

Church Planting through Leadership Formation

Daniel L. Mattson

The driving concern of LCMS World Mission is that all people everywhere hear the Gospel of Jesus and turn in repentance and faith to him. To accomplish that, LCMS World Mission uses a strategy summarized in the phrase, "Church planting through leadership formation." The goals of that strategy are outlined in the procedures which follow.

The Individual

Each individual is important and should have the opportunity to hear the Gospel in understandable terms. To make this a realistic possibility, missionaries need to learn the language and culture of the people they are sent to evangelize. The objective of such training is increased effective communication. Traditional societies are not easily penetrated. If the Gospel message is presented in such a way that it seems utterly foreign, it is not likely to be accepted. Without intimate understanding of the culture and language of the people he has been asked to address, a missionary is likely to make it more difficult to respond positively to the Gospel message.

Church Planting

The missionary is to be concerned not only that individuals respond to the Gospel with faith and repentance, but also that the church is planted. As soon as people believe, they become part of the Church, the Body of Christ. In contrast to Western ways of thinking, the church does not come into existence when it

Dr. Daniel L. Mattson is Theological Studies Consultant on the staff of the Board for Mission Services (BFMS) of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. The BFMS activity is often referred to as "LCMS World Mission."

organizes itself into a congregation, writes a constitution, and elects officers. The church exists as soon as people come to faith in Christ and through baptism are given new birth, joined to the death and resurrection of Christ.

It is likely that this new church will be weak and lowly. As St. Paul said about the Corinthians: "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor 1:26). The first congregations in each mission land are likely to be made up of people who have little to lose as a result of change and whose spiritual needs are not being met by the traditional religion. People do not change such an important part of life as religious belief. The more that they place at risk, the harder it is to change.

Even though this new community may appear weak and lowly, it will carry out two important functions right from the start:

1. The church will continue its role as the nurturing community. Especially at the beginning, it is likely that the believers will be confronted by almost irresistible pressures from the unbelieving community to conform to the traditional religion and way of life. Without the support of fellow believers, many new believers may fall away. Therefore it is important for believers whose commitment to the Christian faith has hardly gone beyond the verbal confession "Jesus is Lord" to begin dialogue with one another to work out the implications of the Scriptures for their daily lives. Many questions which did not occur to them at the beginning will have to be answered.
2. It is also the responsibility of the church, the body of Christ in the world, to continue the task of seeking and saving the lost. The Lord has clearly said that his search for lost sheep will continue, a task that must be carried out by his people on earth, namely, the church.

Missionary Roles in Church Planting

From a human point of view, the decisions which a missionary makes at this point will be critical for the further development of the church. If he concludes, for example, that the people who have come to faith in Christ do not yet know enough, so that he feels he must continue to make all decisions for them until some point in the future, such a church will very likely take a path toward slow growth and dependency.

If the missionary follows a model where local people are responsible for the development of their own congregational life, while the missionary continues to take responsibility for evangelistic activity, the life of the church will very likely

be self-centered, emphasizing the nurture of the present members while paying little attention to the surrounding unbelieving world.

When the missionary views himself as a partner with the new church, he will take their views, hopes, and plans with complete seriousness, working with them to continue and expand nurture and evangelistic activities. The possibilities of healthy, dynamic growth are then greatly increased. In the same way, the leadership model which the missionary conveys during this early period will determine to a large extent the model of ministry that will be followed for years to come, even after he has left the field.

Perhaps his most difficult task will be to model a style of ministry which will make leaders accountable to the people they serve. If the missionary is not accountable, he should expect that his co-workers will also regard themselves as not being accountable to the congregation. If the missionary adopts procedures (such as salary subsidies) so that the leaders are regarded as employees of "the mission," enormous difficulties will eventually be encountered.

Four-Self Churches

Ultimately, whenever the missionary leaves the field, he will wish to leave behind a church characterized by four "selves." In order of importance, it seems to me, the church will be: 1) Self-theologizing; 2) Self-propagating; 3) Self-supporting; 4) Self-governing. The missionary must not lose sight of these four goals as he works with local people.

To be *self-theologizing* means that the church must be capable of answering the questions raised by its own cultural context in ways that make sense within that context. Of course, there is only one biblical message, but there are many ways in which that message is expressed.

The second goal, to be *self-propagating*, is closely related to the first. The church must be willing and able to proclaim the Gospel in such a way that the surrounding unbelieving population responds with repentance and faith.

The worst scenario occurs when new believers have been given no mission vision. They have been taught such a highly individualistic version of the faith that they are concerned only about matters of personal salvation or perhaps themselves and their immediate families. Such views are certainly not faithful to the biblical message. The emphasis on individualism which a Western missionary automatically carries with him makes it necessary for the missionary always to re-examine the terms in which the people are hearing his message. Nearly as bad is the scenario where the people have been given the impression

that they should not share their faith because they do not yet know enough about it. In general, new believers want to share their faith.

