

Assessing Church Planting MOVEMENTS



Jim Haney

While waiting on a car repair one day, I had an interesting discussion with a man sitting next to me. As we talked, we discovered that we had a couple of things in common. First, both of us were believers and involved in Christian ministry. Second, both of us lived a number of years in Africa. My new friend's name was John, and John came to a point in our discussion that he remarked: "You know, Jim, if it were not for the churches in Africa, our denomination would be exhausted and spent. In Europe and increasingly in America, it seems many churches are burnt out, but in Africa, things are 'buzzing.'"

Perhaps you have heard appraisals such as this. As I talk to people about the state of churches around the world, I think many would agree with my friend John. There are many churches in your world and mine, particularly traditional ones, which appear to observers as the "chosen frozen." Members of these churches have a fond nostalgia for days gone by, a distant hope "In the Sweet By and By," and a maintenance plan approach for the here and now.

Sadly, some churches are a lot like fading stars—many burn themselves out and reach a point when their core eventually cools and they become a dim remnant no longer characterized by bright radiant light.

By contrast, churches in church planting movements (CPMs) emanate bright radiant light, like new stars born under the pressure and heat of a dark universe. CPMs swell with bold and obedient disciples abiding in Christ. CPM practitioners focus on Christ, and those in darkness see the Light of Christ in them. The Light attracts new disciples to Christ, and these, like new stars, turn on and shine forth.

CPM assessments position assessors in proximity to new believers within people groups characterized by multiplying new churches. It is a great privilege to

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see the Light of the world burning brightly where formerly there was only darkness.

Putting Together an Assessment Team

When I receive word that an emerging church planting movement is likely among a people group, I discuss the news with the Global Research team I direct at IMB, beginning with Dr. Jim Slack, IMB's Consultant for Field Services and Assessments. Jim and I examine the new information and compare it with growth patterns in previous statistical and narrative reports from IMB teams and other Evangelical partners. After this, we talk with field leadership and other partners to see if they feel a CPM may be underway. If multiple reports provide evidence of a CPM, I hold further discussions with the Global Research team and field leadership to put plans for a CPM assessment into motion.

Global Research and field leadership determine assessment team composition. Normally, two team members come from the Global Research staff, one of which is the team leader. Next, field leadership chooses three field practitioners who have personal experience in CPM-oriented church planting within their affinity group or people cluster but who are not part of the team engaging the people group. Next, we invite additional guests as needed according to their expertise and experience. Finally, we add logistical folks, such as translators and drivers, as needed.

Pre-Assessment Meetings

After team members agree to serve on the team, the team leader begins to prepare them for the assessment. First, the team leader distributes the "Church Planting Movement Assessment Guide," prepared by Global Research, IMB. This guide provides structure for the CPM assessment team and helps them anticipate the basics of a CPM assessment.

Next, the team leader distributes copies of existing reports about the CPM. Team members study these

reports to understand how they speak to the various parts of the assessment guide. After this, the team leader challenges team members to go beyond the existing reports to discover any other documentation helpful for understanding the context of the CPM.

As team members share insights and analysis from existing reports and new information they discover, a document library emerges providing facets of information that may have direct or indirect bearing on the CPM. As team members become aware of the context of the CPM, the team leader moves them to consensus about the best way to go about the CPM assessment as outlined in the sections of the “Church Planting Movement Assessment Guide”—purpose, research methodology, information sources, security, and other important details.

First, the team must know the purpose of a CPM assessment. The purpose of a CPM assessment is fourfold:

- To accurately describe the history, nature, and extent of the movement;
- To describe and evaluate the faith and practice of churches within the movement;
- To identify effective strategies and practices that may benefit other work; and,
- To suggest interventions needed to address current issues or to avert future ones.

Second, the team must agree on an appropriate research approach. The assessment team should consider both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies appropriate to the people group under consideration and to the information sources available. The assessment team should consult with field-based researchers regarding the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches. Suggestions for approaches are contained in the appendix of the guide. The final report of the assessment team must include a description of the methodology employed, the rationale underlying that choice, and a brief discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach.

Third, the team should carefully consider the reliability of the many and varied information sources it utilizes in the course of its work. The final report must include a brief discussion of sources used by the team and an evaluation of their reliability.

Fourth, security issues must be addressed. The assessment team must thoroughly discuss its plans with field leadership prior to conducting the assessment to ensure that the team’s presence, organizational identity, and activities do not jeopardize the movement, other work, or field personnel and their partners.

Although it is impossible to foresee every obstacle the team will face, pre-assessment meetings provide preparation that seeks to mitigate risks while providing the greatest potential for understanding what God is doing within a people group. Finally, the team does not move to the field to begin their work until field leadership agrees to all aspects of the plan.

