

James Tino and Paul Brink, "A Model for Urban Church Planting the First Phase: From Preliminary Investigation to First Worship Service," *Missio Apostolica*, Special Issue 1 (March 1999): 40-46.

40 *Missio Apostolica*

---

---

**A Model for Urban Church Planting  
The First Phase:  
From Preliminary Investigation to  
First Worship Service**

**James Tino & Paul Brink**

In the light of the ever-increasing urbanization of today's world, the need for effective urban church planting is becoming acute. The following article offers one model for the initial phase of planting a cross-cultural urban congregation, a model which has grown out of the authors' combined experiences – in all, nearly 30 years in urban Latin America. This model has been used successfully in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, a city of nearly one million people, and characterized by strong resistance to the Gospel (approximately 3% of the population are practicing Christians). Following this model, a congregation was formed with a core group of 25 regular worshippers. Since that time 4 years ago, the church has grown to over 80 worshippers – every one of them a new convert to Christianity!

Even before reading this model, we offer the following four recommendations to any urban church planter: 1. Pray regularly. 2. Be creative, open-minded, and flexible. 3. If you choose to follow this guide, do things in order! 4. Don't assume that something written here does not apply to your situation until you have first tried it out!

The model which follows is designed to guide the church planting effort through the first major phase – from "ground zero" to the first worship service. This article does NOT talk about what happens after the first worship service. The process which is described in this article is divided into four stages. The urban church planter should allow approximately 18 months to work through all 4 stages described below.

**Stage I: Preliminary Investigation**

*(allow 1 month)*

Before permanently locating a missionary in a city, several factors need to be thoroughly investigated. The investigation must be carried out BEFORE the missionary or missionary team is permanently located in the city because the results of the investigation will influence decisions such as where to live, population targets, and the

---

*Rev. James Tino and Rev. Paul Brink are missionaries in Venezuela with the Board for Mission Services, the LCMS. They represent 30 years of combined missionary service in Barquisimeto in an urban setting.*

amount of financial capital needed to initiate a ministry in the target city.

The investigation is best conducted on-site by a missionary or missionary team, and the results are greatly enhanced if a national who lives in the city can be included in the team. The team should allow for 15 days of on-site investigation. The team will identify their own areas of investigation, but should include the following: 1. City Structure (transitional areas, geographic features, etc.); 2. Population Breakdown (age, ethnic groups, socio-economic distribution, etc.); 3. Financial Concerns (rental costs, legal requirements, etc.); 4. Religious Life (belief systems, practices, etc.); and 5. Church Planting Strategies (employed by other Christian groups in the same city).<sup>1</sup>

Some information can be obtained through publications, but the most reliable information generally comes from people who know the subject matter. The visitation team should plan to talk with government officials, religious leaders, a realtor, and people "on the street".

## **Stage II: Moving Into the City**

*(allow 4 months)*

### 1. Mission Statement

Once the preliminary investigation has been completed, the missionary or mission team is ready to write a mission statement. The mission statement helps to a) focus the work, and b) identify the target population. Any model for writing the mission statement can be used, so long as the work is focused and the target population is identified.

With the preliminary investigation completed and the mission statement prepared, the missionary is ready to move into the city.

### 2. Missionary Housing

The target population (as defined in the "Mission Statement") will identify the area of the city where the initial "ministry center" needs to be located. Missionary housing should be selected with the approximate area of the ministry center in mind. In our experience, it is a hindrance to the ministry if the missionary family is located more than 15 or 20 minutes from the ministry center. Other concerns are comfort; personal safety; proximity to goods, services, and schools; cost; and availability of a telephone in the home.

### 3. Ministry Center

Once the missionary has moved into the city, he will be able to dedicate the necessary time to preparing and equipping the actual ministry center. The location of the ministry center should be chosen with care. If a city-wide ministry is desired, inaccessible neighborhood locations should be avoided (i.e., a house in the middle of a residential area). Exclusive association with a particular neighborhood is too parochial, and may

<sup>1</sup> A list of questions prepared by the authors which can be used to guide the preliminary investigation may be obtained by writing: Dr. Douglas Rutt, Latin American Secretary, LCMS World Mission, 1333 S. Kirkwood Rd., St. Louis, MO 63122-7295.

cripple efforts to draw people from other sectors of the city. The locale chosen for the ministry center should take into account the following considerations: a) visibility; b) readily accessible to the target population (i.e. bus routes, etc.); c) secure enough to deter robberies; d) adequate space to accomplish mission objectives; e) reliable electricity (relative to other sectors of the city); and f) phone service (1 phone line is a must, 2 lines are recommendable).

