gave me the go ahead to move to the church. They even assigned a missionary intern to help me out and offered \$300 for purchasing Bibles and Christian literature, and up to the same amount monthly for other expenses. I accepted the offer for the first month, but did not see the need for any more support for the future since I was going to teach the art

of good stewardship to our people. We still are very grateful that Overlake Church gave us a place to worship and a godly man to work with us to continue the ministry.

Our home remained open for all the people, but the services were conducted at the church building. Many people, especially former Muslims, were uncomfortable and unfamiliar with attendance at a Christian church. The relocation caused the attendance to decline over the next six months. Looking back I can see that the growth of the group would have been more consistent if we had stayed at our home longer, at least until the time that a larger core group had been formed. The group could have gone under the authority of the local church and continued its fellowships at our home. But we had already made the commitment.

In the six months that we had met at our home, the attendance grew to over twenty people but the number of people that came to the church continued to drop. Eventually all the people that were converted began attending Overlake or other local churches. However, we did not despair but rather, we sensed that God was only starting a movement for a greater cause.

The Lord brought an experienced pastor to mentor me and my wife to prepare us for His work. This pastor was from Pakistan and was familiar with working with such groups. He became my mentor for the next twelve years, until his passing. His influence on my life and ministry life was profound. When he joined us, the group had declined to only a handful of individuals. There were even times that the only attendees were my wife and I. I believe it is during such times that the Lord is examining the heart of the ones with the call. It was easy to preach to an eager crowd of twenty, but can two people get together and worship the Lord, and then the preacher would preach to a congregation

of one, his wife! Well that happened. Many people thought I had lost my mind, but I had not lost my mind; what I had lost was my pride. I used to reflect on the closing words of the prophet Habakkuk, which says: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crops fail and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.” (Hab. 3:17-19) The Sovereign Lord was in process of building my character and was preparing me *to go on the heights*.

After arrival of that pastor, the situation remained stagnant and my wife had to take maternity leave. So the number remained at two, and remained that for several weeks. During this time many people would come to visit our services because they knew that there was an Iranian fellowship in its inception, but there were no converts.

Since people were not attending to maintain the livelihood of the group, I decided to become proactive about communications. Correspondence via letter helped people remain in touch with the Iranian fellowship, and they were constantly reminded that we were still meeting. The weekly letters contained news about the fellowship, a mini-sermon, an excerpt from Psalms or Persian Christian poetry, and a weekly meditation program. I had to type the letters using a Persian word processor. This commitment was very time consuming since I had never used Persian typewriter before.

But the Lord provided the strength. Letter writing continued for about a year. I believe the Lord honored the faithfulness of the ones involved to Him and to His work in Seattle among the Iranians. He brought a key Christian person to our group after two years of meetings. He was a former Muslim who was led to Christ by an American

evangelist while attending university. His story of conversion was similar to the mother and daughter who were the catalysts of our fellowship. He is currently the senior elder of our church and our worship minister.

His appearance and continued participation was a sign from God that He had started this movement and He was the one who was adding to our small group. In the following months, family after family came to our fellowship. Salvation and redemption by the blood of Christ began to touch the lives of numerous Iranian people in the greater Seattle area. The first converts witnessed to others, and now we have up to four generations at a time in our congregation. New converts began to witness to people from their families and friends all over the world. This witnessing took place even in Iran, and now hundreds of people know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior because of the witness of these people.

#### Current Disposition and Outlook

Our church has grown in the past fifteen years. It is one of the oldest and largest Iranian congregations in United States. There are two possible strategies for continued growth. One is to continue to grow and have programs for the more mature Christians to disciple the younger converts. The other is to split to smaller churches to more directly relate to individuals and their needs and provide more opportunities for personal growth. Both have advantages and disadvantages, so we have tried a method that offers the best of both worlds. The Sunday services and Friday night Bible studies meet in one location, but the mid-week prayer meetings meet at two locations and are led by two of our elders. Each group has its own worship team and leader associate. When the leadership of our

church is mature enough then the congregation can split into smaller and more effective cell groups to provide more opportunities for ministry and growth of the individuals. I believe to maintain the strength and the unity of the church even at that time, we should have our Sunday services together.

This church has been instrumental in creating a circle of believers in two other cities, Vancouver, British Columbia, and Las Vegas, Nevada. Follow-up ministries are in progress to help these groups of believers to grow and develop into churches in those localities.

### **Conclusion**

Culture plays a significant role both in the formation of the church and in its perpetuation. In those cultures where there is a history of multiple generations of family living and worshipping together, the ability to perpetuate the church is greatly facilitated. In those cultures, such as the Kenyans, where the family splits up shortly after the children marry, there is a real challenge to hold onto the younger generation as part of the congregation. However, despite their ethnic cultures, all these churches are under significant pressure from the powerfully penetrating American culture. Those churches which develop a strong youth program combined with a strong outreach and evangelism program will be the churches that survive and thrive in the coming years.

## ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Herrick interview by author, 8 November 2003, Seattle.
2. Charles R. Herrick interview by author, 22 November 2003, Seattle.
3. Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 233-248.
4. Gene A. Getz, *The Measure of a Church*. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 30.

## CHAPTER 5

### ETIOLOGICAL SUMMARY: THE FUNDAMENTALS AND THE METHODS FOR STARTING ETHNIC CHURCHES FOR THE UNREACHED PEOPLE

#### **Church Foundation**

We should not be ignorant of what we as a race of humans have learned over time, but we should not rely solely upon our own understanding – especially in something as dear to God’s heart as the ongoing building of His church.<sup>1</sup> When we understand both the foundation of this building effort and the fundamental tenets for carrying out the building process, then we are likely to proceed with God’s blessing and assurance of His success.

Jesus said “...on this Rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matt 16:18) In this sentence Jesus disclosed His plan for nurturing and protecting His flock while extending its sphere of influence to gather for Himself a bride called the Church. Sadly though, Christ’s main point in this sentence has been misunderstood and misapplied down through the centuries. However, from studying the Book of Acts and church history, we learn that the Apostles knew precisely what Christ meant by this statement in the above verse.<sup>2</sup> By knowing the context in which Jesus is uttering these words, and by familiarity with the Greek language, the individual in any era can understand what Jesus was talking about when he referred to the Rock. He was not referring to anyone else (Peter, or petros as a free standing stone) but to Himself as

the Foundation (or petras which is a bedrock) and the Corner Stone of what is known to be the universal Church. No other church has ever been built to pass the test of time, except the one that was built on this sure Foundation. Clearly the Apostle Paul understood the verse above, and realized his mission as a church planter in the first century. To the church in Corinth he wrote:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.... For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds, for no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 3:6, 7, 9-11)

Mixing metaphors, Paul speaks of the church in Corinth as both a field and a building. Church planting is done through co-laboring with the Master Gardener and the Master Builder Himself, planting seeds of the gospel and proper watering from which churches grow. The latter is strictly the work of the Lord and does not include any human involvement. The Church is an institution, the foundation of which is laid by Jesus Christ and we are to submit to Him as laborers in His entrepreneurial enterprise. We are to work as the Holy Spirit guides and empowers us to accomplish the will of the Master for the glory of the Father.

Establishing an ethnic church in the Western Hemisphere follows the very same steps seen in the establishment of any other church. The foundation and the cornerstone of this kind of church must be laid on Christ the Lord as much as any other church must. Anyone attempting to establish such a church may be mindful of the same instructions that Apostle Paul provided in passages similar to one that was cited above. The difference in establishing an ethnic church is that there are new challenges that one must be aware of and prepare for them.<sup>3</sup>

## **Church Mission**

The world and the existing powers that control it have stood in opposition to the establishment of this Church for the past 2000 years. This opposition began very early on and continues into this century in various forms. The most severe opposition has historically come when the church has engaged in large scale witnessing and evangelizing. Ironically, the opposition during that time has not only failed to inhibit church growth but it has led to tremendous revivals and growth spurts in her 2000-year history. The key to the successful growth of the church has been to engage in forceful penetration in the dark world to seek and to save sinners, as Christ did in His earthly ministry. (Luke 19:10) In this spiritual warfare, the Church needs to use the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit, which Christ talks about in the Book of Acts. (Acts 1:8) The church is called to forge ahead, full force, with the power that was provided for her on the day of Pentecost, and the promise is "... that the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matt. 16:18)

Today, the challenge to the church comes in the midst of extreme opposition. The church, the Bride of Christ, is under tremendous attack, and there is so much ground yet to be conquered for Christ.<sup>4</sup> As the Bride Groom is getting ready to take His Bride for the Celestial Marriage, the Enemy, knowing his days are numbered, is dispatching all his forces to work against the propagation of the gospel around the world. Ironically, from sheer number standpoint, it has never occurred in the history of the church that she has expanded her territories as much as today. In the past century we saw two World Wars, which had a potential to slow down the growth of the church, but the church is now

propagating fastest where the battle is fiercest. According to the extensive study done by George Otis the biggest battle ground left for the church is the World of Islam.<sup>5</sup> This conclusion does not intend to say the World of Islam is the only significant battle left to fight. Certainly there are large opportunities in pursuing the Hindu and Buddhist populations. But other big obstacles once thought to be almost unscalable only a few years ago are now much less daunting.

Communism, once a great challenge to the advancement of the gospel in certain regions, even a threat to Christianity itself, is now on its knees before Christ the King.<sup>6</sup> More converts are coming to Christ from former and/or present Communist countries than ever in the history of the church at anytime under any political regime. But this is not the time to celebrate our victories, because despite the growth, there are still many more people that have not been reached with the gospel than at any other time in the history of the church.

What are we doing to reach them? The missionaries are busy with their Father's work, and some of us are involved in supporting them in various ways where we live. But what about the rest of the unreached individuals who are from various ethnicities that live in the Western World? The writer of First Book tells us "men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." (1 Chr. 12:32) Now that the nations have come to our neighborhoods what is our strategy to reach out to them and turn them into missionaries among their own people? As the subject of this dissertation suggests and the material that has been laid out in the previous chapters indicates, we can conclude that we need to integrate immigrants and their next few generations into the

body of Christ, via the ethnic churches. These churches can nourish them effectively as disciples of Christ and make them in turn disciple-makers.

All missionary work that the Church does must be related to the missionary work of God. Stuart Murray's practical book on church planting provides the first and most fundamental theological concept in the area of missions around the corner or around the world. It is called *missio Dei*. Missiologists have increasingly been drawn to this phrase to express the conviction that mission is not the invention, responsibility, or program of human beings, but flows from the character and purposes of God. Historically, the term *mission* was first used by the theologians to refer to the acts of God, rather than the activities of the churches.<sup>7</sup> God is the Missionary, who sent His only begotten Son to die a substitutionary death to save the people from their sins. The same God then sent the Holy Spirit as His gift to convict the world and regenerate the ones who receive Christ as savior. The Holy Spirit's missionary purposes are cosmic in scope, concerned with the "restoration of all things." (Acts 3:21)

### **Availing Ourselves of the Opportunities**

Establishing ethnic churches in the Western Hemisphere, as part of church planting strategy, with greater purpose in mind, in concept is no different from church planting for the local people in the Western Hemisphere. The main principles stay the same, with applications suited and tailored to reach the otherwise unreached ethnic groups with the same gospel. Focusing on the Great Commission one view is to evangelize the ethnic people and then to integrate them into the already existing churches for discipleship purposes. This view can be justified by an evangelist, who, referring to

the New Testament says that in the eleventh chapter of Book of Acts, the Gentiles and the Jews were all integrated into one local church. The argument provided in the following pages opens this idea further and demonstrates that even in that church the Jews and the Gentiles were identified separately.

In *Rethinking the Successful Church* Samuel Rima states that a church-planter can follow the example of Paul from the Book of Acts and present an argument that evangelism is only effective when the proper follow-up measures are taken after the conversion and the person has reached maturity and a stage that he or she can be a disciple-maker.<sup>8</sup> Discipleship is the main thrust of the Great Commission. According to Rima this kind of growth, involving moving through stages from conversion to a disciple-maker can take place in only an environment that is spiritually safe and nurturing. This establishment or institution is known as no other than the “church.”<sup>9</sup> Paul, as the evangelist/church-planter, established churches wherever he preached the gospel and introduced the people to Christ. Both views are biblical but naïve in many ways, because they view the main objective only from one perspective. A balanced view to this subject begs a fresh look at evangelism versus church planting.

### **Church Planting for Effective Harvest**

The basic problem is the contextual issue. The New Testament tells us about the mission of the earliest churches going into a world which was without churches. Pioneer evangelism into virgin territory has involved planting of new churches throughout history and in every area of the globe. When mission takes the gospel into regions where there are no churches, Murray states, that there is a reasonably close parallel to the situation

described in the New Testament with the Apostle Paul and others.<sup>10</sup> In some circumstances due to cultural differences it may require different methods from those used in the first century. Some missionaries have resisted the establishment of new congregations formally and have concentrated on winning individual converts for various reasons, such as safety of the converts. However, most of them have recognized that church planting is a vital part of their calling, and for some it is their primary focus. Throughout the world these churches have continued to flourish, long after the missionaries have left the area, through men and women who took responsibility to carry on God's work. It is for this reason that Jesus gave the church the gift of "Apostles." The words *apostle* and *apostolic* come from the Greek language and their translations into English from Latin have produced the words *mission* and *missionary*. The purpose of this gift was to build up the body of Christ through establishing churches in unchurched regions of the world.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, in most Western countries, our context for planting churches is very different from the pioneering mission elsewhere in the world, or in the New Testament. The need for continuing evangelism in a nation where a significant proportion of the populations have little or no connection with the Christian community is evident. Planting new churches may be an effective way to engage in such evangelism, but the context is undeniably different from the New Testament. Any attempts to find a New Testament basis of contemporary church planting must acknowledge this fact.