On-field Orientation

If the CPM assessment team has successfully prepared for the CPM assessment during the pre-assessment phase, two or three days of on-field orientation will be enough. The on-field orientation is important in that it brings the team face-to-face for the first time, at least concerning the assessment.

After a meal and a good night’s rest, on-field orientation should begin with introductions and a generous season of prayer. After all, the team has gathered in anticipation of the amazing opportunity to see God at work!

Another of the team leader’s goals is to provide time for team members to know each other, and this includes the field logistical support staff involved in the effort. Field personnel involved with engaging the people group may be involved in some of the on-field orientation tasks, but they should not provide information that would “front-load” or hint assessors as to what they might find. Information provided by them could prejudice the assessment team.

Another of the team leader’s goals is to help the team understand how the research methodology will be applied as the assessment begins. Team members do not carry the “Church Planting Movement Assessment Guide” into interviews and use it to question people. During the on-field orientation, team members “massage” the guide and their approach so that when the CPM assessment is over, they will be able to speak to the fourfold purpose of the CPM assessment and determine if a CPM is truly underway. For example, the team will want to consider how it goes about documenting interviews. Some may want to use recording devices; some may want to take notes, and some may not want to use anything until the interviews are over for the day.

Finally, the assessment team may decide to split into smaller teams of two to three assessors, a driver, and a translator. Smaller teams can focus on a particular region or stream of the CPM, and this is particularly helpful in comparing various parts of the CPM as the teams come back together at the end of the assessment.

The Assessment

Each team normally spends two days on the road for each venue selected for interviews. Upon arrival at a selected venue, the team meets with their local host. This usually involves a regional or district leader involved in the movement. The team may decide to interview this person first or they may decide to interview him at the end of their time.

If the number coming for interviews is small, the team may interview them together, but I recommend breaking the groups into smaller units. One team member may interview the women, another can take the men, and another can take the children. Each cohort will have their own version of what God is doing in their lives.

Finally, the moment comes for the first interviews. Most assessors have a burning desire to burst forth with an array of questions. However, the best interviews are personal and not rushed. Normally, I share a little about myself. My new friend shares a little about himself. We share about our lives. If God is truly moving, he is likely to tell me about it. If he has no awareness of God's movement, he is unlikely to share about it. If he shares a little about what God is doing, we go down that road together. If there are one or two questions that the assessment team has agreed to ask everyone, I make sure I ask those questions. After the conversation is over, we shake hands, and the interview is over. One final thing: be prepared to spend plenty of time and to drink plenty of tea.

After all the interviews have been conducted and the first day is over, the team meets with the host and asks the host to arrange follow up visits, if possible. Teams spend the second day visiting in the homes of some of those interviewed on the first day, and this may be several miles from the first day venue. I like the follow up visits because they usually involve home cooking, and we get a chance to see the person interviewed on the first day from another angle. We also get to meet some believers that could not come to interviews on the first day.

At the end of each day, I take some progress notes, and each team has time to share what they learned during the day. This time helps the team to make adjustments along the way in order to meet the challenges of the assessment and to come to some agreement of what God has shown them.

The CPM assessment continues accordingly until each team has completed their interviews or until such time that new interviews contain few new surprises. All teams return to base for CPM assessment team debriefing.

CPM Assessment Team Debriefing

The debriefing is always an exciting time that begins with prayer. Prayers go up to the Lord for a new awareness of what He is doing in the world and among a people group. We thank God for new friends, new needs, new disciples and a new understanding of what God is doing in His world.

During the team debriefing, the team leader facilitates reports from each of the teams. It does not take much to get the ball rolling:

"Who did you talk to?"

"What did you hear?"

"What was amazing?"

"What was disappointing?"

"What did you learn about the history, nature, and extent of the movement?"

"Is church planting going on? Is it sustainable and indigenous?"

"Are churches rapidly multiplying?"

"Is the faith and practice of people in the movement biblical?"

"Are there elements of syncretism within the movement?"

"What were the key elements that contributed to the growth of this movement?"

"What challenges has the movement encountered thus far and how has it addressed them?"

"What interventions might help the movement grow?"

"Is this a church planting movement?"

The Final Report

After the debriefing, the CPM assessment team returns home, and produces a final confidential report within six weeks of the CPM Assessment Team Debriefing. I receive the final report and review it with the team leader. The final report usually goes through a couple of edits before it is finalized; it is then shared with the CPM assessment team, IMB leadership and the team on the field. A "sanitized" executive summary assures that those not privy to the confidential report hear the findings of the CPM assessment team.

Final reports have had a great impact on IMB strategy. Most of all they have taught us that God is doing some amazing things among His peoples, and He is moving mightily in church planting movements. Additionally, we rejoice that we serve with you and other partners who are witnessing the amazing acts of new brothers and sisters in the harvest force. f