

The Essential Tasks of Missions - Nurturing New Christians

The second major task of missions is nurturing new Christians to maturity. The Kipsigis say, "We cannot give birth to children and then leave them" ("Magisiche lagok si kebagach."). In this age of international travel it is relatively easy for Western Christians to travel to another land, preach the gospel through translators for a few days, convert a few souls hungry to know God (and sometimes to know Americans), and leave them without basic understandings of the Christian faith and ability to work out this faith in their everyday lives. It will become obvious in this section that the major problem of missions is not *conversion* of unbelievers to Christ but *reversion* from Christ.

Definition of Nurturing

Nurturing stems from the very heart of God. God is a vinedresser who devotedly tends his vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7), a physician who tenderly nurses his patients (Jer. 8:22), and a parent who lovingly teaches his child to walk (Hos. 11:1, 3). These prophetic metaphors reflect God's desire to personally relate to Israel, his chosen people. God is portrayed in scripture as the ever-present, compassionate Lord sending his messengers to nurture his people to come into relationship with him.

Paul had much to say about nurturing in his letter to the Ephesians. The church is described as the body which, although living on the earth, dwells in the heavenlies with the resurrected Christ. This body has been transformed from life to death by the extension of God's grace in Jesus Christ (1:18-2:10). Those of Christ's body--both Jews and Gentiles--must grow together to become one. They should no longer be "strangers and aliens" but "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (2:11-22, especially vs. 19). This unity is based on God's four-dimensional love. Paul writes,

I pray that you, being rooted, and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (3:17b-19)

The gifts of the body are to be joined together so that each part does its function. When this occurs, the body "becomes mature" in Christ, no longer like "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (4:7-16).

Nurturing, then, is building up the body of Christ so that each part of the body supplies its gifts to the whole. It is the process of bringing individual Christians and the Christian community as a whole to maturity. It implies that new believers must be taught how a Christian worldview shapes and influences all facets of life. Nurturing is the preparation to withstand the fire of Satan's persecution. It is relationally mentoring new believers to live out Christian principles in their life.

Guidelines for Effective Nurturing

Methodologies of nurturing, like those of church planting, vary greatly depending on the philosophy of missionaries and church leaders and the context in which they are working. However, there are certain general guidelines which apply to all situations.

First, nurturing is most effectively done in the context of a loving, caring community of believers. Roberta Hesetenes writes, "The Christian life is not a solitary journey. It is a pilgrimage made in the company of the committed" (1983, 11). A recurrent theme of early Christian writings is that spiritual nurturing took place within the context of Christian fellowship. It was not an individual endeavor.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. (Acts 2:42, 46-47a)

Nurturing, therefore, is not an individual endeavor but must become part of the structure of the Christian community. Christians are guided to know God and find their gifts and ministries within the context of intimate fellowship within the body of Christ.

Second, nurturing leads new Christians to visualize specifically what God desires them to become. Because they only feebly understand the transforming grace of God, undisciplined Christians are frequently overwhelmed by their own sins and inadequacies. They must grow to know the radical nature of conversion and how to live distinctively as pure people in the kingdom of God. Conversion is a radical *turning of self to God* (Wells, 1989, 30-36). The lost must turn from darkness to light, from death to life, from the dominion of Satan to the kingdom of God (Acts 26:18). They become new creatures who have spiritually been elevated into the heavenlies to dwell with Christ (Eph. 2:6). Through such understandings new Christians begin to image that they can become holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:15). They can imagine themselves standing with the heavenly host proclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty" (Rev. 4:8; Isa. 6:3). They are so consumed by the love of God that they love their enemies in the midst of suffering, forgiving as Christ forgave those who crucified him.

Third, nurturing involves modeling the Christian disciplines. Christians must be disciplined to turn their hearts and wills to God in *prayer*, humble themselves before God in *fasting*, acknowledge through *worship* that God is God, seek God's truth through *Bible study*, and reflect on God's work in their lives through *meditation*. Without specific mentoring "Christians" may embrace the forms of Christianity but not grow spiritually through the Christian disciplines.

