



Testimony of a Viable, Indigenous Church Planting Movement

By R. REKEDAL SMITH

R. R. Smith and her family (rls@safetypost.net) serve with Beyond, a mission organization wholly dedicated to seeing Acts-like movements birthed among the world's unreached peoples. All Scripture references used are from the AMP.

Ralph Winter once said,

The essential missionary task is to establish a viable, indigenous church planting movement that carries the potential to renew whole extended families and transform whole societies. It is *viable* in that it can grow on its own, *indigenous* meaning that it is not seen as foreign, and a *church planting movement* that continues to reproduce intergenerational fellowships... able to evangelize the rest of the people group.¹

A *viable, indigenous church planting movement*. In India? My husband, Steve, and I didn't believe it was possible. Until it happened.

Steve and I first moved to India in 2001. Over the years, we were involved in many good, Christian activities,

¹ Winter, Ralph, and Bruce Koch. "Finishing the Task," in *Perspectives* (Pasadena; William Carey Publishing, 2009), 517, 524.

but by 2011, we had not established anything close to an indigenous church planting movement. We knew of two Hindu families who'd begun following Jesus through our work, but neither had multiplied other disciples for Christ. What a discouraging summary of 10 years of prayer and work! We weren't alone. Other expat workers were equally unfruitful. We all had explanations for our fruitlessness:

- The [spiritual] ground here is really hard. Hindus aren't interested.
- The gospel message isn't contextualized enough for Hindus to accept.
- The only available Bible translation is out of date.
- Jesus said that few find the narrow way that leads to life (Matt 7:14), so we shouldn't expect many to be saved.

In 2011, our sending agency, Beyond, conducted a two-week disciple making training with one purpose—to spend time looking at nothing but Scripture.

No manuals. No quotes from famous authors. No missional theses. Just a deep dive into what the Word of God has to say about reaching and discipling the lost and about church planting strategies.

During the training, my husband and I were forced to admit that we knew more about what our favorite authors and fellow missionaries had to say about evangelism and outreach than what was in the Word. We knew what our contemporaries claimed about the “right” way to reach Hindus, but we’d never seriously studied the Bible to see what *it* had to say.

I was raised in the church, decided to be a missionary in junior high, and graduated from Bible college. Yet, no one ever advised me simply to follow the strategies that Jesus both modeled and taught concerning outreach and disciple making. Did Jesus even make strategic choices? Didn’t he just kind of walk around with the chosen few, sharing stories that no one really understood until the time came for him to redeem the world? Did he ever *purposefully* reach out to lost people? How sad that I could quote strategies from Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael, and Paul, but not from Jesus.

After the training, Steve and I compared the Bible with our missional strategies and outreach tools, determined to let go of assumptions and approaches that weren’t in Scripture. “Our” strategies hadn’t been fruitful anyway, so we had nothing to lose by letting them go.

For outreach, we began to apply literally Luke 10:1–12. Again, nothing else had worked. Why not try *going* as Jesus had done and taught his disciples to do? So, as obvious as it sounds, this meant we had to actually *go*. In Luke 10, Jesus’ disciples only *went*.

They didn’t go-then-invite, which was, of course, our standard practice. Whether VBS programs for children, medical drives, literacy programs, or skills training, none of these activities are bad in and of themselves. But, when Jesus sent out the 12, he told them simply to go humbly and with prayer. They were even instructed to leave everything at home. Talk about the opposite of our outreach strategies! More than just *going*, they went with a sense of

neediness to lost people, as sheep among wolves (Luke 10:3). Had Steve and I ever gone to the lost like that? We had to admit it. We hadn’t.

Jesus’ strategies are so rich, but I’ll touch on just one more here. In Luke 10:5–7, Jesus instructed his disciples to enter a house and stay in it. The Greek word for house, *oikos*, refers to a household or community. In other words, one-on-one outreach was not included in Jesus’ strategy. His disciples were to meet with families or existing relationship groups.

