

A Church Planting MOVEMENT



Unfolding in Uganda Today

Edited by David Garrison with Bill Smith

A glance at the religious demographics of Africa attests to scores of untold church-planting movements. In 1900, the African continent's Christian population stood at only 9 million adherents. By 2010, the number had risen to more than 470 million.¹

What began a century ago as a colonial byproduct has emerged today as arguably the most vibrant expression of Christianity on earth,² a truly indigenous and exponentially spreading contagion of churches planting churches touching every country and nearly every tribal community of sub-Saharan Africa. As recently as the mid-20th century, African Christianity was still largely an alien extension of European and American colonial religion, as Dutch Reformed, Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist missionaries carved out denominational fiefdoms within the territorial holdings of their respective Western powers.

With the upheaval of two world wars, Western control weakened and the ripples spread rapidly around the globe. What began as a trickle of nation-birthing, soon cascaded into an avalanche as 32 new African nations gained their independence between 1960 and 1968.³ A young doctoral candidate, David B. Barrett, captured the religious dimension of this

phenomenon in his 1969 book: *Schism and Renewal in Africa, an analysis of six thousand contemporary religious movements.*⁴

CPM of Uganda

Uganda's story was typical of the neo-national wave sweeping across Africa. But the enthusiasm of independence from Britain in 1962 was quickly followed by two decades of chaos as Milton Obote and then Idi Amin savaged the country until 1986 when Museveni came to power ushering in an era of relative calm that continues to the present.

Uganda's population of just over 30 million has been plagued by internecine wars and an AIDS epidemic that has cut life expectancy for men to around 48 years and 52 years for women. Though 70-80 percent of the country claims to be Christian, the church is rife "with dependence and corruption within churches, mega churches preaching prosperity gospel, high levels of violence from the 'Lords Resistance Army,' a still raging AIDS death toll, a variety of Muslim insurgencies in the north – in short, not a likely place to see a CPM."⁵

Into this unlikely field God brought four unlikely partners: Rev. Julius Ebwongu (pastor and head of Uganda Assemblies of God), Rev. Rick Seaward (pastor of Victory Family Centre in Singapore), Rev. Ray Belfield (septuagenarian retired UK Overseas Missions chairman of Assemblies of God UK) and Baptist-background CPM trainer, Bill Smith.

As leader of Uganda's Assemblies of God denomination, and pastor of 2500-member Victory City Church in Kampala, Julius Ebwongu seems an unlikely catalyst for a movement of multiplying new house churches. In a similar irony, only when past chairman of the UK Assemblies of God Overseas Missions program, Ray Belfield,

Edited by David Garrison with Bill Smith. Bill Smith is a recently retired 30-year veteran missionary of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. He now gives his full attention to raising up church-planting movements through training and mentoring of missionaries all over the world.

retired from the UK in 2001 and joined the staff of Victory Family Centre in Singapore did he begin to see a multiplying new movement of churches characterize his missionary ministry in a number of foreign countries, including Uganda.

Rick Seaward, an American AOG missionary kid who started Victory Family Centre (VFC) in 1977 as a hotel outreach in Singapore now leads a congregation of some 6,000 members. Today, VFC is linked to thousands of multiplying churches that have been planted all around the world. "In 1992-1993," Seaward explained, "I got a prophetic word from someone that the Lord would give me nations....About the same time I got a burden for the whole nation of Uganda."⁶

Seaward and a small team from VFC Singapore journeyed to Uganda to help the six Assemblies of God churches they found there. They initially planted a Victory Family Centre church in Kampala, but then became burdened to saturate the entire city with the gospel. This led Seaward into a deeper partnership with Uganda's AOG head, Julius Ebwongu.

In 2008, Ebwongu launched an aggressive church-planting initiative called Project 300 aimed at sending 300 teams to 300 Ugandan sub-counties to plant 600 churches in two years.⁷ It was around that time that veteran CPM trainer, Bill Smith accompanying Rick Seaward and his nearly 80 year-old missions pastor Ray Belfield, challenged pastor Julius to raise his vision even higher.