My experience is validated by Hasselgrave's explanation that establishing ethnic churches, in a way, is a hybrid of these two cases described here.<sup>12</sup> The unreached people are in a church area, however; due to cultural, language and other ethnic barriers they

are mostly deprived of the benefit of the evangelism programs of local churches. Some churches have tried to have English language classes, because of cultural differences their efforts have not borne much fruit. No usual church planting that is targeted at Westerners can effectively reach these people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Fulfilling the Great Commission**

As described earlier, in order to reach these people effectively with the gospel, a focused ministry which directly targets them and intends to meet their needs is necessary. Some of the members of these groups do not even speak the English language, and as a result they are intimidated to mingle with the Westerners. Additionally, most of them do not practice their religion, however they adhere to its principles and customs, which shield them from the Western churches. Establishing churches for an ethnic population within a locality in the Western Hemisphere demonstrates a strong commitment to incorporate aspects of evangelism among the respective people groups. This kind of church planting offers local churches opportunities to become sending churches and to involve their congregation members in a mission beyond their culture without leaving their own homes and jobs.

Most of the ethnic population in the Western world either emigrates from areas in which community living is the way of life, or upon their arrival they associate closely with one another and thus form a cultural community. The concept of Christianity presented in the New Testament is also very much community living. According to Murray outreach missions among ethnic populations in the Western Hemisphere has the advantage of combining “Mission” and “Community” in a way that the New Testament

seems to endorse but which few other church strategies, activities or evangelistic methods do as effectively.<sup>13</sup>

### **Importance of the People Groups**

Murray argues that the phrase *panta ta ethne* in the Great Commission, which normally is translated as “all nations,” should be translated as “all people groups.”<sup>14</sup> Jesus does not just deal with people on an individual basis. He also refers to and relates to people groups such as tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, children, and the Pharisees. His approach and message vary from group to group. In the Book of Acts, the advance of the gospel and the growth of the church are measured not only territorially but in terms of new groups of people receiving the message. Luke tells us “so the word of God spread...and a large number of *priests* became obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7) When the persecuted Christians were scattered after Stephen’s martyrdom, they traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. It is recorded in Acts that they told the good news of Jesus to the *Jews*. Some of these people who were from Cyprus and Cyrene went to preach the gospel to the *Greeks* in Antioch. The following verse indicates that people from both people groups believed and turned to the Lord for salvation. (Acts 11:19-21) It was at this time, the believers of Christ, no longer being of only Jewish background, were called Christians. (Acts 11:26) Similarly, we read that the prominent *Greek women* and many *Greek men* were added to the body of believers, after they heard the gospel from Paul and Silas. (Acts 17:12) Paul and Barnabas referred to the *Jews* and told them because they rejected the gospel they had to turn to the Gentiles. (Acts 13:46) When Paul and the Apostles based in Jerusalem met to discuss their mission strategy, their division

of labor was not territorial but in terms of people groups- Peter would concentrate on the *Jews*, Paul on the *Gentiles*. Paul describes this division of labor in the Epistle to the Galatians 2:8-10.

As the world becomes more globalized, the Western countries become more and more a place that new types of people groups are being formed. Those groups are identified from others not by their financial or political differences, but they are identified by their language and customs. This new territory must be influenced for Christ as long as the opportunity remains available. The need can simply be met by a focused ministry that effectively reaches out to each people group in every locality in a way that is comprehensible to them. The first advantage of this approach is that the individuals from the ethnic groups recognize that others love and care about them to an extent that they are ready to enter their sphere. Upon receiving the gospel, the individual from an ethnic group would obviously have questions about the differences between his or her religious worldview versus that of Christianity. These questions cannot be easily and thoroughly answered by ones who are not familiar with the background of the individual from an ethnic group. Helping the unbeliever to see the light of the gospel and the change that it brings to his or her life is the most rewarding experience anyone can ever experience. For the individual to grow spiritually in the knowledge and grace of the Lord it takes special care and a tailored discipleship program to change his or her worldview and beliefs. This special care is due to the unusual background and worldview that the individual had prior to conversion and needs to be gradually changed and replaced by a biblical worldview.<sup>15</sup>

Allowing this transition to take place in an environment that includes others from the same ethnic group helps individuals assist one another in terms they can identify with.

The more mature ones from the same background teach the younger Christians, making the progress more effective and more thorough. At a certain point, the individual can reach to anyone in his or her path, but especially effective, among his or her own peers. The new evangelist learns how to uproot the bad tree and to plant the good seed in the hearts of the people that once he or she was like them.<sup>16</sup> The individual can also be mobilized to evangelize anywhere around the world among his own people - even in the home country as a missionary - without cultural or other common challenges which a Western missionary is expected to face. They can be thought of as ones that went through the language and cultural training prior to conversion to Christianity just the opposite of the foreign missionaries.

### **Fundamental Methods for Starting an Ethnic Church**

The outreach to the ethnic groups can be initiated in numerous ways. One of the characteristics of this ministry is to be sensitive to the physical needs of the individuals. In the beginning of the outreach, meeting needs is a very practical and easy way to gain trust. Usually listening to them while they are expressing their ideas, desires and ambitions opens a door to friendship. In meeting their needs and listening to them the evangelist can find common ground to begin sharing the gospel in a way that the gospel message touches the individual's heart and mind.

In many ways this is no different from sharing the gospel with any individual anywhere in the world; except in the focused ministry the evangelist is more intimately familiar with the person's desires and the evangelist can relate better to the person as far as the places that he or she is talking about and the culture that surrounds his or her

world. The evangelist who is familiar with an ethnic culture can help the individuals from that group to break through their corrupt worldview and to be introduced to the Kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup>

The ministry under the guidance of the Holy Spirit can either start from scratch via an individual, or it can begin via a family, who is familiar with the given ethnic group. This ministry is best if it begins under the spiritual authority of a local church. In evangelizing the member of an ethnic group the spiritual battle is both fierce and unusual. The evangelist must be aware of this fact and be alert and prepared. This kind of ministry needs to be bathed in constant intercessory prayer and fasting more than usual since the light is penetrating in untouched territories that the forces of darkness have ruled for centuries. It is breaking new ground. It is not much different from the times during which Nehemiah was rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. After hearing that there was opposition to rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls, he plotted to continue the rebuilding process with an awareness and preparedness. His new plan involved building and defending simultaneously:

“From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half was equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.” (Neh. 4:16-17)

The half that were equipped for battle is a metaphor for the people that pray for the evangelist who is co-laboring with the Holy Spirit in building God’s Kingdom in the heart of the unbeliever. The evangelist must also remain in a spirit of prayer to know how to effectively “provide the material for the building of the walls.” It is the Lord who is

building the walls and we are merely providing the material, which is the metaphor for the words of eternal life, the message of the gospel.

To arrive at the intent of what is presented here, an individual, who is planning to evangelize the members of the unreached ethnic groups, must find a circle of believers who will commit themselves to pray for such a ministry.<sup>18</sup> The evangelist must be under the protection of the spiritual authority of a local church, to benefit from “political immunity,” while entering the territories that for a long time Satan has invaded.<sup>19</sup> It is best if what he or she starts, after successful evangelism and birth of new Christians, remains a small group of people from that ethnicity in the form of a fellowship or a Bible study with prayer meetings. This incubator idea provides the new Christian a means for proper nourishment and training to both listen to God and talk to Him constantly and earnestly. These fresh caught fish (referring to the metaphor that Christ used to call Peter to follow Him as fishers of men in Luke 5:10) can comfortably swim in the small lake, which is made up of the same kind of fish, and as a result won't be intimidated by the type or the size of the other fish.<sup>20</sup> This approach will allow more time for natural growth in various areas. Furthermore, their special diet will help them grow to maturity more completely and more efficiently than if they were to swim in an ocean full of various larger and/or unfamiliar fish.

This work usually starts by evangelizing outside the walls of the church. It requires a lot of personal interaction. Usually it involves inviting the prospects to friendship through occasional get-togethers such as dinner at home and to engage in conversations with them. Relation-building is a very effective way to bridge the gap, and then use that bridge to reach the prospect's mind and eventually his heart. The

evangelism approach presented by D. James Kennedy, called “Evangelism Explosion”<sup>21</sup> provides a good model for reaching the unreached in the local area, including the people from different ethnic groups. Usually, evangelism efforts are concentrated on a few individuals or preferably one individual. The most effective ways to evangelize to an individual from an ethnic group is as follows:

1. Meet with him or her individually
2. Allow sufficient time for the meeting
3. Respect his or her opinion
4. Let him or her talk and ask questions
5. Provide concise answers
6. Not make the person uncomfortable by rushing him or her into making a decision to accept Christ’s invitation<sup>22</sup>

Many people from ethnic groups have misunderstandings about Christianity and its major doctrines. The evangelist must be patient to listen to and address those concerns and then he or she must provide the biblical principles and worldview to clarify them in the prospect’s mind.<sup>23</sup> The evangelist must remember that the Holy Spirit is the One who takes the spoken words and convicts the hearts of the listener. As stated in Chapter 2, one needs to stay away from arguments, and maintain focus around subjects that the Holy Spirit then uses to convict the individual according to God’s Word. People from ethnic groups more than others have problems with the biblical concept of God, the Holy Trinity, the Sonship of Jesus Christ, His deity, His crucifixion, the authority of the Bible, the original sin, judgment, and life after death. Their problem is not only due to mere ignorance, but because of their system of belief that they have been taught for many years and are totally against the fundamental doctrines of the Bible. Knowledge of their

background and their beliefs helps clarify their mind, since they are rarely familiar with their own belief system except what they learned verbally. Knowledge of the Bible and a sacrificial love for the Lord are irreplaceable tools in any evangelism. And in the same way that Peter had to love Christ in order to qualify to feed and to take care of Jesus' flock (John 21), the evangelist must also witness for the Lord out of his or her love for Him.

As the case histories in Chapter 4 demonstrate, the second means by which an ethnic church can get started is by the "Call to Assemble." This one also can start by a lay leader or an evangelist. The intention here is to call evangelical Christians from an ethnic group together to meet regularly and use the group as an evangelical base to reach out to people from that group. The meetings of these people can start from home fellowships or Bible studies, under spiritual protection of a local church. As their numbers increase they can use the local church facilities for their meetings. The local church must play a vital role in equipping the group to best utilize their resources in their outreaches. Some Christians from ethnic groups do get together, but don't really feel burdened to reach out to others in their sphere of influence. It is a pity to have such a perfect setting for an effective reach out yet lose that sense of responsibility to reach out to people for whom they are probably the only earthly hope.

The third method for starting an ethnic-based outreach is by "Gleaning and Gathering." It starts when an individual senses the urgency to reach out to an ethnic group. He or she visits small and large local churches and shares his or her burden with the leaders of those churches. After allowing the leadership of those churches to catch the vision, the individual can write letters to the ethnic participants of those local churches

and invite them to gather for the purpose of fellowship and evangelism. The participants do not need to change their church affiliation. They need to recognize that this is a multi-church effort to reach out to a specific group of unreached people. These kinds of efforts are currently practiced in reaching out to groups such as prisoners, unmarried pregnant women, and homeless people. For example, individuals from various churches may form a team to reach out to the prisoners in the area. These individuals usually are people that have first hand experience with the impact that imprisonment can have on the individuals and their families. Or several churches may purchase a home to shelter unmarried pregnant women to help them bring their children into this world. If the child is unwanted they can help them with finding families to adopt them. The same approach is valid for sheltering homeless people in a building and having ministers from various churches cooperate to manage the affairs of that building and that ministry.

The fourth method of church planting among the ethnic groups is by “Splintering.” In splintering a large group of people are pulled from one or two large churches to form an outreach and discipleship group. There are large churches among some of the ethnic groups in the Western world, such as Romanians, Koreans, and Chinese. These churches’ focus may be different from the evangelism of the people from their own ethnicity. The group that is formed from the gathering of local ethnic churches can create a safe haven for outreach and disciple-making of these people. This group can in turn grow and form a large healthy church that can effectively work toward fulfilling the great commission. This idea may be more suitable for larger metropolitan areas, where finding, commuting and interacting among people from the same ethnic group is not easily made possible. The efforts will be rewarded when the size of the ethnic group

is large enough that they can in turn have ministries among other people groups of various kinds, by ethnicity or culture.