During the training, my husband and I were forced to admit that we knew more about what our favorite authors and fellow missionaries had to say about evangelism and outreach than what was in the Word.

Reach out to an entire household? This was definitely not standard practice for our outreach efforts. Sure, Steve and I prayed for our relatives back home also to follow Jesus. After all, the Philippian jailer *and his whole household* were saved (Acts 16:31–34), but we’d never considered targeting *oikos* as strategic for reaching the lost. A search of the Scriptures shows that the Philippian jailer’s family isn’t an anomaly. Whole households are saved from Genesis to Revelation, including but not limited to Rahab and her whole family, the Samaritan woman and her village, Cornelius and his family, as well as Lydia and hers. Likewise, see Joshua 2:18; 6:22–23; John 4:39–42; Acts 10:27–33; 16:15.

Besides literally applying Luke 10, we looked for others who also wanted to see more fruit from among the lost. The Lord led us to a small group of Christian Indians who were willing to try these *new* things (which were really old). Truthfully, this story is their story.

God has worked much more through the Christian Indians than us to complete this essential missionary task. In six months, that group of 15 Christians started 65 Bible studies in Hindu households (*oikos*). Many of those households received baptism, even knowing persecution might result. Also, many became co-laborers in the harvest. Thus, there were now two

generations of disciples *going* and starting new Bible studies. Multiplication had begun.

That was 12 years ago. There are now over 300,000 churches planting churches and three million baptized followers of Jesus across 16 states in India (over half the country). Disciples of Jesus come from all walks of life: Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and even Christian (important in a country of self-designated “name Christians”). There are well over 250 caste groups represented in this indigenous, viable church planting movement. As many might expect, there are Dalit and Tribal households, but there also are Brahmin, Rajput, Jat, Thakur, even Baniya, and many others.

How are so many caste groups being touched by the good news? Some households become followers because someone from their own caste reaches out. Others become followers due to outreach across caste or religious lines. In caste-striated, religiously divided India, doesn't reaching across caste or religious lines cut a person off from his or her family? It certainly can and does when individuals act in isolation. Thus, we praise God for including *oikos* in his outreach strategy!

The only way this movement has grown across 16 states in 12 years is because households are actively engaged in the essential missionary task of establishing a *viable, indigenous movement* that renews *whole extended families* (and whole villages, in some cases).

When an *oikos* is discipled together, they support and encourage each other. They spur each other on to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24), applying God's Word to their lives in practical ways, even difficult verses like love your enemies (Matt 5:43–48), and that, in Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek...slave nor free...male nor female [but] all are one... (Gal 3:28). They learn to obey together, even in opposition to accepted cultural practices. This is not just an assumption.

With around 300,000 house churches, there are countless other examples to recall. The only way this movement has grown across 16 states in 12

years is because households are actively engaged in the essential missionary task of establishing a *viable, indigenous movement* that renews *whole extended families* (and whole villages, in some cases). Rejoice with us! God is building his Church! In fact, indigenous movements are happening on every continent today, with over 40 in South Asia alone. Hallelujah!

Lord, I'm sorry that for so long I blamed the lost for being lost. Thank you for appointing us for fruitfulness (John 15:16). Forgive us for being content with little. Jesus, you are worth the worship of all nations, including those who have yet to hear. May we, your people, be willing to stop, start, or change whatever needs stopping, starting, or changing to see your great harvest brought in so that the end can come (Matt 24:14).



Steve and I wish we had more space to brag about our Indian co-laborers.² God has done and is doing great things through them! They face intense opposition. Some have had their homes burned to the ground. Many have been beaten and/or imprisoned. Others have been killed for following Jesus. In response, the churches are caring for widows and orphans. They visit those who are imprisoned and pray for their persecutors. Meanwhile, they continue to multiply and do not shrink back. We are honored to know them. ❏

² Our book *Dear Mom and Dad: An Adventure in Obedience* talks more about our journey. All proceeds go toward buying Bibles for the churches who continue to multiply, even today.