Fourth, nurturing must be an ongoing process; otherwise, the church grows stale and dies. One generation teaches the next generation, which in turn teaches the third:

He commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.

(Ps. 78:5a-6)

Nurturing is passing the baton of faith from generation to generation. Without effective nurturing the baton is seldom passed to the next generation.

Rural Models of Nurturing

Effective mission works in rural areas almost always target a specific ethnic group, one homogeneous unit. The people typically live in large extended families and know everyone in their village. Contacts for evangelism and church planting flow principally along kinship lines. Numerous congregations are initiated because of the distance people live from one another and the expense of travel. The model of church nurturing used in the Kipsigis work in western Kenya has been adopted and revised by numerous African missions works (Van Rheenen 1983, 79-86). It will be presented in this section in revised form.

From the beginning of the work in Kipsigis church planting missionaries were concerned with church nurturing. A methodology of maturing churches was developed after an in-depth study of the concept of the church as the body of Christ in the book of Ephesians (Van Rheenen 1983, 73-79). A mature church was understood as a congregation organized with its own elders, deacons, and evangelists who had matured to the point that it could "build itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:16). The people within the church had grown to become "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." They were no longer "aliens and strangers" (Eph. 2:19).

Building on this foundation, Kipsigis church planters developed four stages through which all churches were to be matured. The role of the initial church planter, whether missionary or national evangelist, changed according to the degree of maturity of a local church (Van Rheenen 1983, 79-88).

The ***Initial Church Stage*** is the introductory evangelism phase of the church when the first converts are brought to Christ. At this point the new converts are hardly a group. They will likely not yet know the names of the books of the Bible, how to pray, or how to teach the central themes of the Christian faith. They are like newborn children who do not yet know how to walk. As "strangers and aliens" to one another, they must be incorporated into the body of Christ. During this stage the church planter serves primarily as an *evangelist* who proclaims the foundational message of the gospel: God has acted to save his people despite their sins; God has accomplished this mighty act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ; humankind, however, must respond to him in faith and obedience. The objective of this stage is to gain enough converts to form a vibrant group. This stage may take from three weeks to three months depending on the receptivity of the people within the village. It is important to begin the second stage as soon as possible in order to

incorporate the young Christians into a body. The joy of this stage is seeing a congregation born through public and private proclamation of the gospel.

The incorporation or "body building" period is called the *Developing Church Stage*. During this stage initial Christians are mentored to become a germinally reproducing, cohesive body through both cognitive and experiential teaching. The church planter serves as a *church maturer*, nurturing each member of the body to serve the function that God has given him within the body. He assumes the role of mentor, spending one or two days each week visiting from house to house and holding evangelistic and nurturing meetings throughout the village. This relationship with the new Christians is like that of Paul during the early days of the Thessalonian church:

We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well because you had become so dear to us. (1 Thess. 2:7-8)

During the Developing Church Stage, the church planting evangelist seeks to nurture all Christians within the fellowship. Out of this in-depth congregational training, leaders emerge as God works within the body. *New Christians should never be elevated to leadership roles by outsiders in developing mission churches*. Leaders should be called by God in the midst of active church life rather than artificially selected before nurturing.

The church planter asks two significant questions during this incorporation stage. The first question is "Do Christians understand the central truths of the Christian faith?" The concepts taught during this stage are the basic building blocks of the Christian faith. Although I published a list of concepts that should be taught during this stage (Van Rheenen 1983, 81-82), I now think it wiser for each church planting team to develop its own curriculum for teaching and nurturing during each stage. The second question the church planter must ask during this stage is "Is the Christian worldview, defined by biblical truths, being practically lived out?" The church planter must so intimately relate to the new Christians that they not only teach the concepts of the Christian faith but also guide the new Christians in living out the concepts. The joy of this stage is seeing new Christians grow into a cohesive body able to stand on their own.

Two extremes must be avoided during the Developing Church Stage. If the church planter concentrates on a particular church for too long, the church may look foreign and become dominated. If, on the other hand, there is not enough concentrated teaching, the church may not internalize basic Christian concepts. This might result in its eventual disintegration or syncretism with non-Christian beliefs and forms.