We started with a permanent foundation – Christ as Petras – and then proceeded on to the fundamental methods used to start an ethnic church. Now we need to set this in perspective and look at how we establish a mission for our newly founded congregation. As the following chapter will demonstrate, the building never stops, therefore we need to be very sure of what we are building toward.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Hesselgrave, 148.
2. Barnett, 17-19.
3. Shenk and Stutzman, 127.
4. George Otis, *The Last of the Giants* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1991), 33-41.
5. Ibid., 61-80.
6. Ibid., 49-52.
7. Murray, 39.
8. Samuel D. Rima, *Rethinking the Successful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 36-39.
9. Ibid., 136.
10. Murray, 68.
11. Hesselgrave, 74.
12. Ibid., 180.
13. Murray, 71.

14. Ibid., 70-74.
15. Hesselgrave, 180.
16. Shenk and Stutzman, 136-139.
17. Ibid., 128, 129.
18. Hesselgrave, 79.
19. Shenk and Stutzman, 162-179.
20. Hesselgrave, 155.
21. Kennedy, D. James. *Evangelism Explosion*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishing, 1996.
22. Shenk and Stutzman, 131, 132.
23. Hesselgrave, 180-187.

## CHAPTER 6

### GETTING A NEW ETHNIC CHURCH STARTED

Any church planting involves laying a sound foundation. As in building a skyscraper, the depth and the quality of the foundation in church planting are decisive in its longevity and its effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission. A solid and stable foundation provides the basis for a healthy church and an effective ministry over a long period of time. On the contrary, unreliable and shaky foundations jeopardize these prospects and will not yield lasting fruits for God's Kingdom. Throughout this document, there has been an attempt to continuously emphasize that the basis for starting any church is the completed work of Jesus Christ. Any attempt to look at church formation as a mere procedure or "recipe" is to be discouraged because it does not address the issue of a spiritual cornerstone, "the one the builders rejected." (1 Pet.2:7)

In addition to a substantial foundation, there must be a compelling yet realistic vision of what the church is to become.<sup>1</sup> As seen in Chapter 4, there is a tendency for immigrant Christians to congregate for reasons other than doctrinal. They are not only dealing with a new country and its customs, many are struggling with language issues making it hard for them to get the most out of the church services they attend. The next generation will probably not struggle over these issues. Therefore, the long term plan for the church must take into consideration what the church will look like over time. This reality will then dictate its short term charter and operating principles. It is the suggestion

of this author that the long term charter be congruent with Christ's long term Commission as the following will indicate is both possible for and beneficial to the congregation.

### **Building with the End in Mind**

Using models presented in the previous chapters, different ethnic churches can be established to fulfill the Great Commission among the unreached peoples group in the Western world. For instance let us examine the two ministries in which the Lord used the author and his wife for starting ethnic fellowships. These two groups are the Iranians and the Armenians. Both of these people groups represent a terrific outreach opportunity for evangelism. According to authors of *Operation World* (2001), the Iranians are 99 percent Muslim and the Armenians are less than 15 percent evangelical Christians.<sup>2</sup>

These discouraging numbers aside, the two groups are potentially critical to spearheading a significant change in the religious complexion of the Middle East. Iran, the largest non-Arab country in the region, is undergoing a major cultural change. The ruling Shiites fundamentalists are in a shrinking minority both in percent of population and clearly in popularity. Tehran, a city of 12 million souls, now has more than 75 percent of its population under 35 years of age. They dislike their nearest Arab neighbors (the Iraqis) and they don't buy into the Arabic-Muslim culture. They are ripe for the gospel.

However, sending in large groups of blonde-haired, blue-eyed American missionaries or Western missionaries of any physical description is all but impossible since the act of converting a Muslim carries the death sentence in Iran. Armenians, on the other hand, are an accepted ethnic group in Iran. Thus, evangelical Armenian

nationals supported and directed by American Armenians and Iranians are a much more practical means of reaching the people of Iran. The big picture and the end game were always in mind as we began the first Iranian and Armenian congregations.

The inception of the Iranian Christian Church in Seattle was essentially a group that started from “scratch.” This group has been instrumental in leading hundreds of Iranian Muslims to the Lord in the greater Seattle area. The ministry of this church has gone beyond the borders of the State of Washington. Several of the converts from this church are now key members or the leaders of this church and some other churches in the Western countries. As a result of the collaboration of this church with other Iranian ministries, conferences for the Iranian leaders have been organized to strengthen and to encourage their ministries so they can carry the gospel to the unreached Iranians, Afghanis and other Muslims.

The evangelical efforts of the Seattle church have been fruitful in and out of the Seattle area. For example, the evangelists from this church have traveled to cities such as Vancouver, British Columbia, for over four years to witness to numerous Iranians and others. The fruits of this ministry have been several converts, who have become committed Christians and are now serving the Lord in their city. With collaboration of a few dedicated Christians in Vancouver, the ministers of the Seattle church have started a discipleship program in downtown Vancouver, where more than 60,000 Iranian reside. Additionally, the Seattle church, with the help of the Iranian leaders from Los Angeles, has been instrumental in mobilizing a ministry among Iranians in Las Vegas, Nevada. The 60,000 Iranians in Vancouver and the 15,000 more in Las Vegas are among the

unreached populations of these cities. Without a doubt, few local churches have sufficient programs to reach out to them with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Armenian Fellowship in Seattle, on the other hand, is closer to the “Gleaning and Gathering” Model above. Initially four families from different churches joined together to form a Bible study. When everyone was strengthened and the Lord confirmed the unity of their hearts, they took this ministry under the authority of a local church and began to evangelize to other Armenians in the area. Despite the oppositions from the local Armenian traditional church, people from different walks of life and backgrounds were approached with the gospel, and the ones who received Christ were brought into the fold. The Lord confirmed this ministry through signs and wonders. As an example, one of the ladies who received Jesus as her Lord, shortly after her conversion, was diagnosed with colon cancer. As we gathered to pray at her house she showed us the number of medications that she was taking daily. Miraculously, in response to our fervent prayer, the Lord healed her completely. Her doctors and medical staff were astonished by it, but she told them boldly that what the medical field could not do for her, the Lord did instantly. This woman could not possibly have received the gospel, and as a result come to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, if it were not for the ministry that is focused on the Armenians in the Seattle area. She still lives to this day to tell everyone about that miracle. She has been instrumental in converting others, including her husband, daughter, granddaughter, and others in her family to Christ. This woman also speaks Russian. She has witnessed to numerous Russians in her neighborhood, and has led many of them to the Lord. Her granddaughter, despite the father’s pressures, reads the Bible in secret and

prays for her father's conversion. If her Muslim father finds out that she has been converted she will be severely persecuted.

The same Armenian group has been a blessing to Armenian evangelists and pastors around the world, especially in Armenia. The ministry among Armenians, Iranians, and other unreached people groups such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs are in many ways similar to the spreading of the gospel in the first century.

### **Leadership Requirements and Recommendations**

Murray states that: effective church planting, according to the Scriptures, requires the grace of God, appropriate expertise and considerable care. Diligence, strength, and stamina of the leader that the Lord uses to establish an ethnic outreach can come only from the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> This kind of a leader is the one that the Lord uses as a bedrock for His work among a people group, where he or she unselfishly submits to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all matters relating to the ministry. This sort of leadership is, in a local sense, similar to the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. (Eph. 2:20) The calling of the enthusiastic individual is important but not sufficient by itself. Hard work alongside proper training, even though necessary, is not a guarantee of success by itself. An individual who receives a call to establish an ethnic church must be a visionary. King Solomon said "Where there is no vision people are unrestrained ...." (Prov. 29:18) Without a God-given vision it is impossible to lead even the most dedicated group of people to form an enduring congregation. In the absence of God-given vision, it is only a matter of time before the most serious leader turns cold and walks away from it all. Thus, the basic ingredients that an individual

leader needs to possess to start a successful ethnic church are: 1) a call to ministry, and 2) a God given vision.

The leaders of such groups must be willing to work as volunteers, as did Paul and the other Apostles in the first century.<sup>4</sup> Most of the time, because of the low income of the immigrants, the offerings are not adequate to pay the salary of the minister or any other expenses of the ministry. Furthermore, some ministers must work not only to support their family but to pay for the expenses of the ministries as well. Once the number of the converts increases, the group must be encouraged to strive toward financial stability and independence.

### **Call to Ministry**

After conversion to Christianity, the “call to ministry” is the very first thing that one receives from the Lord in starting up a church. No one can start a ministry without an actual call from the Lord. This call is not based on the person’s merit or abilities since the Lord chooses people to co-labor with Him according to His perfect will. This call may come at once or gradually in one’s life. Shenk and Stutzman state that “It is usually wise for a newly converted person to test his or her walk with Christ before assuming a position of leadership in the church. Personal study of God’s Word and training through discipleship and pastoral education is necessary for effective ministry.”<sup>5</sup> Consultation with pastors, leaders and others who are involved in similar kinds of ministries forms a good foundational step. Christ instructed His disciples to consider the cost of a building before they start the project. (Luke 14) He was talking about the cost of discipleship, but

this principle easily applies to establishing churches as well since it is the place where disciples are trained.

### **Creating a Church Vision**

In any church, having a vision is one of the most fundamental of issues<sup>6</sup>. Among the ethnic groups, the best vision anyone can give to the members of the group is the example of his or her own life. The person has moved from an unreached country to the Western Hemisphere where he or she has heard the life changing gospel of Jesus Christ. Now that the person has come to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ and believes that He has a plan beyond what the new convert had, it is not very difficult to see that his or her presence in the Western country is not by accident. He or she also can easily see that at conversion the Lord chose him or her to come to faith and to grow only to return as ambassador to the home nation, starting from their own Jerusalem, as Christ told His disciples in Acts 1:8.

Giving vision to converts from an ethnic group is to set them on the right path for life in order to search for people from their Jerusalem; then go beyond to the Samaria and Judea and to the farthest parts of the world from the people's group point of view. All this is done without moving away from his or her region. For example, the Muslim converts, knowing how unusual their conversion is to the Westerners, continuously evangelize effectively to their Western neighbors and witness their conversion to the Christian faith. Through these converts from ethnic groups, the seed of the good news gets planted in the hearts of many Westerners only to flourish and turn into a disciple of Christ.

Several years ago in an area of Seattle, one of the churches, which had declining membership, asked the Iranian Christians to go through their neighborhood and knock at the doors and invite people to attend their church for a special function. The turn out was amazing to everyone. In the history of that church never before had their invitation been accepted by so many people!

### **Creating a Church Operating Charter**

The charter for any ethnic church, which desires to be more than merely a social gathering is clear: edification and evangelism. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, a person with a call and a vision is the human instrument that the Lord uses to initiate a movement that can turn into a future church. For example, it was Barnabas who introduced Paul to the thriving church at Antioch and helped him find a place of leadership within that church. This congregation was a remarkable congregation, which brought together into one fellowship persons from European, Asian and African backgrounds.

Many cultural difficulties and persecutions from the powers and principalities of the air are waiting for this kind of ministry, but the Holy Spirit, despite all of them, guides the church through these uncharted waters and adds the converts to the body of Christ daily.

All throughout church history evangelists have had to deal with cultural issues of the time to communicate the gospel effectively. Two considerations are necessary to share the gospel with a people group who has not yet received Jesus Christ: the first is to work toward forming cross-cultural teams, or preferably a team that is native to the

culture of the unevangelized people; Second, there is a need to discover creative ways to communicate the gospel so that it speaks to the worldview of these unevangelized people. When the gospel is presented with relevance to any worldview, it always elicits a response, whether positive or negative. If an audience is composed largely of Hindus, for example, a study of their worldview will be required in order to contextualize the Christian message. Even when religious traditions are not so different from ours, it will be most helpful to take time to characterize the dominant beliefs of the target audiences. Continued learning of the people's behavior and the aspects of ministry that help in maintaining effectiveness assist the evangelist to remain fruitful among people.

It is imperative to note that the key to successful ministry is not merely to lead people to Christ, but to make them followers of Christ (disciples) and then teach them to become fishers of men (disciple-makers), as Christ said. (Luke 5)<sup>7</sup> As mentioned earlier, no one can reach the indigenous people better than one of their own. Familiarity with the whole person helps move the person to conversion and then from conversion to discipleship. Hesselgrave states it best when he says "The world has an overabundance of 'converts' whose curiosity has been satisfied but whose hearts have not been transformed!"<sup>8</sup> Contemporary evangelism often leads to a hurried decision for Christ with inadequate attention to repentance and inadequate explanations of faith and conversion itself. That the Holy Spirit may bring a person to repentance and faith on the basis of minimal knowledge should not be used as an excuse for inadequate instruction. It is imperative that potential converts be instructed in the gospel concerning the meaning and significance of conversion. To ask anyone to make such an important decision on the basis of minimal understanding or misunderstanding is ethically indefensible. This fact

can have a worse influence on a convert from a different ethnicity, since they are to defend their new faith before their own people, such as their family members. (1 Pet. 3:15)

What the converts in each group need is to grow in their relationship with the Lord through a thorough study of God's word and live according to its principles. They should be given the vision of moving through the levels of discipleship and disciple-maker instead of remaining with a stagnant Christian attitude which has overtaken most Western Christians. The new convert needs to be led and encouraged to live a Christ-centered life and not to fall into the temptation of living a self-centered life, which the Western culture typically breathes into every immigrant from the moment that he or she arrives.