A common mistake for urban church planters, especially those working in cross-cultural situations, is to begin their ministry out of the home. Such a strategy limits the work in a number of ways and compromises the missionary family.<sup>2</sup>

The initial ministry center does not necessarily need to have space to celebrate worship services, although it should have space for a reception area, offices, and a meeting area that can accommodate 20 to 30 people for Bible studies or other events. If it is not possible to find a place that meets all the considerations mentioned earlier and is large enough to hold worship services, it is better to rent a smaller, better-suited facility first and then rent a separate worship facility when the time comes.

Once the ministry center has been secured, the missionary or mission team will want to equip it with the essential urban ministry tools. Naturally, as the ministry grows, more equipment will be added, but to begin with a ministry center should have a) furniture (desks, chairs, tables, shelves, etc.); b) a computer with modem and printer; c) a FAX machine; d) a storage cabinet, especially if no storage room is available; and e) a photocopier.

### **Stage III: Beginning the Work**

*(allow 12 months)*

#### 1. A BIG mistake – starting worship services too soon!

A common mistake in urban church planting is to begin holding worship services too soon. The temptation to begin worship services is strong, but should be resisted for a number of reasons. First of all, it is a permanent, long-range decision. Once begun, Sunday worship cannot easily be stopped. In addition, the preparation for weekly worship can easily consume 20 or more hours per week, time which should be used for evangelism (during the beginning stages). Another consideration is that starting worship too soon prohibits the missionary from visiting other Christian churches in the city, where he can glean ideas as to how to contextualize the worship style according to the culture of the people. Finally, a small, poorly-attended worship service is unattractive to the unbelievers, disheartening for the new believers, and discouraging for the missionary.

We recommend that the first worship service be held no sooner than six to twelve months after completing stage II ("Moving finto the City"). Instead of following a rigid

---

<sup>2</sup> Among other things, planting a church in your home limits the visibility and appeal of the work, communicates a sense of impermanence, attracts people from the "fringes" of society (unemployed, people looking for "a leg up", etc.), compromises the personal security of the missionary family, and puts them under unnecessary stress and strain.

time frame, a good guideline would be to hold the first worship service when there are at least 15 to 20 converts committed to participating in a Lutheran church.

## 2. Support Personnel

Many experienced urban church planters have found it useful to have salaried support staff. In many cities, and especially in developing countries, huge amounts of missionary time can be wasted on errands and clerical-type work. For this reason, it is a good investment of time and money to recruit and train a secretary from the target population. He/she can make phone calls, work as a receptionist, track down people, make photo-copies, and a multitude of other time-consuming tasks. An ethnic secretary makes the ministry center more accessible to the target population, and frees the missionary to be out of the office and on the streets. In addition, an ethnic worker is often able to provide invaluable cultural interpretation for the missionary. A salary package for such a secretary should be as much a part of the budget as rent.

The missionary/mission team may also find it helpful to have a person who works as a sort of "errand boy" or messenger. To determine if this is needed, the missionary should talk with some highly-placed secretaries in the private sector, and find out how things get done in their culture, and in their city. In Barquisimeto, we have a messenger who works two days per week, and does errands "on the street"-go to the bank, pay utilities, purchase office supplies, etc.

## 3. Developing Contacts

Once all the elements are in place, the missionary or mission team is ready to begin the evangelistic task. The time spent in the city up to this point and the churches that were visited will have generated some ideas on how to reach out to the target population with the saving news of the Gospel.

A huge variety of evangelistic methodologies are available, and the evangelist will have to select those which he believes are best suited for his particular situation.<sup>3</sup> However, there are some common elements that should be included in every urban evangelism method, and some elements that should be avoided.

### Things to be Included:

- Generate activities which are attractive to your target group.
- Use the computer to register personal data on people contacted. As the database grows, patterns will emerge and events can be tailored to a specific segment of the "contacts" registered.<sup>4</sup>
- Plan events which foster a sense of group identity – get people to interact with each other, not with just the "leader."

---

<sup>3</sup> A list of some of the authors' urban evangelistic methodologies can be obtained by writing: Dr. Douglas Rutt, Latin American Secretary, LCMS World Mission, 1333 S. Kirkwood Rd., St. Louis, MO 63122-7295.

<sup>4</sup> The authors recommend the program, "Filemaker Pro." It has the capacity required for interacting a number of variables on even very large databases.

- Be open about the spiritual nature of what you are doing. Do not hide the spiritual character of your ministry behind the facade of education, recreation, etc.
- Co-ordinate evangelistic events so that people are reached by more than one event. For example, a student at an English as a Second Language class could be invited to a Family Movie Night, and then to Friendship Sunday worship.

Things to be Avoided:

- Avoid filling your time with activities which are not evangelistic in nature and purpose.
- Avoid having the person of the missionary as the only link between scattered contacts.
- Avoid exclusively home-based ministries, because later on it will be difficult to get those people to leave their homes and come to church.
- Avoid dedicating prime time to the socially marginalized (i.e., people who are outside of the mainstream of your target population). The church, when planted, ministers to the community. The missionary plants the church!
- Avoid setting unhealthy precedents – i.e., giving everybody a ride to church in your vehicle; acting as "errand boy" for the church; catering to people's special needs in the hope that they will some day be evangelized.