The third goal, to be *self-supporting*, depends a great deal on what the missionary does and does not do. If the missionary develops his own work in such a way that it could only be conducted by someone with access to an automobile, he should not be surprised if he is constantly besieged with requests for a car when he hands over the work, or that the work is neglected after he hands it over. If a missionary has a full set of multimedia tools at his disposal when he makes his presentations, can his co-workers expect any less? Decisions the missionary makes about the way in which he will carry out his work have lasting effects on new churches.

The fourth goal, to be *self-governing* is dependent on the attainment of the previous three. Of course, structures can be created and imposed or even accepted at any time, but this is not the same as "self-government." Churches are "self-governing" when their structures are understandable to the people who use them and can be used by them to accomplish the tasks which they deem important.

Leadership Formation

"Church planting through leadership formation" attempts to take seriously the fact that the church exists as soon as people come to faith in Christ, and that the same Spirit of God who brings people to faith in Christ is also able to raise up leaders among new believers so that the church may grow.

The missionary must recognize that there are many people he cannot reach. Matters of religious belief are intensely personal in every culture, and there are large numbers of people who will never accept the possibility of change proposed by an outsider. They will be open to advice only from someone who is near and dear and who can explain the implications of change in terms that they can understand and accept.

New believers are usually filled with questions about the new faith and its implications for their lives. They are vulnerable, especially at the beginning, to misbelief and to falling back into old ways of believing and acting. In the same way, the surrounding unbelieving community also has many questions that it wants answered, and when answers are available at the teachable moment, so much the better.

The wise missionary immediately begins to observe who within the community of new believers has leadership abilities. He tries people in various

positions and observes the community's reactions. Who has something to offer? Whose leadership is encouraged and accepted?

When the culture of the missionary is substantially different from that of the new believers, it is better if the missionary does not choose leaders. It is likely that what he regards as leadership qualities will not be so regarded within the culture of the new believers.

Classes will continue and spread as the evangelization process goes forward, and the missionary will need help. His best resource will be his new fellow believers who are willing and able to carry out leadership functions. This process which involves people in learning-by-doing activities under guidance of a trusted mentor is a powerful teaching and learning tool. It may appear to be very lowly and humble, but it is, in fact, the process which Jesus used to train his disciples.

The time will eventually come, however, when leaders-in-training must become leaders on their own, both for their own sakes and for the sake of the emerging Christian community. Congregations need to be fed with Word and Sacrament, and the leaders-in-training need to be recognized as legitimate spiritual leaders in their own communities.

At this point, the missionary has another important role to play. The congregations need to understand biblical standards for leadership. He needs to help them recognize that secular standards are not normative. He must help the community to design a model of ministry that can be sustained on the basis of community resources.

It is most important that the missionary in his own words and actions has firmly established a model of *servant leadership*. To be a Christian leader is not to be a "big man" or a boss, but a servant of people, working with them for their good. The qualifications of "overseership" in such passages as 1 Timothy 3 can serve as a good guide.

An important question arises: What model of ministry are these people able and willing to support? The word "support" does not mean only financial support. It also means that they will recognize his ministry as their ministry, to support and defend also in times of controversy. Such a leader they will follow for nurture and in outreach activities.

Very likely there will be little or no opportunity for full-time ministry. There is, however, nothing wrong with a bi-vocational model of ministry. St. Paul's activities as a tent maker did not make a second class apostle. In contrast, if the missionary starts on the slippery slope of subsidizing a ministry in which the people cannot afford, when he and his resources go home, the church he leaves

behind will have to start again in developing its own model of ministry.

The people of God, organized as a Christian congregation and led by the Spirit of God, are certainly free to call someone from their own midst as pastor. There is no inherent superiority in the system where the pastor must come from outside of the community. Nor is there any scriptural requirement that all pastoral functions must be exercised by a single individual.

Part-time, bi-vocational ministry by local people, an alternative model of ministry, will require an alternative educational program. Bi-vocational people are rarely able to afford the luxury of full-time, residential programs. They need extension programs to bring the needed, training to them in their local setting. There is no single ministerial formation program which is universally valid. God's people are free to design formation programs which provide them with the workers they need.

Nevertheless, three concerns must always be present as those who work with young churches plan and implement leadership formation programs. 1) Programs must be biblically and confessionally sound. 2) They must be educationally appropriate. 3) They must be culturally acceptable. This is a normal pattern of development and exactly what LCMS World Mission expects will happen as it carries out its strategy of "Church planting through leadership formation."