Shenk and Stutzman present a blueprint of how the church in mission should work at resolving issues related to the gospel and culture. This blueprint applies equally to missionary work in foreign lands, as well as among foreigners in the Western world.

The five major points of this blueprint are as follows:

1. Flow with the movement of the Holy Spirit.
2. Test the perception of the movement of the Holy Spirit with the Scripture and the counsel of the whole church.
3. Recognize that practices involving ritual or symbolism are culturally relative. For instance, holy kiss in some cultures might be misconstrued as homosexuality.
4. Recognize and embrace universal commitments which are transcultural. For instance, the Jerusalem counsel freed the Gentiles from following the Jewish cultural practices, but asked them to submit to the universal moral and spiritual commitments of the Christian faith.
5. Work toward the goal of preserving the unity of the church as the body of Christ, because Christ Himself transforms every person to His own image to make them the light and the salt of this world.<sup>9</sup>

Some people groups and their worldview seem more receptive to the gospel at different times in history than others. Paul stayed only a few days in Athens, but lived nearly two years in Corinth (Acts 18:5-11).<sup>10</sup> This indicates, among other reasons, that he stayed longer among the people groups who were responsive than among those who seemed quite disinterested. Noting Paul's example, some people believe that church planting efforts should focus primarily on people groups who seem responsive. Others point out that the apparently unresponsive may never understand and receive the gospel if no one takes the time to interpret and reinterpret patiently the good news. This question forms the basis for considerable debate among modern missionaries and church planters. Church planting among ethnic people in a Western society would closely follow the same arguments as well. To give the church a vision is to tell the members where the group is going. By itself it is only a destination without a road map to make it clear for everyone how the church is to get there. What every church needs is to have a "mission statement" and an "operating charter" to help everyone know how they are going to reach their destination, called vision.<sup>11</sup> These help focus the efforts of the people who are involved and encourage them to pray more effectively. In this way the gathering of the people that might have formed as a fellowship under authority of a local church can eventually move to being an autonomous church. Operating charter is nothing but the Great Commission restated for the given people group with their focus in mind.

### **Mundane Items: Permits and Regulatory Issues**

Independence of an ethnic church from the sponsoring church, which may be called the mother church, helps it to develop an identity. This identity can lead to better

and healthier growth and the taking of responsibility by its members. In doing so, the church should consult the legal staff of the mother church, or another trusted source to comply with government regulations. It is conceivable that the ethnic church can operate for a time under the legal and accounting structure of the sponsoring church. However, as the activities of the ethnic church expand, there is typically a desire of the part of the sponsoring church to reduce its exposure to issues that come up with accounting and legal issues. This is certainly true if the ethnic church looks to physically splinter off and establish a separate location.<sup>12</sup>

Every country or even state within the country has their own laws for governing a church. In addition to having a religious status for legal issues, the church must also have a tax-exempt status and maintain regular records which conform to accepted accounting principles. Fortunately, in the United States, most CPA's are readily familiar with the regulations related to non-profits, churches, and other 501-C entities. Setting up such a framework is wisely commenced early and in advance of actually forming a separate entity.

An ethnic church is not exempt from following and fully complying with those laws and regulations. This too is part of "rendering unto Caesar." (Luke 20:25) Staying in touch with the leaders of other ethnic churches in the area is a great way to learn such lessons, which, in the long run, can eliminate a lot of duplication of efforts as well as avoid run-ins with state regulators, the Internal Revenue Service, and the law.

## ENDNOTES

1. Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategy Planning* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 33-150.
2. Patrick J. Johnstone, Robyn Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World* (Waynesboro, Georgia: Paternoster Publishing, 2001), 79, 352.
3. Murray, 106, 107.
4. Hesselgrave, 76.
5. Shenk and Stutzman, 33.
6. Malphurs, *Advanced Strategy Planning*, 140-150.
7. Hesselgrave, 171.
8. *Ibid.*, 167-191.
9. Shenk and Stutzman, 113, 114.
10. *Ibid.*, 134.
11. Malphurs, *Advanced Strategy Planning*, 99-115.
12. Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 127.

## CHAPTER 7

### BUILDING ATTENDANCE

The actual planting of an ethnic church follows the same main steps as any other church. As Aubrey Malphurs describes, once church planters have thought through certain key issues, knows that they are, indeed, designed to be church planters, and have decided what kind of church they are going to plant, the remaining task is to begin the process of church planting. Where, the first three steps focus on the why, who, and what of church planting, this step concerns the how of church planting. It involves six stages, which are analogous to the human birth process: conception, development, birth, growth, maturity, and reproduction.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Keeping the Flock Together**

While conception deals with defining the “core values,” the concern in the development stage is the “core group.” The core values were described in the previous chapter. In this step the vision and operating charter of the group is developed. It is in this step that the church planter decides where the main focus of the ministry is going to be and who the target ethnic group for effective evangelism is. Also, in this step the means by which the church is going to reach out to the target group will be decided. After this step is well thought through, with much prayer and seeking God’s will, a strategy from the Lord is developed and the focus moves to developing a “core group.”

A church cannot start without people. Roy Thompson says, “Even though no church is built on a man, every church is built by a man.”<sup>2</sup> The person with a call to evangelize a group of ethnic people should gather key people to form the core group, where the Lord can add to it as He did in the first century. The first core group in the Book of Acts consisted of 120 people. It was formed immediately after Christ’s ascension. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit added three thousand people to that core group. Subsequently, there were many more who were added to the group forming a large body of believers.

These people were added by the power of the Holy Spirit, but the members of the core group were not idle, passively waiting for the numbers to increase. As Christ taught His disciples, they had to go and evangelize. The most important key to building attendance is the lost art of evangelism. There are many philosophies that may be employed for building up a congregation, but as Roy Thomas argues in his book, “Soul winning is the least expensive and most rewarding method the church can use.”<sup>3</sup> This argument is true especially among unreached ethnic people in a Western society since there is no over-abundance of believers among them. The main thrust of church planting is to create an environment for the new convert to mature in Christian faith. Building the core group could be thought of, as Malphurs puts it, as a “cold start” or a “hot start.”<sup>4</sup> A cold start refers to starting a church using the method called “starting from scratch” in Chapter 5; while a hot start refers to starting a church using the other three methods, primarily centered on involving other Christians for a jump-start.

The term “cold start” finds a new meaning, which is different from one used by Malphurs in his book called *planting growing churches*, when dealing with ethnic church

planting. When he uses the term “cold start,” he refers to “involving and gathering a non-existing group of believers.”<sup>5</sup> In the context of the ethnic church it should be referred to as a group that starts up by an individual evangelist witnessing mostly to strangers that later may constitute the “core group.”

Unlike the “cold start,” the “hot start” in both contexts is very similar. It refers to a group of people willing to gather together, sometimes under authority of a local church, to form an outreach for the ethnic people and as the Lord leads them to form a church. The challenge that the cold start method has is that the founder can become burned out. It is a rather difficult task to reach out to individuals from an ethnic group. The process of evangelism might be longer than the evangelist was originally planned. Prayer and patience before the Lord, while evangelizing, is the key to success. The advantage of this kind of start up is that as the team is formed its members commit to the leadership of the individual who started the church. To prevent the potential problems of leadership without accountability, it is best to have accountability partners from a local church who understand the vision and the mission of the ministry.

In the case of a hot start, the progress does not seem to be as tedious, but the freedom of the individual is rather limited to the willingness of the others to follow and move to where the visionary leader wants to take them.

The ministry, after having a core group, needs to move to the next stage, called birth. This stage is where the work of group evangelism begins, and the fellowship or home group regular services can start weekly meetings.

## **Spreading the Word**

In evangelizing the ethnic people in the Western world, not only must we know how to explain the Bible; we must be able to explain the Bible in a manner relevant to the culture to which we are reaching out. Malphurs believes that a vital aspect of communicating divine truth is the application of that truth to life.<sup>6</sup> This cannot take place, however, unless we understand what is taking place in people's lives before we reach out to them. As mentioned before, the passage in 1 Chronicles 12:32 is a key passage in illustrating this principle. The writer presents the numbers of those who had decided to join David in his battle with Saul. When the writer gets to men of Issachar he describes them as those "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." Apparently this particular group was in touch with what was going on, unlike many others. Not only did they understand their times, but they knew what to do about what was going on.

The author's experience and observations indicates that in order to build an evangelical outreach for the ethnic group, any model that has the capability of reaching the needs and hearts of the lost people would work, as long as it is done under the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ's example, where He witnessed to the Samaritan woman, is a very vivid picture of evangelism through cross-cultural relationship building (John 4). Christ first masterfully built a line of communication with her before revealing to her who He really was. He did not allow the cultural differences to create a gap between Himself and the potential prospect. He countered her objections with sound arguments that she was familiar with and then penetrated her culture and thus her heart and mind. This step is essential in outreach to any people group. Studying the culture of non-Westerners, one can easily see the high value of trust in relationships. Building

relationship and friendship with the lost person is the most effective way to gain his or her trust and to demonstrate sincerity.

Malphurs quotes Dr. Alister E. McGrath, while speaking at Dallas Theological Seminary.<sup>7</sup> He noted that “England was primarily a Christian nation in the eighteenth century. However, today only 10 percent claim to be churched.” McGrath warned that this was because the church stopped evangelizing and focused its attention on teaching and pastoral care of its members. This statement does not undermine the significance of biblical teaching and pastoral care of the members in the church, but it elevates the importance of the church being involved in evangelizing the world around it that is lost. The church will reach her full potential when the members are mobilized from being consumers (converts) to becoming producers (disciple-makers.)

The warning signs of lack of evangelism come from every direction. In his book Malphurs quotes Floyd Bartel, from his book called *A New Look at Church Growth*. He writes “95 percent of all Christians in North America will not win one person to Christ in their entire lifetime.”<sup>8</sup> Malphurs exclaims at this statistic by writing; “Obviously, this is, to him, a shocking figure. Sixty five percent would be high, but 95% is frightening!”<sup>9</sup> The new converts among the ethnic Christians have the zeal of the first century Christians. Christianity for them is not business as usual. The long time oppressive suffering in the enemy’s clutches is over, and they want to share that with the world around them. It is another example of pouring the new wine in the new wine skin all over again. Their excitement and vigor for the Lord and preaching the good news of His Kingdom is truly refreshing and make up for all the difficulties and challenges faced while the group was

starting up. They are like new born babes that hunger and thirst for the truth, and are eager to learn new ways in which they can live a life pleasing to the Lord.

### **The Internet and Modern Church Building**

Having access to modern technology enables people from an ethnic group in different localities to get in touch, stay in touch, and develop sustaining, uplifting ministries. Since each fellowship might be small it can easily download resources available on the internet. For example, if a fellowship in a given locality does not have a rich worship program, they can download worship songs available on the church website. The same applies to broadcasting the teachings and preaching throughout the world for the ethnic groups. If a pastor shares a timely message with a small congregation in a locality, and it needs to be heard by all the ethnic groups in various locations, the sermon can easily be broadcasted through the internet. Sharing of resources provides a sense of unity among different groups and gives each group a global view of the ministry.

Still, the best use of the internet so far is its application for evangelism. Bible and evangelical resources, such as the Jesus video, tracts and books can be made available on a website, and links from cultural related websites can be places to attract the curious individuals. The web address of the Iranian church in Seattle is “Iranianchurch.com.” We have had over 12,000 hits in the past couple of years. Through this website, several people have inquired about how to receive Christ as their Lord and Savior. A group of university students contacted the website of the Iranian church in Los Angeles and inquired how they could receive Christ, since they were fed up with Islam. The staff of that church witnessed to them and provided literature for them on line so they could

download in their own home and learn about the gospel. For these people, the internet and other means such as radio are the only way they can grow in their new faith.

### **How Traditional Churches Can Help**

Traditional churches can be instrumental in establishing and developing ethnic churches. They can help an individual who has a call from the Lord and a vision to start a group under their authority and allow him or her to use the church facilities. They can provide monetary assistance to the evangelist so resources can be purchased for the work of the Lord. They can form an accountability team and a mature individual to mentor him or her. For the two ministries that the author and his wife were involved in, Overlake Christian Church (OCC) has graciously been involved for the past fifteen years. The Iranian fellowship was the first ethnic fellowship that was ever formed in OCC in June of 1988. Several other fellowships since then have been formed by individuals under the leadership of OCC. Among them are the Armenian, Spanish, Korean, Jewish, Chinese, Japanese, Pakistani and Indians.

The vision of each of these churches is different. The vision that the Lord gave to the Iranian fellowship was to go through the growth and maturity process to become an autonomous church. In July of 1997, the Iranian fellowship with the encouragement of Iranian pastors from other cities moved to the next step of ministry and became the first ethnic daughter church of OCC. After five years this church still meets at the OCC building but under its own leadership body.