This stage takes from six to fifteen months depending on how quickly the church matures as a body. Frequently stronger churches mature quickly and weaker ones more slowly.

The third period of maturation, the *Independent Church Stage*, begins when the founding church planter is able to allow local leaders to assume all major leadership roles. The church is able to stand on its own feet independent of the founding evangelist.

Frequently a rite of separation--a time of commissioning, of laying on of hands to commend the new church to the Lord--occurs as a church enters this stage. The church has now developed enough leadership to function as a cohesive body without the continual presence of the initial church planting missionary.

A church in the independent stage is ready to begin leadership training. God has raised up those qualified to become the leaders of a mature church. The church planter thus becomes a *periodic catalyst to train leaders*. The objective is to train leaders to the point that local Christians are able to "build themselves up in love" (Eph. 4:16). The joy of this stage is seeing leaders develop.

If leadership training precedes the congregational training of the Developing Church Stage, a clear distinction between clergy and laity is developed, which can rarely be overcome merely by concentrated teaching on the subject. Also, if leaders are selected by outsiders and trained before a fellowship is incorporated, those trained leaders often are not respected by local village leaders and, therefore, seldom are able to initiate a fellowship. It is better for church leaders to be selected from fellowships who are maturing. The nature of leadership training will be more fully described in the next section.

The ***Mature Church Stage*** is final period of church maturation. At the beginning of this stage and after intense leadership training during the Independent Church Stage ordained church leaders are selected. Elders are selected to pastor the flock; deacons are chosen to serve in various ministries; evangelists are set aside to lead the congregation to proclaim God's redemptive message both in the local village and in adjoining areas. Sunday school teachers and other ministry leaders are also selected. The founding church planter can now look at the church and see with joy how God has worked to bring this body to maturity. The ordination of these trained leaders thus infers that the founding church planter now assumes the role of occasional guest. As a guest, the church planter may come periodically to exhort and strengthen the body, but his presence is not needed for the ongoing of the body. He must overcome the temptation to maintain control over the mature church, thus preventing the church from continuing on its own.

Churches in Kipsigis were classified according to their stage of maturity. For example, of the one hundred Kipsigis churches in 1987, twelve were in the Initial Stage, thirteen in the Developing Stage, sixty-eight in the Independent Stage, and seven in the Mature Stage. Specific goals were set each year in terms of church maturation. For example, in 1982 personal goals set were to (1) plant two new churches during the year (one during the first six months of the year and one during the final six months), (2) nurture one initial and one developing church all the way to the Independent Church Stage, and (3) teach ten leadership courses to leaders of Independent churches on how to use the themes of prophetic literature to strengthen local churches in Kipsigis.

The following time line depicts the spiritual maturation of a Kipsigis church from its inception to its becoming mature.

Time Line Designating the Kipsigis Nurturing Model

Our schedule in Kipsigis practically reflected our goals to plant initial churches, nurture Christians to maturity in Developing churches, train leaders in Independent churches. I reserved Monday as family day. From Tuesday through Thursday I worked one day with other Kipsigis evangelists to initiate a new church and two days to nurture two Developing churches to become independent. On two weekends each month (Friday to Sunday) I taught area-wide training courses for leaders of Independent churches. Kipsigis was divided into ten areas with training courses conducted in all ten areas. During alternate weeks when I was not conducting a leadership course, I gave additional attention to the village where a church was being planted, to the two churches who were being nurtured to maturity, to lesson preparation, or to special family activities. I also worked to prepare lessons every morning before leaving for the days activities. A effective teacher is always a prepared one. This schedule provided diversity of ministry and contact with numerous types of people: In one week I worked with initial, developing, and independent churches.