#### **Stage IV: Developing a Worshipping Community**

##### 1. The Core Group

As your evangelistic efforts bear fruit, a growing number of people will express a desire to worship. The hard part of this stage is to keep the first converts growing in their faith, while you wait for the Holy Spirit to convert a sufficient number of people so that you can begin a church.

**WARNING: IT IS UNWISE TO BEGIN WEEKLY WORSHIP SERVICES WITH JUST A HANDFUL OF CONVERTS. WAIT UNTIL YOU HAVE A SIZABLE CORE GROUP.**

What is needed at this stage is some basic discipleship. One effective discipleship plan centers around a weekly Bible study with prayer to keep the new believers growing. The Bible study should not be progressive (i.e., building on previously studied material), because that will prevent newer believers from becoming incorporated into the group. Instead, study a series of topics centering on how to live out the Christian faith in real life. Such topics may include:

- allegiance to Christ
- handling family opposition to Christianity
- dealing with peer pressure
- Christian parenting

- What God says about alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, etc.
- The group should meet at the ministry center during a schedule which approximates the future worship schedule, and should be open to all new believers and seekers.

Teaching songs at this stage is only a good idea if the missionary is certain that they are songs which communicate to the target population (appropriate instrumentation, rhythm, Scriptural words, etc.). Simply translating Christian songs from English may stamp the group with a foreign flavor, which could later be a hindrance to effective outreach and assimilation.

For those who have been converted, additional mid-week Bible studies may be conducted which teach the basic articles of the Christian faith ("The Six Chief Parts" is a good starting point).

Selecting leaders from this first handful of converts would be irresponsible on the part of the missionary. However, some Theological Education by Extension (TEE) courses may be offered. This permits the missionary to lay the groundwork for the future selection and training of church leaders.

## 2. Preparing for Worship

Before beginning actual worship services, there are some things that the missionary needs to know. **DO NOT ASSUME** that you already know the answers to the following questions. Ask! Use your core group as a sounding board-it is usually best to ask the people in a group setting.

### Key Questions in Preparation for Regular Worship:

- a) What is a good day to hold worship services? Why? What do people (non-Christians) usually do on that day?
- b) When is a good time to hold worship services? Why? What do people usually do during that time-slot?
- c) What should the worship time be called? (Worship? Service? Mass?) Why?
- d) Should the worship leader wear special clothes? Why?
- e) What kind of musical instrumentation reaches the heart of the people?
- f) How should the Bible teaching/sermon be presented? (i.e., length; in dialogue; storytelling; cognitive vs. emotive; etc.)
- g) What is the most appropriate way to gather the offering?
- h) What is an appropriate posture for prayer (standing, sitting, kneeling, etc.)?
- i) How important are visual symbols (cross, candles, banners, etc.)? What special meaning do they have for the non-believer?
- j) Is there a particular seating arrangement which is more (or less) suited for worship?

## 8. The First Worship Service

### A. Musicians

Nothing touches the heart of a people like music, especially music which reflects the style and flavor of the target group. It is difficult for a person of one culture to duplicate the music of another culture. For this reason, PRAY FOR MUSICIANS! Begin praying well ahead of time, with a goal of having musicians from the target group in place before beginning worship services.

### B. Publicity

Publicize your first worship service through newspaper ads, direct mailings, telemarketing, even radio or T.V. spots. Such costly advertisement often is not an efficient use of resources, but the first worship service is an exception. A church has only one "first" worship service. Play it up big! A strong start for a new congregation not only is encouraging to all involved, but also can provide a number of good evangelistic contacts.

### C. Delegate

Try to involve members of the core group in as many tasks as possible right from the start. Some ways in which they could be involved include: greeters, ushers, music, attendance register, opening up the church before worship, closing the church after worship, set up and clean up, Sunday School (helpers and/or teachers), follow-up visitation, etc.

### D. Plan Ahead

What you do in the first month(s) of worship sets the stage for forever. It is much easier to develop good habits from the beginning than to correct bad habits later on. For this reason, special attention should be given to the following points:

- Make Sunday School a regular part of the worship experience right from the beginning. Have laymen lead the children's classes from the very first day. Your Sunday School may not be very good at first, but on the other hand, it will have nowhere to go but up!
- Choose your time schedule with special care, and then stick to it!
- Carefully choose or develop a liturgy which can be used for several Sundays at a time, so that the people will have a chance to learn it.
- Make follow-up visits a part of the routine, either Sunday afternoon or early in the week.

Following this model, within 18 months the urban church planter should be celebrating the congregation's inaugural worship service. By God's grace, he should have everything in place so as to move ahead in the next phase of the church planting ministry: from the first worship service to a self-supporting congregation.