This church has expanded its territories beyond the Seattle area. It is a good example of a church that is at an early stage of replication. The goal for this church is to

remain a witnessing church and to expand its horizons beyond just Iranians. Our vision is to reach the world around us since people from every ethnic group have come to Seattle, the hub of the high technology world. Iranian Christians, like the men of Issachar, are being taught to “understand the times and know what *the church* should do” (1 Chr. 12:32) at this time. They know that they have been saved to take the gospel to other Muslim nations in the world in short order. These nations are the Arabs, the North Africans, the central Asians, the Pakistanis, and the Muslim nations around the Pacific Rim among others. The population of this target group of people is over 1.2 billion. The order is tall, but so was the order for the first century Christians. With the power that the Holy Spirit provides, any one of the converts from ethnic groups can be a powerhouse to reach the unreached in the Western world. Some will go back to their countries as missionaries. One of these groups of people is the international students. These folks mostly go back to their respective countries after they complete their education. Imagine the implications of leading these folks to Christ and mobilizing them to return as missionaries to their own countries. They are educated, especially from the Western universities, and will be influential individuals in their countries. They can potentially impact their own nation in a very profound way for Christ.<sup>10</sup>

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 25.
2. Roy Thomas, *Planting and Growing a Fundamental Church* (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 1979), 15.
3. *Ibid.*, 40.

4. Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 300-319.
5. Ibid., 300.
6. Ibid., 166.
7. Alister E. McGrath, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977; quoted in Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 207.
8. Floyd Barna, *A New Look at Church Growth* (Newton, KS: Faith and life, 1987) 59; quoted in Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 207.
9. Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 207.
10. Lawson Lau, *The World at Your Doorstep* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 13.

## CHAPTER 8

### OBSTACLES AND PROBLEMS

Church planting among the ethnic groups is an attempt to solve a problem that the modern church in the Western Hemisphere has faced, sometimes unknowingly, over a long period of time. It is taking advantage of the unique opportunity that God has given the church to reach out to otherwise unreached people who have propitiously arrived next door. These people are some of the same people that the Western church spends millions of dollars each year to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ through missionary activities and has done so for hundreds of years. With a fraction of the effort and resources, a local church in the Western Hemisphere can lead these people to the Lord and then mobilize them for mission work abroad. These people live in our neighborhoods, their children go to the same school as ours, their children marry our children, they compete with us for our jobs, and they work in the grocery stores, banks, hospitals and every other place in our communities. It is difficult to go somewhere today and not see a person from a different ethnic group. This opportunity that the Lord has opened for this generation could be unique and limited, thus we must invest the time and use every opportunity to reach out to our ethnic neighbors with the gospel.

However, before we jump into this opportunity feet first, we need to consider the obstacles and the problems in reaching out. Church planting among the ethnic people has

the same fundamental challenges as starting any other church in the West plus some other unique challenges that we will examine here.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Generational Problem**

Of all the problems ethnic pastors face, the generational problem is the greatest. What originally brings members of a particular group together is their feeling of discomfort in a new country with strange customs. They miss the “old ways,” and they desire to worship and discuss things in their mother tongue. For many this reason remains a compelling reason to return to church and stay part of the congregation for the rest of their lives.

The reasons that bring first generation immigrants together are rarely felt by the next generation who grow up speaking and thinking like Americans. To live in a fast paced, high tech society and be exposed to extreme examples of “sophisticated” and suave entertainers and then to show up in church and watch people dress and behave like peasants is at best strange to the younger set and at worst, odious. Ethnic pastors know that what brings the church together will likely not keep it together once the children come of age.

So what does the pastor do? First, he must be convinced that the generational problem is an issue that needs the utmost attention of the pastor. If the child is reared in a good Christian environment, receives Christ and then matures, marries and attends a Western church, is this not acceptable or even wonderful? The real problem comes in the case of the church member whose child is hard to reach. There is a critical period of time when the child becomes aware of the world around him or her and starts asking

questions. Is the ethnic church equipped to answer the questions that arise in an advanced American context when their whole make-up appears to be retrogressive and reactionary? The child merely has to look about him or her to see that they might not have the answer wanted.

Pastors must have a much shorter horizon in looking at the problem of the next generation. If they believe they will have these children as parishioners until their early twenties, they are in error. They must organize the youth and focus first on the issue of salvation and then immerse them in projects and teachings that will keep them alert and focused. In the old country, the very culture surrounding the children kept them in check. It will not work in America, and the church must be prepared to compete with the external influences the children will inevitably encounter.

In addition, they must also prepare for the high likelihood, approaching 100 percent, that the child will not remain with the congregation in his or her late teens. All early programs should be aimed toward edification and salvation. There will not be a second chance.

Ethnic pastors are actually quite realistic in considering this problem. The challenge they face is in continuing the growth and vitality of the congregation without depending on the next generation. Since over time, death, disability and people moving to other cities will inevitably take its toll on the number of parishioners who attend regularly, something must be done to replenish the membership. For this, they turn to new immigrants.

Almost all ethnic churches have an aggressive program to seek out new immigrants and invite them to their congregation. For those coming from a similar

religious background searching for the new immigrants is fairly simple to do. For those ethnicities where the religious backgrounds are not the same, this search becomes a complex process which consumes the majority of the members' time outside church. Even those countries that have multiple "Christian" denominations can be challenged here. Romania, for example, has a dominant religion in its Eastern Orthodox Church. If an Eastern Orthodox parishioner comes to America and is approached by a Romanian Baptist, there will be at least a temporary standoff. All his or her life an Eastern Orthodox parishioner has been told that Protestants, and in particular, Baptists, are heretics and troublemakers. They lack orthodox rituals, organization, doctrine, and Scripture. Now one is knocking on the door and inviting the new immigrant to attend the local Romanian Baptist church. The solution is typically to have a former Orthodox member call on such people. Often, the pull of being with fellow immigrants will win out for at least an initial visit. Islam, of course poses a bigger problem and is discussed below.

One additional related problem that arises with ethnic churches is that of ongoing acculturation to the language. Over time, some church parishioners want the services to be conducted in English. They have now adjusted and would prefer to hear what they hear everyday in the way of speech. Also, some have married and have spouses who only speak English or children who prefer English.

The answer will depend on the size of the congregation. A group of less than fifty people can still afford to have a split service. In most cases, the answer, once it becomes an issue, is to have services in both languages, including songs and prayers. Even if one must tune out temporarily, it is tolerable and even interesting at times to hear songs and chants in other languages. This approach is routinely employed by most ethnic

congregations after time. Ignoring it or taking an “old country only” approach appears to be where falling out occurs.

### **Non-Christian Cultural Heritage**

In general, when introducing an individual to Jesus Christ, the best place in the Scriptures to refer to is the Gospel of John. This Gospel has universal implication and shares the message of Christ in such a manner that the reader would come to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. After conversion, the epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Romans, which was a nation unfamiliar with the Scriptures, is a valuable resource to disciple a person of a different ethnicity. This Epistle provides all the essential Christian doctrines in a complete and concise manner. Paul masterfully presents the most authoritative doctrinal exposition of the Christian faith. He follows this exposition with a practical application of Christian faith so that the believer can live and work out his faith in Christ. (Romans 1-11) He continues with an appeal for dedication on the part of the believers. Paul urges the Christians to take heed of two instructions. First he urges the believers “to offer” their bodies as living sacrifice to the Lord, and second for them “not to conform” to the patterns of this world. (Romans 12:1-2)

In the balance of the chapters of Book of Romans, Paul offers an alternate life style to individual Christians and to the body of Christ as a whole. His plea for Christians is to be transformed to the image of Christ by renewing of their minds. (Rom. 8:29) No message other than the gospel of Jesus Christ can renew the mind of sinners, no matter where they have come from. Jesus came from another world to redeem us from the current world system, called Satan’s kingdom, and to transfer us to the Kingdom of God.

No culture and no ethnicity are above this transforming power. There is no other means beside the Word of God that is powerful enough to illuminate the dark mind of an unbeliever, and let the individual see the marvelous light of Christ.<sup>2</sup> There is no other truth that can set the captives of this world free, except the truth of Jesus Christ. Referring to His Word, Jesus called it “Spirit and life.” (John 6:63)

Even though there is no culture that is closer to the heavenly culture of Jesus Christ, there are cultures that Christ and His Church have penetrated for longer periods of time in modern days. For instance, in the Western culture going to church is not a foreign idea, and sitting in the pews for a period of time to worship and then to listen to a preacher speak is not unfamiliar. But for some cultures, such as Islamic cultures, going to a church is a forbidden act. Sitting in a church service and participating in worship, music and singing, which in their culture is a worldly act, is not an acceptable spiritual practice. For many, handling the Bible and interacting with Christians is forbidden.

Reading and systematic study of the Bible is important in discipleship programs. To a Westerner, the idea of reading is part of gathering knowledge, but to some ethnic people reading and interpreting the “holy” book is reserved only for the clergy. Some are not even literate enough to read the Bible. Their edification comes by “gleaning” the verbal communication of their parents and teachers during their childhood. They mostly have a superficial idea of their religion and cannot even defend their own faith. The great majority of Muslims, for example, don’t read the Quran. They mostly use a mixture of their upbringing and their conscience plus the world of spirits as a guide for their lives. This is called “folk Islam” as opposed to “formal Islam.”<sup>3</sup> As a disciple-maker one should be aware of these phenomena and be cautious not to let them seep back into the life of the

believer after conversion because the ramification will be far reaching and problematic. In other words, it will be a mess. The people of Berea serve as a good example of this situation. According to Dr. Luke, these people “were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scripture every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (Acts 17:11) Their Scripture was the Old Testament, and the canon of the Scriptures was not yet closed. But these people knew better. They knew God does not talk inconsistently. His revelation today can only be built in alignment with His revelation yesterday.

### **The Galatians Problem**

We must reach out with the gospel and touch the deepest part of the person who comes from an ethnic group. If his or her worldview is not completely changed in their walk with Christ he or she is going to have problem following Christ to the end. Many of the converts start well, but due to spiritual malnourishment, a plague of famine causes doubt, suspicion, and pride. When these plagues settle in, the believer starts to have all kinds of problems. He or she is trying hard to maintain a peace with God, and yet is in a constant battle with the flesh and the world. Providing sound doctrine to the individual and not expecting too much too soon from the convert will give him or her sufficient time mature in knowing and walking with Jesus.

One is not to baptize the recent converts immediately after conversion. They need to settle in their new faith and know the essential doctrines and demonstrate a worthy walk before they are to be baptized.<sup>4</sup>

One of the worst things the Western church can do is to give the novice believer responsibilities that are beyond his or her maturity level. As an example, the Overlake Christian Church (OCC) provided opportunities to a group of the Muslim converts in our Iranian church that almost undermined their salvation. Seeing a convert from a strong Muslim background is very pleasant. The pastors at OCC, without consulting with the leadership of the Iranian fellowship, asked some of these converts to share their testimonies in front of a large congregation. These opportunities were sufficient for these converts to be puffed up and to rebel against the Iranian fellowship leadership, the ones who had originally led them to Christ. This uprising went on for nearly two years. In those years, the OCC pastors on many occasions reprimanded us, even in front of these people, and asked us why we were not giving higher responsibilities to these new converts. Some of these new converts left the Iranian fellowship and joined the OCC services.

The Iranian leadership could only act on God's word and pray for everyone involved and patiently wait for their return. They eventually returned, but very bruised, much like the prodigal son. After a time of restoration these families were brought back into the fold and the wounds were healed, and the relationships were completely restored. The relationships among us are now better than ever, after resolving the sizeable problem, which was caused, albeit very innocently and unintentionally. Once again, we are all working together for the glory of our Father. Every one of the family members is responsible for a ministry in the church at this time. One of them leads the church youth group, his wife is our hospitality minister, and the husband of the other family is an elder of the church as well as an active evangelist and teacher.

## **The Western Compromise**

The West, and in particular America, poses a threat to Christian growth in the abundance of “things” which can become alternatives to God. Materialism has indeed become the number one form of idolatry in America.<sup>5</sup> The deprivation, persecution, and misery the immigrant once faced is pretty quickly erased by access to so much. It only takes one trip by a newly arrived immigrant to an American supermarket to realize there is no need to suffer, die and go to heaven; he or she is already there. Of course, the god of materialism is a demanding god. No matter how much you possess of things, it is never enough. The pursuit becomes more and more all-encompassing and even the formerly spiritual immigrant finds himself or herself with a competing religion. He or she is also poorly equipped to deal with the issue of materialism when it comes to rearing his children.

When combined with diminution of ethnic culture, materialism is cited by ethnic pastors as the number one threat to the viability of their ethnic congregation.

The vision of the church must always remain the focus of the church members. In doing so, any compromise to the Western culture and its mentality will settle in and will take the minds of the converts away from the reason that the Lord saved them in the first place. The best way to avoid this is to get everyone involved in a ministerial task in keeping with their Christian maturity. Each member of Christ’s body has a gift. After taking new converts through the fundamental teachings of the Bible, they are introduced to various opportunities in the church and no member is left without a responsibility. Intentionally each person should be mentored by someone with more experience and this way no one is left idle.

Pastors of all denominations, not just the pastors of the ethnic congregations, must work together to address this serious issue. Ethnic pastors interviewed displayed mixed feelings when it was suggested they seek out Western pastors on this subject. They felt that even though Western pastors were more familiar with the issue of materialism, they have done a poor job of dealing with it. It remains a challenge and can be addressed only with vigilance and repeatedly returning to the Word.