Urban Models of Nurturing

Contrast between Rural and Urban Contexts. Because of differing social contexts, strategies for urban church planting are significantly different from rural models. Rural areas are largely homogeneous while urban centers are heterogeneous and pluralistic. In rural localities people tend to live in extended families and know everyone within the immediate village; in urban contexts people live in close proximity to thousands of other people but paradoxically are neighbors with few of them (Smalley 1978, 708-710). In rural communities kinship is the dominant relationship connecting people; in urban societies associational and occupational webs overlay kinship relationships and frequently are considered more important. In the urban environment people become more job oriented and less family oriented. In rural areas education originally consisted of the informal learning of subsistence skills; urban contexts, however, required the formal learning of technological and informational skills. People grew to believe that they could control and manipulate their universe rather than live in submission to it.

Urban mentalities. Four characteristics delineate the mentality of the world's urban people.

First, a passion for commodities consumes the urban consciousness. People are overwhelmed by culturally induced "needs" for material things. Advertisements bombard the senses declaring that people cannot live without certain items.

Second, communities are disintegrating. Many people are so focused on the demands of their jobs and the social responsibilities inherent in them that family time and involvement are minimized. The cohesion traditionally present in world cultures is

disintegrating as a result of the break-up of extended and nuclear families. Jerrold Footlick in a special edition of Newsweek on "the 21st century family" writes:

Marriage is a fragile institution--not something anyone can count on. . . . The divorce rate has doubled since 1965, and demographers project that half of all first marriages made today will end in divorce. Six out of 10 second marriages will probably collapse. One third of all children born in the past decade will probably live in a stepfamily before they are 18. One out of every four children today is being raised by a single parent. About 22 percent of children today were born out of wedlock; of those, about a third were born to a teenage mother. One out of every five children lives in poverty; the rate is twice as high among blacks and Hispanics. . . . Parents feel torn between work and family obligations. Marriage is a fragile institution--not something anyone can count on. (1990, 16)

This disintegration of social fabric results in intense loneliness! People, as social beings, yearn to live in community but are forced by culture to live privatized lives.

Third, culture is becoming exceedingly complex. Humans, therefore, are forced to make innumerable decisions. The increasing options of the material marketplace--models of cars, brands of foods, and types of housing--are reflected in the ideological marketplace. Many people believe that they can choose to be homosexual or bisexual; monogamous, polygamous or promiscuous; married or single. They can ascribe to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, New Age, or Christianity, or any form of these religions. People can seek to relate to the god *within* through meditation (pantheism), or believe that God is uninvolved in the world He created (deism), or seek to relate to personal creator God through prayer (theism). In this pluralistic culture the innumerable options available create disequilibrium.

Fourth, cultural relativism, spawned by Western individualism, is a typical urban response to culture's complexity. Cultural relativism is the perception that there is no absolute truth in the world. Relativists believe that diversity should be tolerated, that each person is entitled to his own beliefs, and that all perceptions of truth are valid.

In order to survive and to reflect the nature of God, the church must encounter each of these urban mentalities. The church must seek release from the bondage of materialism by teaching and modeling sacrifice for the cause of Christ. In the midst of disintegrating community, the church must be the community of God--an intimate fellowship ministering to the lonely who live among the urban masses. In complex, urban contexts Christian leaders must become "meaning-makers" clearly articulating the central tenets of the Christian faith eternally rooted in the nature of God. Posterski writes,

Meaning-makers are people who make sense of life, people who make sense of God, people whose lives ring with clarity in the midst of contemporary ambiguity, people who have integrity, people who reside in today's world revealing with their living and their lips that Jesus' death is the source of vital life. (1989, 15)

These urban mentalities demonstrate the need for radically different models of strategy. These urban strategy models must provide community in an impersonal urban environment and stand against the materialism and relativism of urban life. Urban churches lacking organized structures for providing nurturing on an intimate, personal level are nominal and stagnant, unable to reach out.

Small Group Methodologies in Urban Contexts. Many urban missiologists are suggesting various types of small group ministries. Roberta Hestenes describes using small group evangelism in the context of more traditional program-based churches (1983). *Program-based churches* organize the church around specialized ministries (Sunday schools, 12-step programs, "Friends Day," etc.) and seek to attract unbelievers through these programs. Carl George (1991), suggest creating cell-based churches. *Cell-based churches* organize the spiritual life of the church around small groups. These cells serve as beacons for reaching the lost, assimilating new Christians into Christian fellowship, and providing spiritual nurture for all Christians. George's *meta-church model* suggests a highly organized church which worships together on Sunday in a large celebration meeting but uses small cell groups of fifteen or fewer people to nurture believers and incorporate unbelievers.

