

Church Planting Movements: Among Hindu Peoples

B.D.B. Moses

The challenge of reaching Hindus

A survey in India of the 15 most widely spoken languages revealed that six out of 10 Hindus would like a Christian to tell them more about Jesus. When Hindus hear the story of Jesus and are confronted with the gospel they often understand and respond. There is openness to the gospel among Hindus, though challenges remain intense. With nearly a billion Hindus speaking more than 300 languages among myriad castes and people groups, it is imperative that we sow the gospel among Hindus abundantly, knowing that whoever sows generously will also reap generously (2 Corinthians 9:6).

The Lord's commission is to go and make disciples (Mathew 28:19). Even when we instill abundant evangelism in a movement where the gospel is spreading person-to-person and new believers are sharing their faith in Christ, there is another major challenge of discipling the new believers who come to faith in large numbers in a church-planting movement. There is also the challenge of developing new leaders for the movement. Even using discipleship chains based on 2 Timothy 2:2 pattern, "*The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable men who will be qualified to teach others,*" leadership development that can permeate the entire movement remains a challenge. Healthy church-planting movements (CPMs) require nothing less than instilling them with biblical principles, so that every believer is sharing Christ, discipling new believers, and raising up new leaders for indigenous churches that are reproducing throughout the community.

Overview of CPMs among Hindus

With the world's second largest population, it is not surprising that India is seeing so many church-planting movements. David Garrison's 2004 book *Church Plant-*

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ing Movements documented CPMs among the Bhojpuri in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states, among the Khui peoples of Orissa state, and among tribals in Madhya Pradesh.¹ Various evangelical groups report additional movements from every corner of the subcontinent. I have personally been involved with four movements that are not addressed in Garrison's book, and will discuss lessons learned from these four. Due to widespread persecution in India over the past decade, I will obscure the actual name of some of these movements.

The K-State Movement

In the case study "K-State: Church Planting in a Responsive State" published in the *Best Practices Institute Manual*² we find a CPM where over 600 house churches were started among Hindus in four years. The author worked closely with the leaders of this movement for this entire four-year period 2003-2007. The church planters used CPM methodologies because they saw them as consistent with New Testament patterns for church planting and because they found them to be effective in the Indian context particularly among Hindu peoples.

Garage-Church Movement

In 2004 a group of missionaries formed an urban house church to model house church for the nationals they were training. The watchman who lived in the garage of the house church was watching. He was a devoted Hindu, but came to Christ and was baptized at the house church. He was disciplined by the missionaries and a local national leader and soon he was leading his friends to Christ and they were regularly baptizing Hindus. These new believers began to meet in what

1 David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements, How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004), pp. 35-48.

2 See B.D.B. Moses and Neill Mims, eds., *Best Practices Institute Manual*, p. 141. Available on the Internet as a pdf download at: http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=42&Itemid=90

was commonly referred to as the Garage Church. This group of men who met in the Garage Church then started churches among their families and dozens of new churches were planted.³

Tribal CPM in Middle India

In one of India's largest and most resistant tribal communities, this CPM saw more than 3,000 new house churches started in the four years between 2002 and 2005.⁴ The religion of these tribals is animism influenced by Hinduism. In this CPM new believers shared their faith almost immediately after coming to Christ. Sharing Christ with others was one of the first discipleship lessons they were taught. Church planting went hand in hand with evangelism. It was a common pattern in this movement to identify and mentor the first believers in the village to serve as leaders of their own house churches.

Lingayat CPM.⁵

With a population of nearly 10 million, the Lingayats are the largest Hindu community of India's Karnataka state. Following a 12th century reformation of Hinduism, Lingayats rejected the caste system. Until recently Lingayats were regarded as highly resistant to the gospel, and for this reason few Christians tried to reach them. However, beginning in the early years of the 21st century, a focused effort to reach the Lingayats that emphasized working through Lingayat family relationships and retention of Lingayat ethnic identity began to bear fruit. Recently, a Lingayat Christian leader visited 30 villages where Lingayat believers are spreading the gospel. In these villages he found some 200 families from a Lingayat background who have come to faith in Christ; all of them came as entire families. Today, the gospel is spreading at a rapid pace through the Lingayat community.

An inside look at CPMs

As we examine these CPMs up close, we can identify some common patterns. In each of the movements, we are typically finding a leader with a vision to reach his entire people with churches. This God-sized vision leads them to a methodology that results in a multiplication of new believers and churches: spiritual multiplication and making disciples who make disciples becomes their emphasis.

³ "Unlikely Places" (Video 4:01 min.) – A church born in a garage leads to a church-planting movement. <http://www.imb.org/main/downloads/flashvideos.asp?filename=/files/38/3835/3835-20587.flv>

⁴ Tribal CPM in Middle India, see http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/images/stories/CPM_Profiles/tribal-cpm1.pdf

⁵ Gospel multiplies among India's Lingayat people, see <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=22192>

In John 14:12 Jesus said, "Greater things will you do," and this is what we find in these movements. Miracles, signs, wonders, and dramatic answers to prayer fuel further evangelism and church formation. The basics of the faith are strongly emphasized: abiding in Christ, evangelism, discipleship, raising up new spiritual leaders and starting new churches that are easily reproduced.