### **Misplaced Expectations**

Even though the church aims to meet the needs of the people as a means of evangelism, teaching people to remain dependent on the church is a recipe for disaster.<sup>6</sup> Originally the Iranian church had a ministry that met the financial needs of the people on a regular basis. Approximately 20 percent of the budget of the church went toward expenses for personal assistance. This amount was more than any other ministry even more than evangelism. Every other ministry was hurting because of this practice. Usually the same people who had needs the month before would come and ask for more help. This issue was deeply challenging the leadership's heart. How could we not help our brothers and sisters, yet how could we face God with repeatedly spending His money on the needs of the same group of people? The Lord convicted us with the following thought: even though the poor in Jerusalem had a special place in the heart of the Apostle Paul, he never helped them out of the general treasury of the church. He would collect offerings from the church members especially for this purpose. Now we also, once a month, have an additional collection of offering for the needy in our church. Thus we used a first Century biblical model to solve our problem satisfactorily.

Another problem that has plagued the ethnic churches has been the issue of refugees who have mixed motives. Due to severe persecution of the Christian converts by some religions, such as Islam, the Western countries have graciously opened their doors to these people to find a safe haven and to practice their faith in security. This privilege has prompted several of these ethnic people to show interest toward the Christian faith for self gain. In order to get a Green Card, an immigrant must fit one of several criteria. One of these is fear of religious persecution upon returning to his or her native country. By attending church on a regular basis and going through such “certifying” ceremonies as baptism, an immigrant can safely claim to be a Christian and thereby build a case that he or she will be persecuted upon returning home. Ministers must be careful in the Western countries to ensure that the name of our Lord is not misused or mistreated. While this phenomenon has brought many people to the church for the wrong reason, many more have heard the gospel and come to genuine faith in Christ. So we should not shut the door to the ones that come with nefarious intent but rather pray that the Lord in the process of their attending touches their hearts and grants them heavenly citizenship. This would be more than the person ever bargained for!

As with all churches, ethnic or otherwise, the answers to most problems are prayer, Scripture, and fellowship. However, the smaller congregation size and the natural cultural evolution found in most ethnic churches require tremendous diligence on the part of church leadership. Nothing can be taken for granted or assumed. When you consider that most ethnic pastors also have a full time job and many are lay pastors, the challenge is considerable.

## ENDNOTES

1. George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 35-54.
2. Roy Thomas, *Planting and Growing a Fundamental Church* (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 1979), 44-55.
3. Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2000), 19-38.
4. Hesselgrave, 182-191.
5. *Ibid.*, 169.
6. *Ibid.*, 171-175.

## CHAPTER 9

### THE COMMON STEPS OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

According to the author's experience and observations when a church that starts as an ethnic church becomes a vibrant evangelical church, bent on outreach, it is a maturing church with a long term future. What starts as more of a social organization and a gathering of souls in search of familiar faces and familiar language will either stagnate as a community center with religious overtones or become a self-promulgating force for Christ.

“Mission is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Mission exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not mission, because God is the ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, mission will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.” These are the passionate words of John Piper in his presentation on missions<sup>1</sup>. He sees a day when people from all nations will stand before the throne of God singing praises to His name.

How is that possible when, among others, over 1.3 billion Muslims are bowing down before false gods and murdering Christians in their lands? Greg Livingstone states “It is possible to establish Muslim-convert churches through a team, even where missionary visas are not available. Establishing viable congregations with their national leadership among Muslims is a doable task.”<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter 7, six different stages of church planting were presented. In this chapter, using these stages as applied to the planting of the Iranian Christian Church in Seattle, we will examine the common steps of growth and development.

### **Outreach and Discipleship**

The first step of discipleship is to proclaim the gospel and to set the captives free. This statement is what Christ proclaimed as His mission by reading from Isaiah 61:1, 2 in the beginning of His ministry. (Luke 4:18, 19) Following the steps of Christ, we must enter the territory of the enemy to set the captives free. He has commissioned us and has given us political immunity to carry on this task. As the soldiers of the cross, we enter a battle, which Christ has already won for us. Using a weapon stronger than any other and a power mightier than anything in this world, we enter the battlefield. Our weapon is the Word of God, and our power is the power of the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 6:17)

The other world religions entice people of all nations via various deceptions. As a result of following these religions, the people are driven into spiritual bankruptcy and begin to believe and do many things that are out of the realm of what the Bible considers Godly behavior. They become captives to these world religions and Satan, who is the master mind behind all the deceptions. The words that Hosea spoke against the people of Israel when they had departed the Lord apply to all men. Speaking in behalf of God, He said “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.” (Hosea 4:6) Christ teaches us that knowledge of the truth brings freedom to all kind of captivities. In His teaching He implied this truth to be nothing or no one except Him and Him alone, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Regarding the redemption from captivity He said: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36) Our calling is to preach the good news of God’s Kingdom to these captives, and let the Son and His message set them free.

Rick Love expresses his passion for setting the folk Muslims free by preaching the Kingdom of God cross-culturally; by contextualization of the gospel message through church planting.<sup>3</sup> Folk Muslims constitute over three quarters of all Muslims in the world.<sup>4</sup> What bothers Rick Love is that most prayer warriors and evangelists in the church today are more impressed with the Devil than they are in awe of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> They focus more on the powers and principalities than they do on the One who has been raised far above every power and principality. (Eph 1:21, 22) They walk in fear instead of faith. They reflect anxiety instead of confidence. The army of the Lord should rise above it all and move forward to fulfill the Great Commission before it is too late. How do we penetrate in the land of the captive and what are some common strategies?

Rick Love writes: “Scripture reveals four aspects of kingdom theology relevant to contextualized church planting among folk Muslims: 1) truth encounter, 2) power encounter, 3) moral encounter and 4) cultural encounter. The church planting team and the emerging church must preach the good news that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (truth encounter), confront the powers of darkness through exorcism (power encounter), model the values of the Kingdom (moral encounter), and express the reality of the Kingdom through culturally relevant rituals (culture encounter).”<sup>6</sup>

Being sensitive to the needs of a people of a different ethnicity is a good start for developing trust and preparing the ground for these encounters. This step is vital in reaching out to any ethnic group with the gospel. This approach is what Jesus used to

reach the people of His time. He healed their sickness, raised their loved ones from the dead, set them free from the demons, calmed all kind of storms, fed them when they were hungry, and through all of it preached the Good News of the Kingdom. Numerous details, which might be trivial to us, could be important to them.

We can do the same to reach the ethnic people around us. They are very sensitive about others, and they watch to see how Westerners treat them. In building relationships we need to constantly make sure we are gaining their trust and not giving them the impression that they are the second class citizens.<sup>7</sup> They need to see that as Christians we value their personhood, and appreciate the differences between us. They need to see that we accept them as they are and that do not want them to change into a Westerner before we treat them as an inner circle acquaintance. After all, we have the Words of Eternal Life from the Author of Life. Our mission is to extend that message to their ears and let them see the glory that is waiting for them.

Most of the ethnic people who come to the Western countries have left a community of intimate familiarity, hoping that they find a new community in the “new world.” They long to build relationships and get acquainted with the new people they meet. If good relationships are built, they will usually last for years, perhaps even decades. They are accustomed to closely knit friendships. In the Western country where people are isolated and mostly individualistic, the ethnic people long to create anew such relationships with anyone that might step forward. This relationship orientation is very crucial to witnessing to a member of an ethnic group.<sup>8</sup>

Usually the relationship starts by visiting the home and staying more than a short while; then reciprocating the visit by inviting them for a dinner and taking the time to

listen to them and actually care about what they are sharing. This interaction is both Christ-like compassion as well as a great investment of time. Most of the immigrants have a lot of needs. Tending to those needs to a reasonable level will most certainly strengthen the relationship. Healthy and strong relationships provide open doors for evangelism to ethnic people. Drawing from Christ as our model for evangelism, Walter A. Henrichsen in his book, *Disciples are Made not Born*, gives eight steps from His encounter with the Samaritan woman.<sup>9</sup> This example is relevant to cross-cultural evangelism because Christ, being a male Jew, was witnessing to a different gender from a vastly different culture. The first step, which is a prerequisite for starting evangelism, is to go to the lost sheep. In this case the ethnic groups have come to us and have made themselves accessible.

The steps for ethnic evangelism are the same as the steps for evangelizing to any lost people. However, because there are many other issues on the mind of an immigrant, they must be adhered to more carefully. These steps are as follows:

1. Open the opportunity by asking for a favor
2. Tailor the approach to the person
3. Choose the questions you want to answer and ignore the others
4. Strike for the “open nerve” that causes the person to expose his or her need
5. Tell the truth with love, even if it hurts
6. Agree with the person as much as possible
7. Don’t allow the conversation to get off the subject
8. Be sensitive to how the Holy Spirit is working in the person’s life

An example of how this worked was seen when my wife used to take the Iranian and Armenian immigrants to apply for their social security card and their application for

low income housing. She also used to take them to the bank and opened accounts for them. She instructed them not to fall too quickly for the lure of credit cards, yet buy their furniture with credit and make the payment before the interest accumulated, to build credit history. This way she built strong relationships with the new people and gained their full trust. They had no doubt that her motives were good. She then would use steps similar to the ones discussed above and then reach out to them with the gospel. She led many people to the Lord in this way.

These kinds of supportive services are invaluable in showing the love of Christ. It is the most practical way to befriend immigrants. There is an Azeri lady in our Iranian church with her two teenage sons that my wife befriended in this manner. Eventually she shared the gospel with her. One day she opened her heart and received Christ as her personal Lord and savior, and she is now a key member of the Iranian church. The irony of this story is that my wife's ethnicity was Armenian and hers was Turk. These two ethnic groups have been enemies for nearly a century. The Turks had massacred over 1.5 million Armenians in 1914. During the time the Lord brought these women together for His purposes, their people were fighting with each other over land issues for eight years in the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. Before my wife's passing they became best friends.

In reaching out to the people of an ethnic group, the best approach is to use a home setting to establish the relationship and make them feel comfortable. Casual meetings can take place on an irregular but never too infrequent basis. Bi-weekly meetings with frequent phone calls in between keep the relationship's fire alive. When the individual is ready to receive the Lord he or she needs to know that he or she is not

going to be accepted any more or less enthusiastically after salvation. Obviously, the relationship with the individual will go to a new level, but the love, and the affection is unchanging. If the prospects are members of a family, each member needs to understand that his or her individual decision is what matters to the Lord.

The children must remain under the authority of the parents, unless they would like to receive Christ and their parents are not ready to take that step yet.<sup>10</sup> In that case the child, provided he or she is at a mature age, needs to be dealt with separately, ideally by one of his or her own age group. The ministry to the children of the ethnic people can be done separately, with their parents' permission. Usually the parents don't object to safe outings for their children, especially if they know where they are going and who they are going with. Because they can adapt to the Western culture and language more easily, the children could be taken to the church youth programs or camps by their peers and be given the opportunity to hear the gospel pitched at their level. Many people from ethnic groups have come to faith through the salvation of their children. One of our elders in the Iranian church and his wife came to the knowledge of Christ in this way.

### **Home Settings and Other First Steps**

When several individuals receive the Lord, the discipleship programs need to start. At this point, home gatherings might not be suitable for them anymore. Group members need to be encouraged to get comfortable with the idea of going to the church and using its facilities. It is best if the meetings to discuss this consist of these individuals and the discipler without any additional or new people.<sup>11</sup> The idea of going to the church can be uncomfortable with some ethnic people, especially those who have never been to a

church before, such as Muslims or Budists.<sup>12</sup> This can be ameliorated by having them over for tea after the service, or even going out to a coffee shop. The meetings needs to be regular and in the same place. The services should follow the same pattern as the first century church, as described in Book of Acts Chapter 2. It should be a good balance of study of God's Word, fellowship, worship, stewardship, and witnessing.<sup>13</sup> The meetings should not be more than two hours long. Two-way communications usually work best in discipleship.<sup>14</sup> Later on they need to be encouraged to talk about what they have learned later on and each time they need to be asked to give a testimony of what they think God has done for them in the recent past. They need to be asked about any concerns they shared in previous conversations or matters for which they had requested prayer. Writing these points down for later references is well worth it, because it demonstrates they are still cared for.

Many converts feel that, after conversion, the discipler is no longer interested in their business, and his or her work is done with them.<sup>15</sup> Close follow up with converts is the most vital step in the discipleship process, and it is necessary to produce mature Christians. If converts are ignored after conversion it will take tremendous effort to bring them back to the flock and make them useful for the ministry. If a mistake or misunderstanding happens they should not be left alone. The discipler should teach them by example of what it means to be in Christ. They need to know that anyone can make mistakes, but not everyone knows how to admit their mistake and ask for forgiveness. This is a precious lesson they can learn from their discipler.

After early stages of growth and development, disciples need to be baptized. As mentioned before early baptism is not recommended, because the significance of baptism

needs to be well understood. Disciples are encouraged to invite their relatives and friends to witness their baptism, unless it is not safe for them. Some Muslim or other converts do not want their relatives and friends to find out about their new faith because of the danger this may pose to them. They must be baptized discretely for their own safety. Having a person from their ethnic group consult with them in this matter is prudent.