Asked how he came to elevate his vision from planting single churches to launching church-planting movements, Seaward replied:

We learnt this from the Baptists! You can go on their website and find out about it. Basically some of their missionaries began to dabble and experiment going to minister to unreached people groups and then these phenomena began to happen. Their leader, Bill Smith, did training of our leaders in Singapore and when I heard him, I was like, "Wow! We have to get him to Uganda."⁸

Encouraged by his Singapore friends, Pastor Julius asked 300 of the senior pastors in the Uganda movement to train up two assistants each and bring them in for two years of mentoring in missional church planting. The teams were given an initial seven-day training in CPM by Rick's friend Bill Smith, and then sent into the field to plant 12 churches each in 18 months – a total of 3,600.

How did they do? "We have started quite a few churches!" Julius says with a hint of under-

statement, "But in the last 24 months, our goal was to plant 3,600 churches which ended in the first week of August (2010). We hit 3,671 in July, a month and a half ahead of target."⁹

Pastor Julius continued, "Our long-term goal is much larger than that. Project 300 was just one of the components that we came up with in 2005 to help reach our goal, but we got halfway there. We're looking to double the number of new church plants again in the coming months, from 3,671 to 7,200 at least."¹⁰

Lessons Learned

Asked to help interpret the Uganda movement, Smith replied, "My read of Uganda is that this was a process:

1. More than a century ago the gospel entered Uganda with martyrdom and good start
2. Sixty-five years ago (1935 Pentecostal Assemblies of God entered Uganda) AOG entered the country with lots of false starts and restarts
3. The arrival of Singapore pastor Seaward coupled with new leadership by pastor Julius Ebwongu signaled a new beginning.
4. Continuous Singapore involvement in CPM training, goals setting, and coaching and correcting led to great results
5. Ray Belfield with decades of experience and relationships maintained continuity with the AOG identity while also modeling an openness to learning new ways.
6. Rick Seaward cast a vision for doubling the size of the denomination
7. Initial sparks were struck during CPM training that Smith conducted with Rick for East Timor nearly 10 years ago; it was during this time that Rick first caught the vision for church multiplication
8. The first vision for Uganda was cast in Kampala during a training that Ray, Rick and Smith conducted four years ago
9. Julius, Ray and Rick and others took about a year to make the vision truly Ugandan, working out details of how to adapt universal CPM and Book of Acts principles and make them fit into the Ugandan AOG context.
10. Emphasizing lots of monthly trainings at a regional level, continuously adjusting and tweaking

as various challenges arose were indispensable to the movement.

11. Net results: Lots of new churches; Many more local leaders trained; Hundreds if not thousands of small training events held all over the country.

From what I can determine there is a tremendous growth in faith that God can reach every village in Uganda and beyond. So my question about where else really can such a movement occur, can only be answered where there is mature yet open, aggressive leadership on the ground like Julius that has a vision for seeing thousands of new churches rather than just bigger churches. Another contribution of Julius was his wise and decisive exercise of his authority. Unlike what we have conventionally believed about CPMs, the Uganda movement was a top down movement. It did not arise from the grass roots. Left to themselves most of these pastors and assistant pastors would not have voluntarily picked up their families and moved them to new villages. So quite a few unique things came together for Uganda these past four years.”¹¹

Endnotes

- 1 David B. Barrett and Todd Johnson, “World Religious Statistics,” in the January 29, 2010 International Bulletin of Missionary Research.
- 2 See, for example, Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 270 pp.
- 3 See “A Chronological List of Independence Dates for Africa.” Accessed 29 December 2010. Available on the Internet at: <http://africanhistory.about.com/library/timelines/blIndependenceTime.htm>
- 4 Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, an analysis of six thousand contemporary religious movements (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1969), 363 pp.
- 5 Email from Bill Smith to Galen Currah, 28 December 2010.
- 6 Rick Seaward interviewed by Mark Wreford, “Whirlwind of Purpose and Passion,” *Re Magazine*, p. 20.
- 7 “I Came, I Saw, I Planted,” in *Re Magazine*, p. 34.
- 8 Seaward interview, p. 20. Rick Seaward interviewed by Mark Wreford, “Whirlwind of Purpose and Passion,” *Re Magazine*, p. 20.
- 9 Mark Wreford, “I Came, I Saw, I Planted,” p. 32.
- 10 Wreford, “I Came,” p. 35.
- 11 Excerpted from an email from Bill Smith to Shane Comiskey dated 28 December 2010.