A common thread that we have seen in these four Hindu-background CPMs is a shift in vision from addition to exponential increase in every aspect of ministry. In these CPMs we are seeing the evangelists immediately train new believers to share their story (testimony) of how they came to Christ. The new believers are challenged to share Christ with five family members right away; this infuses the movement with a powerful momentum of joyful evangelism that becomes normative and contagious.

What is emphasized is for the new believer to understand that God wants to save their family members through them. Citing three Old Testament examples, Noah, Lot and Rahab and four New Testament examples of the Gerasene demoniac, Cornelius, Lydia and the Philippian jailer, the new Hindu-background believer is strongly encouraged to stay in his family and win his family to Christ.

We train new believers in basic follow-up lessons that they can use with those they lead to Christ. As a part of this training, we use New Testament examples (e.g. Romans 16:5, I Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15 and Philemon 2) to encourage the new Hindu-background believer to start a new house church with his own family members (*oikos*) as they become believers.

Meeting in their own homes, these new believers experience a faster spiritual maturation process, as: 1) each believer is called upon to use his spiritual gifts right away, and 2) participative Bible study invites active involvement from every believer. In participative Bible study, rather than teaching a lesson, the leader typically asks open questions such as, "What does the passage say? What does the passage mean? What should I do?" Meeting together in small groups encourages accountability for an obedience-based faith.

Lessons we can learn from these movements

With so many new believers coming to Christ from Hindu backgrounds at such a rapid rate the question is how solid are these new believers in their faith? I have been involved in an analysis among high caste Hindu new believers where hundreds were turning to Christ rapidly. The interviews we conducted showed that these new believers in Christ held solid evangelical and theological understanding with a strong commitment to the authority of the Bible. The first step in

this transformation begins with good follow up after the Hindu turns to Christ. Learning and quickly teaching other new believers basic follow-up lessons is a foundational building block for the new believer.

All night prayer meetings are common among new believers from a Hindu background. National leaders are men with a great burden for the lost and often suffer persecution. We have found them eager for all kinds of church-planting training that will make them more effective in their witness and ministry.

The engine driving Hindu-background CPMs is evangelism. There is a shift from the

pastor doing the evangelism to every believer doing evangelism. Getting these believers to share within their sphere of influence of family and friends is much more effective than outsiders sharing with them. They are able to share their faith right away, telling a very simple version without complicated jargon in their testimony.

A widespread pattern used in these movements is: Model, Assist, Watch and Leave. The missionary or church planter first models healthy church practice with the new believer. He then assists him in forming and leading a church himself. Then, after watching to see that the new believer is on the right track, he leaves him to go and start the process all over again. In this way, CPM multiplication is built into the very framework of the movement. Every aspect of ministry is kept deliberately simple; evangelism, follow-up, discipleship and the starting of new churches so that they can be put into practice by every new believer and reproduced. These CPM methodologies have proven suitable for both literate and non-literate, educated and uneducated Hindus. In some instances, to aid oral learners, we have adapted CPM training into a storying format.⁶

Challenges for the future

In Acts chapters 13–21 we see how Paul’s missionary journeys resulted in multiple church-planting movements. These nine chapters give us a glimpse into

⁶ Using biblical stories in effective evangelism and reproducing church planting <http://storyingt4tning.com/>

how first-century church-planting movements were initiated and sustained. We have the New Testament Epistles to a large degree because these young churches had major problems about which Paul and other New Testament writers wrote to them for correction.

The New Testament churches are our ideal yet even those new churches had problems. But despite the problems we know that the rapid movements of the first century produced healthy, reproducing churches.

Lay house church leaders in the context of traditional churches has posed a significant challenge to CPMs. Pastors and leaders of traditional

churches often view rising numbers of lay leaders as a threat if they do not have a kingdom vision beyond their own ministry. Authority for a house church lay pastor to baptize has been a key issue that we have faced. Without encouragement, a new house church leader may be reluctant to exercise his authority to baptize new believers. Hindus are only familiar with the priest performing special functions in the temple. It has been helpful to expose these emerging leaders to others who have effectively put CPM principles into practice.

Sometimes existing Christian leaders negatively impact the movement. For example, a traditional pastor who disciples new believers and then assimilates them into a large church rather than starting multiple home groups undermines a movement. Pastors who want to see growth in their own congregations often resist forming new house churches. These traditional church leaders see church buildings as essential and even new believers may share this view thus stunting the growth of the CPM.

Our challenge is to get pastors and evangelists in the CPM to think of themselves as master-trainers, leaders of movements, rather than leaders or planters of single churches. They need to raise-up other leaders who will raise-up still more leaders, each planting multiplying house churches. Only as thousands upon thousands of new churches multiply exponentially among Hindu-background believers will the vision be realized: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” (Habakkuk 2:14) ^f

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