

## Monthly Missiological Reflection #17

### *"Transplanted and Contextualized Churches"*

Before my first visit to a "Three-Self" (official) church in China, I wondered, "How will I understand what is going on without knowing the Mandarin language and the Chinese culture?" During this particular service, however, I was surprised to hear translated Western songs and observe worship patterned after traditional Western forms. After the service concluded, Chinese and American Christians met informally to sing familiar hymns, the Americans in English and the Chinese in Mandarin.

What we witnessed was not a contextualized Chinese church, as we anticipated, but a replica of a transplanted, Western one. Such churches reflect the culture and heritage of the original sending church. The initial missionaries establish patterns within the target culture which mirror those of their own culture. These non-indigenous forms then become routinized as local Christians adopt them as part of the gospel. Contextualized churches, on the other hand, develop local ways for reflecting God's will by asking the very difficult question, "How does God expect His eternal will and message to be reflected in this cultural context?"

A transplanted church is like a potted plant transferred to a new culture. It is expected to grow and reproduce exactly as it did in the original culture. A contextualized church is like planting "God's seed" in new soil and allowing the seed to grow naturally adapting to the language, thought processes, and rituals of the new culture *without losing its eternal meanings*. These eternal meanings include a biblical perspective of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, humanity, time and eternity, and salvation.

A transplanted church could also be compared to a banana plant in Canada. To survive winter, it has to be taken into the house and given special care. Because it is unable to adapt to the new climate, the plant will never be able to reproduce itself. Contextualized churches, on the other hand, are like banana plants in the Bahamas. They thrive in their environment and produce much fruit.

Many mission churches, like potted plants or banana plants in a cold climate, are unable to reproduce and need special care just to survive. This Monthly Missiological Reflection will contrast transplanted and contextualized churches in four areas: functional arrangements, leadership patterns, cognitive approaches, and message formulation.

#### **Functional Arrangements**

Times for Sunday worship are frequently patterned after the schedule of the sending church. These transplanted churches may view 10:00 a.m. on Sunday as God's sacred time of worship. In many late night cultures, like Uruguay, however, many religious groups have their largest worship services at 7:00 or 7:30 **P.M.** Many early Christian churches met in the evenings so that Christian slaves were able to join Christian freedmen in worship and fellowship.

The order of worship in transplanted churches also follows that of the sending churches. The missionaries from sending churches whose worship services consist of "a prayer, three songs, preaching, an 'invitation' song, more songs, announcements, and a closing prayer" establish churches with such patterns. Those from testimonial churches have testimonial worships. Cell-based churches tend to believe that their organized cell structure fits every context in the world. Leaders of transplanted churches fail to ask the question, "What worship forms and structures bring eternal Christian meanings and spiritual formation into this contemporary culture?"

It is obvious that human culture rather than divine revelation designates these times and patterns of worship.

### **Leadership Patterns**

Leadership patterns of transplanted churches also reflect those of the original sending church. Western cultures are youth-focused, and their churches prefer energetic, vibrant preaching ministers who appeal to young families. However, when such young leaders are ordained in age-oriented societies, they tend to attract only the young and their churches are considered "for children." Such churches frequently disintegrate or stagnate because of immaturity. Young preachers in age-oriented societies do not appeal to the full age spectrum of the culture as they do in the West.

Some North American churches organize themselves with a plurality of elders, who shepherd the preaching minister and the entire flock. In addition to being shepherds of the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4), they frequently serve as a board of directors who make the basic decisions for the entire church. This organizational structure works wonderfully well in rural or small-town America with its egalitarian focus and business orientation. Egalitarian churches in authoritative Latin America, however, seldom develop the incisiveness to significantly grow. Strong apostolic leaders, following the model of Paul, select elders and empower other leaders. In Latin America some transplanted churches have an egalitarian leadership patterned after North American churches. Contextualized churches, while still reflecting the servanthood of Christ, have strong leaders. Church planters in Latin America tend to be crusade evangelists, who call unbelievers from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to the kingdom of God thus confronting the spiritistic practices of popular religion. Trained nurturers are then left behind after the campaign to organize the new converts into a Christian community. The founding crusader, however, maintains close contact with the new developing churches by working with local leaders to develop the spiritual and physical resources for the growing movement. Egalitarian leadership is one of the great deterrents of church development of many fellowships in Latin America.