Ralph Neighbour's *cell group church* considers the cell as a fundamental unit of the church. Neighbour suggests that cell group churches are more appropriate for world-class cities because (1) they involve many more than the traditional ten to fifteen percent of the membership in the activities of the church; (2) Christians become part of a community of believers in which they feel a sense of belonging; (3) Christians in small groups focus on prayer; (4) the church personally and deeply penetrates the structures of the city; (5) their structures are "flexible, able to adapt to their environment"; (6) they are not "circumscribed by the size of a building"; and (7) the gospel is communicated in terms of the life of the community rather than through cognitive, impersonal propositions.

These cell groups effectively reach non-Christian urban cultures because (1) they provide numerous points of light within neighborhoods; (2) they focus on needs to make contacts with unbelievers; (3) the group holds members accountable to God and equips them to break the strongholds of Satan; (4) the laity are trained to testify and proclaim the message of Jesus Christ within the context of intimate community (1990, 21-23).

Yonggi Cho of Seoul, Korea, was one of the first to form a cell-based church. This congregation has grown from five people meeting in a tent in 1958 to a church of over 700,000 people today. In 1964, when this congregation had grown to 3,800 members, Cho fainted from mental exhaustion because he was trying to do all the work of the church himself. During this time, he read Jethro's advice to Moses: "The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. . . . But select capable men from all the people . . . and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens" (Ex. 18:17, 21). Soon afterwards he instituted cell groups to be channels of growth and to provide pastoral care for the church. By so doing, he began to equip hundreds of lay people to carry on the work of the church.

These cells were developed around the homogeneous (people group) principle, the understanding that Christian groups most effectively evangelize if they minister to similar types of people. McGavran expressed the principle by saying, "Men and women like to become Christians without crossing barriers" (McGavran 1979, 227). Housewives find more in common with other housewives than with female teachers; factory workers have more in common with other factory workers than with medical practitioners. Financial administrators sense more commonality with other money managers than they feel with doctors or college professors. Cell groups based on geography are consumed trying to develop a feeling of oneness; groups based on homogeneity more easily develop a sense of unity. All other programs of the church, including the Sunday assembly, make no distinction between types of people within the church. Cho writes that:

the homogeneous unit principle is used in developing our cell system, not in developing our entire church. We do not differentiate between rich and poor, high and low, or well-educated and uneducated; we are all one in the body of Christ. (1984, 51-54)

McGavran said that this church may be the most organized in the world (Townes 1982, 66). Members are intimately related to the members of the cell group which they attend and are nurtured within this context. All cell group leaders go through a prescribed training program to prepare them to nurture the group. Cell group leaders are trained both in special training courses and by working as an assistant to a trained leader. When a group births to become two, an assistant is prepared to lead one of the groups. A treasurer is chosen to handle the finances of each group. A *licensed* minister shepherds participants of every thirty cells. The cells are divided into twelve districts, each overseen by an *ordained* minister. Each level of leaders has a specific type of experiential training (1984, 54). Cho expects these leaders to surface naturally. His job is then "to direct that leadership quality toward useful service to the whole church" (1984, 59).

Cho, in collaboration with church leaders, prayerfully sets goals for growth. Upon entering their new facility in 1973, the congregation set a five-year goal of 50,000 members by the end of 1978. That goal was attained in only four years. A goal to grow to 100,000 members by 1981 was achieved two years ahead of schedule. Each cell group set specific goals for outreach, and each family was asked to reach another family during the year. Expectation of growth was, therefore, built into the life of the church.

Although nurturing in small groups is neither exclusively urban nor the only model of effective urban modeling, it does (1) provide the community so necessary for urban missions, (2) multiply the number of trained lay leaders, and (3) can personally nurture disciples to live distinctive lives in the midst of the complexity and relativity of urban cultures.

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