### **Attending Church**

After baptism, the disciple is encouraged to share his or her Christian faith with any one that he or she is comfortable with if they are not already doing so. They could be taken to a Western church so they see the services and participate if they are comfortable with the idea of large groups provided they understand the language. Translation is always a good way to show that they are cared for.

The services in their language should not be stopped for any reason since others from the same ethnic group will be attracted to those services, and the new disciples can actually reach out to them with the gospel message. The idea behind all these efforts is to form an ethnic fellowship with the hope that it could grow into an ethnic church in due time. So regular services should continue and witnessing outside the church should be the basis for fishing for souls for the Kingdom. The new disciples should always be involved in the decision making process, and special training programs must be arranged for their growth. They should not be left to stagnate for any period of time because their old circle of friends never ceases inviting them to return to their old, non-Christian ways. They need to be encouraged to be selective in their friendships and to stay away from temptations that they can and should resist. (1 Cor. 15:33) Their healthy growth in

learning God's Word and walking in the Spirit can produce a powerhouse of an evangelist among their own people. In turn each one has a potential of being the key person that the Lord can use to bring an entire nation to salvation!

### **Church Funding Considerations**

Sooner or later funding issues will pose challenges that if not taken care of properly, can hinder the progress of the young congregation<sup>16</sup>. Most ethnic churches have congregations made up of people whose earnings are lower than the average of the local community. Whether the church starts as a Bible study and then grows or whether it is a newly planted church funded by an established congregation, it will need money to be able to operate.

Practice has shown that the single most effective strategy used by ethnic churches to make ends meet is to keep costs very low and work toward a common vision. This strategy has its drawbacks and can actually begin to hurt the church if carried out too severely. Let's look at this approach and develop some points of considerations to act as guidelines for the developing church.

One way to keep costs low is to avoid certain larger expenditures altogether. The two biggest expenditures are rent and salaries. Rent can be avoided via the "hermit crab" approach to growth. As a congregation outgrows the home-based gathering, it can move to an established church or a local school. Most of the larger churches can handle substantial growth on the part of an ethnic church. The compelling factors for a group to establish their own physical church operation generally revolves around the need for broader programs and more normal meeting times. When using the facilities of another

church, the Sunday morning times and standard Sunday evening times (6:30 PM or later) are taken. This arrangement leaves a range of start times from 1 PM to 4PM. Most ethnic churches feel strongly about meeting on Sunday since many of the countries they come from place a greater emphasis on Sunday than is seen here in the United States.

Usually, a church will wait until it has accumulated the capital reserves before moving to their own facility. According to the experience of the author and interaction with several other ethnic pastors the churches may wait as long as ten years collecting adequate funds to open a church of their own. This financial decision is often driven by emotion since many ethnic churches do not feel like a “legitimate” church until they are meeting in their own building.

The other big line item in all church budgets is the pastor’s salary. As a result, most ethnic churches are headed by a lay pastor who has a regular career and source of income outside the church. Not a single pastor in the case studies discussed in chapter 4 is a full time pastor. In addition, none of them commands a salary greater than \$1500 per month and at the time this document is being written, none of them is taking even that which is designated as their salary. In other words, they tithe 100 percent of their church stipend.

The benefit of this benevolence on the part of ethnic pastors is obvious. It allows the church to accumulate funds much more quickly. The downside is more subtle. Pastor burnout is rampant even in traditional churches where the pastor is paid. Imagine being the chief recruiter, cheerleader, and sounding board for ethnic Americans while preparing the weekly message and making the rounds each evening with parishioners. Then imagine doing so for no pay. What ethnic church pastors have to do for their

congregation is known as a labor of love and it represents the most common scenario in developing ethnic churches in America. Experience indicates the optimum approach is to begin paying the pastor as soon as there is a regular assembly beyond a Bible study – even over the objections of the pastor. This is biblical: “The worker deserves his wages.” (1 Tim. 5:18) It may prevent a loss of momentum due to pastor burnout.

One final stage of growth which may occur is the split. There are two positive reasons for splitting in an ethnic church: geographic critical mass or ethnic critical mass. Often, even in a large city, members of an ethnic group will have only one choice of meeting place where they can congregate with people of like nationality, language and/or ethnicity. For the large metropolitan cities it may involve a significant commute. However, once enough people are meeting, parishioners begin to compare notes on where one another reside. Once it is determined that enough people live in a more convenient location to be able to have a congregation, a change of venue may be in order. A key consideration will be the impact on the remaining congregation. This impact may be felt in terms of critical mass, programs and leadership.

A split for purely ethnic reasons is rarer. Still, as we saw in chapter four, the Moldavians felt more comfortable with their own dialect and more of them lived in Tacoma than in Seattle. The remaining congregation also benefited geographically because the majority of them lived in a more northerly section of Seattle’s eastside. As a result, two congregations now meet in two more convenient locations, and both are thriving.

While there are general patterns of growth and development for an ethnic church, there is no precise formula; just as there is precise formula for the growth of a city. In

addition, there is no time schedule that can be universally applied. As was indicated however, there are three elemental aspects that all successful, growing churches have in common: a foundation built on the Lord Jesus Christ, an evangelical orientation, and a significant amount of work on the part of a zealous pastor in the early stages of church formation. Provided there are enough people of a particular ethnic group in a given geography, these three elements can hardly miss in forming a congregation that is successful by God's standards.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 17, 228-230.
2. Love, 9.
3. Ibid., 9.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Ibid., 89, 90.
6. Ibid., 70, 71.
7. Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 98-105.
8. Shenk and Stutzman, 135.
9. Walter A. Henrichsen, *Disciples Are Made Not Born* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1988), 55-61.
10. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*, 175-182, 185.
11. Ibid., 196-199.
12. Ibid., 208-210.

13. Ibid., 194.

14. Ibid., 153-166.

15. Henrichsen, 77-88.

16. Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 50-60.

## CHAPTER 10

### WHAT ABOUT GENERATIONS TWO THROUGH N?

In general, this topic is a major issue in an ethnic church and pastors must come up with positive ways to address it. The youth are the future. Learning from Christ, it is easy to see that He cared whether the propagation of the gospel continued after Him. Paul knew that concept well. For this reason he wrote his Pastoral Epistles to Timothy and Titus. These men were going to pass on the message of the gospel from the generation that had seen and encountered Christ to the next generation, and continue the message on to an unknown future when Christ was to return.

Generational outreach was in the mind of Christ when He gave the Great Commission to His disciples. Furthermore, Paul, referring to the basics of faith, charged Timothy by writing him, “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Tim 4:15, 16) Timothy’s diligence, dedication, personal progress, watchfulness, and perseverance were the key elements in reaching the next generation for their salvation through Christ.

Following this model the pastor of the ethnic church must first make sure the youth are not neglected, then concentrate on having the dynamics in the church that reach the youth with the gospel message to make them disciples of Christ. This issue was dealt with extensively as a serious problem for the ethnic churches in Chapter 8. In this

chapter, using the example of the Iranian church, we will examine some positive steps that have helped the youth to “catch the vision” of the ethnic church.<sup>1</sup>

After the Iranian church grew in number, a few families, along with their youth became regular participants, the parents asked the leaders of the fellowship about a program for the youth. Our focus was so much on the parents that we had overlooked the precious generation that we had under our influence. At the time there were eight teenagers who, along with their families, were regularly attending the services. Even though the services were being conducted in English and Persian, the relevance to youth was not there. The decision was made for the youth to have their own youth group on Friday night and attend the regular Sunday service with the adults. I was assigned to work with the youth, as our Pakistani pastor and the other key members led the Bible studies on Friday nights. The result was encouraging. The youth were very eager to talk about their experiences in school. They also wanted to talk about their relationships with their parents.

I tried hard to be a listener as well as an instructor. I listened to their complaints and then addressed them by systematically teaching them about the principle that was important for them as a Christian to follow. It was not easy but my experiences were very helpful to them. As a young person of eighteen, I had come here to continue my higher education. I was a person that could relate to them. They could see that there was room for a person with a Western education and culture to hold on to the things that mattered in his old culture. Their model was then someone who had adapted to the new culture without severing the ties from the old culture. In a way they learned to enjoy the best of both worlds.

They were free to speak in any language they found comfortable, and there never was pressure for them to learn the Farsi language. Interestingly enough we found out that they did try to talk to each other in Farsi since some of them were not fluent in English yet. Since there were equal numbers of boys and girls, they learned how to be respectful and cordial toward one another. We had programs outside the church for them. These programs varied in nature. Sometimes they all participated in plays. At other times we would separate the boys and girls into groups so they could do activities that were more enjoyable for each group. With the boys, for example, we made a manger one year for a Christmas play, and asked the girls to sew the dresses. We took them to the downtown missions and invited them to participate in ministries among the homeless people. All along we tried diligently to be their friends and to remain good role models. We occasionally reminded them that they were part of the chosen people of their generation, who could reach out to many people, but especially to unreached Iranian people.

These efforts paid off for the first youth generation of our church. Out of the eight, all still walk with the Lord; all are college graduates some with graduate degrees; four are married, all to Christians, and are serving the Lord with their spouses. One of them is our children's director with his wife, another is married to another children's director of an American church. Two of them work among the international students in large college campuses with their husbands, and one is teaching university courses on how to evangelize to Muslims. This last one was the honorary guest in the Seattle mayor's breakfast a few years ago. Her message shook the 600 business men and women that had come to that prayer breakfast.

The next generation of youth in our church are also well on their way to maturity in Christ. Their minister is also a United States educated Iranian and can very well relate to the needs of the youth.

Using this model one can conclude that the youth in an ethnic church need to have their unique programs yet stay plugged into the church. The programs should be flexible enough for them not to feel the cultural pressure, but at the same time they need to be Bible-oriented so they are equipped for their future. With the cooperation of the parents and the church leaders, a suitable youth minister who can relate to the needs of the children, and who is familiar with the Western culture as well as the culture of the homeland is a recipe for success. Additionally I don't remember a prayer meeting throughout our church history in which we did not pray for our youth and ask the Lord to protect them and teach them His ways.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Hesselgrave, 175-182.

## CHAPTER 11

### LOOKING BACK ACROSS THE OCEAN: HOMELAND STRATEGIES

#### **We Each Have a Jerusalem**

It is so natural for an individual from an ethnic group who immigrates to a Western country and receives salvation through Christ to then forget about his or her own people. But Paul demonstrates an unmatched longing to reach his own people with the message of the gospel. He felt it to such an extent that he wrote these words to the Romans: “I speak the truth in Christ- I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.” (Rom. 9:1-4) These are powerful words from a powerful person. It is easy to see Paul’s transparent heart in all of this longing. He is ready to be cut off from Christ, the one for whom he has suffered so much in order for the people of his race to be united with Christ. This fundamental mindset for evangelism is a biblical teaching that must be instilled in the mind of an ethnic individual before the individualistic Western society influences him or her.

When the vision of the church is kept on display every week and in every church function, it becomes difficult for the individual to forget his or her own people. Even the ones who opt to worship in Western churches after their conversion learn through sound biblical teaching that the Lord commanded His disciples to start from Jerusalem, go to

the neighboring areas, and then to the outer most parts of the earth. Every person's Jerusalem is different. Some see their Jerusalem as their families, some see it as their own race, and some see it in their immediate neighbors regardless of nationality.<sup>1</sup> Each Jerusalem has its own merits, but the important thing is to have a Jerusalem to start the evangelism. With proper training the members of the ethnic church can become the best missionaries among their own people anywhere they choose to live.

Among the Iranian Christians there is a large majority that believes the rapid rate of salvation of Iranians in the twenty five years since the Islamic Revolution is not merely an accident. The group believes that God has a very specific strategy for reaching the Muslim world. He has confirmed this message through non-Iranian church leaders as well. There is a prophecy about Elam, the old name for the country of Iran, which is pretty powerful:

This is what the Lord Almighty says:

See I will break the bow of Elam, the mainstay of their might. I will bring against Elam the four winds from the four quarters of the heavens; I will scatter them to the four winds, and there will not be a nation where Elam's exiles do not go. I will shatter Elam before their foes, before those who seek their lives; I will bring disaster upon them, even my fierce anger," declares the Lord. I will pursue them with the sword until I have made an end of them. I will set my throne in Elam and destroy her king and officials," declares the Lord. "*Yet I will restore the fortunes of Elam in the days to come,*" declares the Lord. (Jer. 49:35-39)

At the time of the prophecy, the Persian kingdom covered a large portion of the populated regions of North Africa, Middle-East, Central, Eastern and Southeastern Asia. These countries constitute what is widely known as the 10/40 region, where the most unreached people of the world live. Current Iran happens to be in the center of this window. At no time in its 2,500 year history has the population of Iran been so scattered

throughout the world. After the Islamic revolution's overthrow of the Shah in 1978, a minority of fanatic Muslims began a dictatorial rule over the majority of very moderate Muslims. This oppressive government forced many people, especially the educated individuals, to escape the country by various means once the oppression became unbearable. These people have gone mostly to the Western countries, but a great number of them are scattered elsewhere throughout the world. Last year the Iranians were considered by many to be among the most highly educated immigrants in the Western world among recent immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, as the Islamic revolution has been brought to light, many Iranians have come to know the truth about Islam and do not want to have anything to do with it. These events have become a door to great opportunity for Christians to reach the disappointed Iranians with the message of the gospel. Many of them have turned to Christ, and many more continue to come in great numbers. Iranians are the single most open nationality among the Muslim nations to hear the message of gospel.