The Bible, while giving principles of Christian leadership (Mark 10:35-45) and structure (Titus 1:5-9), was not meant to be a detailed instructional manual on leadership patterns.

### **Cognitive Approaches**

David Hesselgrave, using material from Edmund Perry via F. H. Smith, describes three cognitive approaches to reality: (1) the conceptual or rational typified by modern Westerners, (2) the concrete relational illustrated by Confucian-oriented Chinese, and (3) the intuitional characterized by traditional India (1991, 301-304). These cognitive approaches greatly impact how people from different cultures approach and worship God. Rationalists seek to know, understand, and differentiate. The Christian worldview is systematically presented in propositional categories. Concrete relationalists emphasize respect, responsibility, and community. "Life and reality are seen pictorially in terms of the active emotional relationships present in a concrete situation" (1991, 303). Intuitionalists solicit oneness, unity, and harmony. Their intuition "emanates from inner experience and vision" (1991, 303). All three of these are operative in all cultures but are emphasized in varying degrees.

Transplanted churches, both consciously and unconsciously, superimpose their cognitive approach upon other cultures. Western transplants frequently reflect cognitive forms of worship, emphasize content over relationship, and avoid any type of inward experience. Contextualized churches, on the other hand, theologically reflect upon scripture and purposefully communicate God's eternal message into the receptor culture. Consequently, the church's music reflects the culture. Thus Christian lyrics powerfully present the Gospel in the melodies and rhythms of the receptor culture rather than using those of the sending culture. For example, people in emotional

cultures like those in Latin America do not have to become Western rationalists in order to come into our churches. During my recent four months in Latin America, I visited many growing churches. One distinctive feature of each is that they expressed praise to God with great emotion. I believe that Bible-believing people with a great knowledge of the scriptures can also be Christians of great emotion.

God accepts followers by grace through faith and obedience from all three cognitive modes!

### **Message Formulation**

Evangelists in transplanted churches assume that the one Gospel should be preached in the same way in every context of the world. The sermons are merely translated from one language to another. Contextualized churches, however, realize that both presentation of the message and its form and structure must be adapted to the receptor culture.

Illiterates among the Aja of Benin are oral learners and most effectively hear the Gospel as narrative. Topical lessons might fill in the gaps of the narrative but stories are not only remembered but also provide the historical backdrop for theological understanding. The teaching that Christ has defeated the principalities and powers (Col. 1:15) has little impact on secular Americans or Europeans who have little understanding of spiritual powers. The concept of Christ, the triumphant One who has defeated the spirits, is, however, the metaphor that stirs the heart of the animist, Spiritist, and New Ager and brings him to the foot of the cross (Van Rheezen 1991, 141-42). Only in Christ can one find deliverance from the fear and control of the satanic realm. Christian proclamation among unbelievers must focus on those metaphors of atonement that most impactfully touch their hearts and help them understand the kingdom of God.

Theology is thus like light reflecting off of a prism. Although the prism is of one substance, it can be seen in different ways depending on the direction, color, and intensity of the light. So it is with the Christian message. Although there is one Gospel, it can be perceived through different metaphors and types of presentation.

Transplanted churches are established by missionaries who are ill-prepared to learn local languages, discern the essence of the indigenous cultures, and collaboratively theologize with maturing Christians to interpret God's eternal message and apply it to local cultural issues. Naive contextualization has been greatly amplified by the "re-amateurization of missions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Winter, 1996). Many missionaries go out without adequate training and recreate transplanted churches. The great need is for missionaries who learn local languages and cultures and work with local Christians to apply God's eternal message to local culture.

### **Sources Cited**

Hesselgrave, David J. 1991 *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.

Van Rheezen, Gailyn. 1991. *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Winter, Ralph D. 1996. The Re-Amateurization of Missions. *The Occasional Bulletin of the Evangelical Missiological Society* (Spring). <http://www.missiology.org/EMS/bulletins/winter.htm>.