It is worth noting that when Islam was forced on the Iranian people by Jihad (Islamic war), they were stripped of their great heritage in areas such as art, science, literature, and architecture. With the new religion they were forced even to change their written alphabet and many other customs. Iran then was instrumental in propagating Islam beyond the Arab nations, since it was the first non-Arab nation that became Muslim.

Iran was once the cradle of civilization. The first alien rights law was written and issued by Cyrus King of Persia. Those rights were issued to set the Jewish people free from Babylonian Empire and allow them to worship their God Jehovah. Daniel was

among the captives who were set free after the Persians overthrew the Babylonian Empire. It was in Persia that Daniel prayed and fasted for twenty one days before Archangel Michael could deliver him the answer because of the fierce battle with the “Prince of Persia.” (Dan 10:20) Daniel became the prime minister of the Persian Empire. Key biblical figures such as Queen Esther, Nehemiah the king’s cup bearer, and Ezra the godly man that brought the people back to the Law and to their God lived and died in Persia. Their books were written in that land and the project of re-building the walls of Jerusalem was funded and made possible by the Persian kings. The erecting of these walls marked the calculation point from which the day that the Messiah, the Anointed One, was to be determined. (Dan. 9:25, 26) There is possible historical evidence that the Magi came from Persia. While the word “Magi” was commonly used to describe sorcerers and wise men, it also referred to the leaders of the Iranian religion Zoroastrianism. In the days of Christ, Zoroastrians lived only in Iran. Several years later, on the day of Pentecost at least three people groups from Persia heard the gospel. They were Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, and they took the gospel back to their countries.

### **Going Back Home**

Could it be possible that God is interested in using the same people He used to set His people free and later used to mark the day of His Son’s birth as a key element in preparing for the Parousia? Jeremiah’s prophecy is very significant as part of the eschatology in answering this question. If the gospel is not actively preached among a fifth of the world’s population, Muslims, according to Matthew 24:14, how could Christ return? The Western world has effectively failed to reach the Muslims in the Muslim

countries and Muslims in the Western world with the message of the gospel. Many of the people who started and supported the Islamic revolution in Iran were educated in Western institutions. In comparison to missionaries active all over the world, the missionaries to the Muslims are the fewest in number. It is truly frightening for a Westerner to go to Muslim countries for evangelism purposes. The Muslim religion is the second fastest growing religion in the world. Their hatred toward the West and Westerners is the biggest issue for the governments of the world, and no one has an answer for them. I believe the church is the one that has the answer to this problem. The answer lies in evangelizing to the millions of the Muslims that are in the Western world and then to turn them loose to go back and evangelize as nationals.

The Arab people, as children of Ishmael, are similar to the children of Isaac. What Paul said about the latter applies to the former as well: “For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.” (Rom. 10:2) The Muslim disciplers live in caves and train their disciples under the harshest conditions. They do anything for destruction. Imagine if they are told the truth and are won for Christ what a work force they will be for the Kingdom. Their men gather in thousands and pray in unity. The author’s observation is that while the majority of the West’s Christian congregations are made up of women, our men are enjoying their days in idleness or are working frantically to have all that King Solomon called vanity.

As Iranians are so open to the gospel and have become the fertile land, it is not difficult to see how God’s plan is unfolding. The openness to the Gospel among Iranians is observed by the author and the network of the ministers involved in the ministry to the Iranians. God is saving the first non-Arab nation to become Muslim, and He is going to

use them to reach out to the Arabs and other Muslim nations. This way God will *set His throne in Elam* and *will destroy her king and officials*. And God *will restore the good fortunes of Elam* for His glory and Honor.

At this time, the Iranian church is beginning to send missionaries to other Farsi speaking countries such as Tajikistan.<sup>3</sup> There are two missionaries that our church supports who are effectively working among Tajikistanis. There are a few others that minister among the Afghanis since they are a Farsi speaking nation as well. There are overall 60 million Iranians in the world, and a 100 million Farsi (the national language of Iran) speaking people in Iran. There are well over 1 million Iranians that live in United States and Canada alone.<sup>4</sup> Many of these people have not yet heard the gospel. Among the ones that have, according to the experience and observations of the author, the majority of them have received Christ. Mobilizing these people locally to evangelize the other Farsi speaking peoples will create a very strong army for the Lord. Then all that needs to happen is for these people to go back as ambassadors of Christ to their countries - their Jerusalem. From there they can go to the neighboring countries, which are mostly Muslim.

This strategic approach to evangelism requires proper planning for leadership training among the ethnic churches. Partnership with the Western churches and educational institutions is a key at this time to equipping the pastors of these ethnic congregations and helping them prepare the saints for the work of ministry. As Muslims make disciples to destroy the world, we can make disciples to save the people of the world from eternal damnation. Today the Church needs men like Joshua and Caleb and women like Esther and Ruth to walk by faith and not by sight; to maintain a godly vision

and not be afraid of the enemy; to engage in their Father's business and let Christ complete it. (Phil. 1:6) Our God is stronger and mightier than any other visible and invisible power, and the victory is surely ours. All we have to do is to go and conquer the land and return it to its lawful Owner.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Hesselgrave, 123-131.
2. Phyllis McIntosh, "Iranian-Americans Reported among Most Highly Educated in U.S.," *Payvand's Iran News*, 26 January 2004.
3. Hunter III, 26-33.
4. Soraya Fata and Raha Rafii, "Strength in Numbers," *Iran Census Report*, 2003, 4.

## CHAPTER 12

### SUMMARY

In the previous chapters the need for the existence of ethnic churches was presented. It was demonstrated that they have a viable place in the Western world. Issues common to most ethnic churches were discussed at length and their ongoing challenges were presented. It has become fairly clear that the Western church typically does not have an effective approach to reaching the immigrants with the gospel of Jesus Christ, because of differences in language, culture, and worldview. However, individual Westerners could have an impact on their friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

Typically, handing tracts to them is not a very effective way of evangelism since immigrants are more relational than individualistic people. To first gain their trust and then build relational bridges with them is the most effective way to communicate the gospel with them.<sup>1</sup> Bridge building is a positive approach that Steve Sjogren and D. James Kennedy in their respective documents advocate to be the best way to reach out to anyone, especially to the immigrants. The key difference between conversion of a Westerner and one from ethnic groups is not as much in the way that the gospel is presented, but rather it is the follow up.<sup>2</sup> They should not be left on their own with a Bible and some reading material. Rick Love, Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq , Ron Rhodes, and Don McCurry and numerous other sources provide excellent information on how to reach out to Muslims effectively making them disciples who are able to go back to their

own people to make disciples. Hesselgrave provides a concise approach for reaching out to the people of the world with a different worldview, such as naturalists, Hindus, Buddhists, Chinese and other monotheistic view points.<sup>3</sup>

The ethnic converts are not satisfied with a couple hours of Sunday service and a pastor's hand shake upon arrival and departure. Since most of them are sociable people they need to be surrounded by Christians and receive as much nutritious pure milk for growth as possible.<sup>4</sup> They should not be catered to beyond their need, and surely they should not be placed in positions which could bring on spiritual arrogance. They need to be reminded to share the gospel with their ethnic friends and relatives to the extent they feel comfortable. As they mature and receive proper training, the Western church can help them start a Bible study, perhaps with just their family members in their own homes, but under the leadership of the church. The natural leaders will rise to the top and prepare others as members of the body of Christ.

Finding well balanced groups in other localities will be another way to help ethnic converts grow and learn how to plant what could become an ethnic church. The Westerners need to be careful not to become a controlling influence upon these groups, since this practice has been destructive in the past. It is best to pray for them and let them learn via on the job training. The Holy Spirit has a way to guide the ones that He calls to ministry as long as they maintain a close walk with Him.

The ethnic churches that concentrate only on reaching out to the immigrants, especially if they are large churches, can become obsolete once the number of immigrants declines. The expenses alone of the church can be the cause of such decline. The ethnic churches should open their horizons and invest in their youth.

A number of helpful and positive strategies were provided, and other problems were discussed which need to be addressed. The vision of the church must be greater than just the ethnic people in that locality. The ethnic church must learn to accept other people from close to their ethnicities without reservation, and accept dual language services to reach out to every one in the congregation. The congregation members need to always be reminded not to fall into the temptation of going back to their old life style and worldview when they are in trials. The converts need to be taught how to place their faith in action and live by it on a daily bases.<sup>5</sup> This practice of walking in the faith will help them to become strong for the Lord and form the pillars that the local church will be built upon.

The best way to keep the fire of Christianity alive is to share the gospel. The members need to be constantly reminded to be active disciple-makers. An ethnic church might in the long run turn into a church with mixed membership consisting of both ethnic and Western parishioners. For that reason the church should maintain a very high level of integrity in handling the Word correctly and not quenching the Holy Spirit. The church should maintain its effectiveness in spreading the good news among *all* the people and making disciples of *all* the nations not only of their own kind. While many Western churches are losing their congregations, it is the opinion of the author that the ethnic churches will be the spiritual boost that the Church in the Western world needs these days. Nowadays, Westerners pay very close attention to all kinds of absurd eastern philosophies. Many even adhere to the wrong ideologies presented by the false world religions. Perhaps the time is right for ethnic Christians to preach the gospel anew to Westerners.

I have encountered numerous Westerners who had converted to other world religions. The opportunities that the Lord provides for our Iranian church members are truly unique to witness to the Westerners who have embraced Islam, thinking that it is the religion of brotherhood. By using the Bible and going forth by the power of the Holy Spirit Iranian Christians can help people realize their mistake in converting to Islam. These Islamic converts never knew what Christianity offered them and they sought after the right things in the wrong places. Some people married Muslims and never knew what aftermath would await them. Again the ethnic church members can play a vital role in helping the couple to know the truth and begin walking in the light.

We have no choice but to be optimistic about the future of ethnic churches in the Western world. Ethnic missionaries, based in America and other Western countries, are going to be pivotal in the final push to reach all nations and peoples with the gospel. In his impactful work K.P. Yohannan, an Indian émigré, points out that the world of evangelism has entered a new phase and many people do not realize it.<sup>6</sup> The outreach success of “blond haired, blue eyed” missionaries in many restricted countries will be limited from now on. Restricted countries such as India, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Sudan, and China, as well as other somewhat restricted countries such as Indonesia and Russia will best be penetrated by the ethnic groups who are considered to be part of the cultural fabric of those countries. In fact, this penetration is already happening.

America can provide two things to further this revolution in evangelism: money and know-how. We can start and fund missions with a variety of ostensible objectives, while never taking our eye off of evangelism. Americans who have this know-how and also know the language and culture will be the most successful. Who better than recent

immigrants, trained in the Bible and evangelism to fulfill this role? Dr. Jerry Appleby, author of *Missions Have Come Home to America*, convincingly makes the case for a new mission focus “inward” toward the foreigner in our midst. He writes, “Our time, our buildings, our leadership, our money, and—above all—our Lord must be shared if the ethnic harvest of America is to be reaped. This is not easy! Our resources must be God's possessions.”<sup>7</sup>

Ethnic churches with limited or no evangelism programs are likely doomed to irrelevance or to disappear altogether. Those ethnic churches which are unable to reach their own children are especially vulnerable to disintegration. However, those churches with a plan to include their children in active ministries and to reach out to their community and around the world will not only survive, but they will thrive down through the generations under the blessings of the Lord, who has assured us of this truth if we honor His model and His mission for churches.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, 98-105.
2. Henrichsen, 77-87.
3. David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 193-280.
4. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 50-56.
5. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*, 219-253.
6. K.P. Yohannan, *Revolution in World Missions* (Carrollton: GFA Books, 2003), 90-95.
7. Appleby, 67.

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## Vitae

Patrick Safarian is a lay pastor by calling, an engineer by training and an FAA engineer by vocation. He presently resides in Sammamish, Washington where he is the father of two children.

He was born in Iran but left in 1978 to come to America. He completed his Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering at Northrop University and later went on to earn his Masters of Science at California State University, Fullerton. In 1986 he began doctoral studies in the same field at the University of California, Davis, but left in 1987 to move to the Seattle area to take a senior engineering position with Boeing Company. Eleven years later he joined Federal Aviation Administration as aircraft structural engineer specializing in metal fatigue and fracture mechanics. He maintains his edge and his ties to the academic world by teaching graduate-level courses in Aeronautics at the University of Washington.

Fifteen years ago, he began a series of home Bible studies for both Iranians and Armenians, under the tutelage of a Pakistani Pastor, and eventually took on lay pastoral duties for both ethnic congregations. He continues to lead both of these growing fellowships to this day.

The love of his life, his wife Alenoosh, died in 2002, leaving him to rear his thirteen year old daughter, Natasha, and his nine year old son, Christopher. He continues

to build on the work that he and his wife began. He fondly dedicates to her memory much of his efforts to spread the gospel here and abroad.

As an ethnic Armenian-Iranian, he has ties to both countries and remains active in the network of Iranian and Armenian expatriates who seek to bring the gospel to Iran and restore the Christian stature of Armenia.