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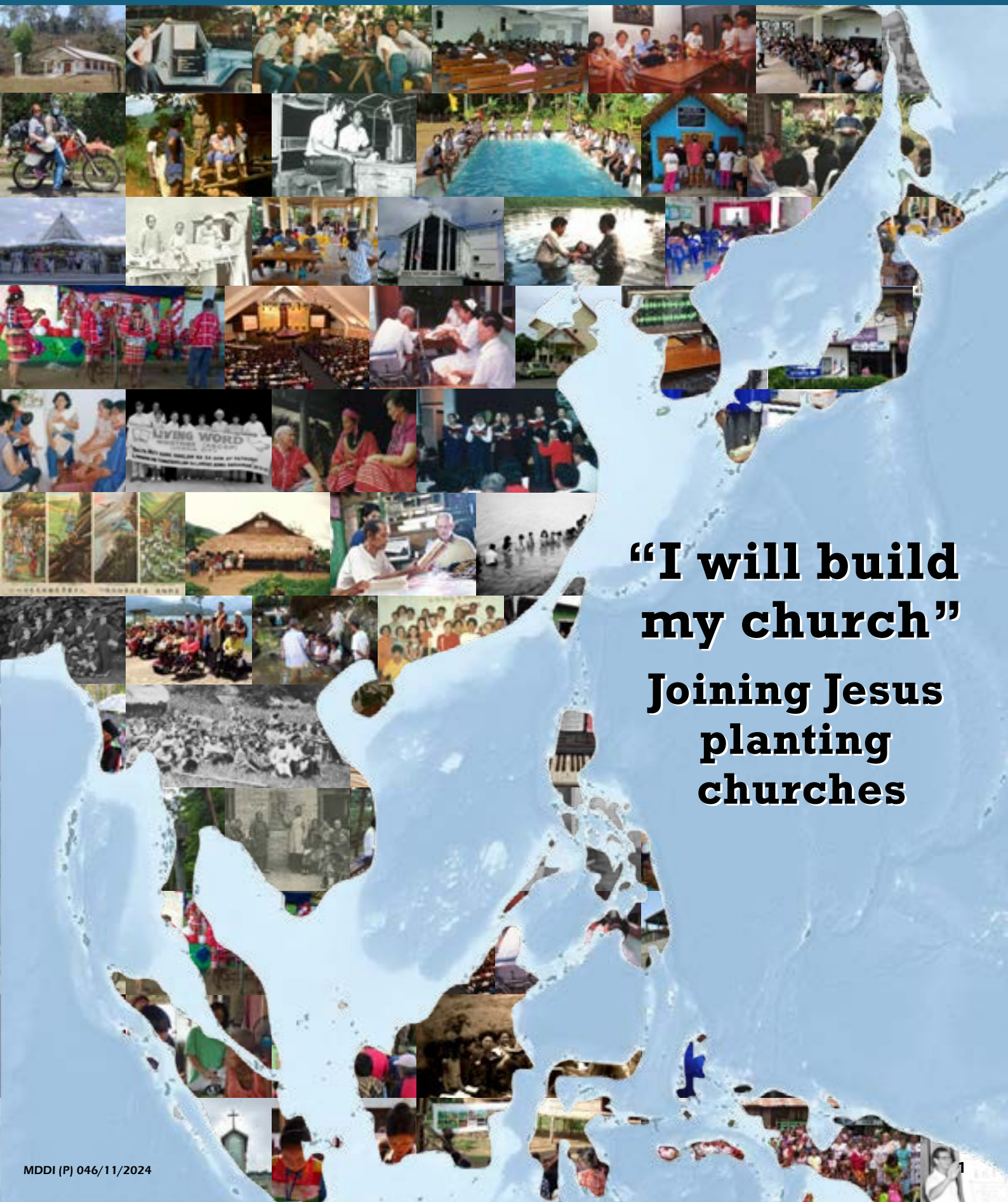
Mission Round Table

The OMF Journal for Reflective Practitioners



"I will build my church"

Joining Jesus planting churches

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Editor: Walter McConnell walter.mcconnell@omfmail.com
Contributing Editor: Claire McConnell claire.mcconnell@omfmail.com
Editorial Office: int.research@omfmail.com
Graphic Design and Printing: IK Marketing & Productions
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Editorial

Walter McConnell

From New Testament times, Christians have elevated personalities and ministries in a way that is neither helpful nor spiritual. As a result, the Apostle Paul had to inform the church in Corinth that their quarrels about whether they followed Paul, Peter, Apollos, or Christ served only to create divisions and demonstrate deep-seated jealousy and strife (1 Cor 1:11–13; 3:3). He then reminded them that the apostles were simply "servants through whom you believed" (1 Cor 3:5). These are words that everyone who follows a favorite apostle or modern church leader needs to hear. We are all simply servants—*diakonoi*—whom God has gifted to plant and water seeds that will bear kingdom fruit. And though our service is essential, it is only effective as it is superintended by the God who alone produces growth. He it is who deserves all the glory.

We could say similar things about spiritual gifts. Though some gifts are regularly promoted as being better than others, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit dispenses them as he wills and uses them to build up the body of Christ. Far from being something to take pride in or argue about, the gifts are ministries—*diakonia*—that the Lord distributes for the common good (1 Cor 12:4–7). Again, God is the one who distributes the gifts and empowers the users to accomplish his ends.

Mission can be viewed from a similar perspective. Though certain ministries can be promoted as more important or more relevant than others, God uses them all by endowing people with gifts designed to reconcile the world to himself. So, far from boasting that "I follow church planting" or "I follow integral mission" or "I follow marketplace ministries," we should recognize them as tools God uses to build his church.

Past issues of *Mission Round Table* have focused on such topics as integral mission (4.1, 5.1), medical mission (6.1), missional business and marketplace ministries (6.3), ministry to the diaspora (12.2), mission and disabilities (15.2), and discipleship (9.2). This is the first issue dedicated to church planting. Historically, many have considered church planting to be the bedrock of CIM/OMF work. More recently, some have spoken as though it was passé and should be replaced by newer approaches. But as the papers in this issue make clear, however we might need to adjust our church planting methods, it is virtually impossible to claim that mission is happening unless churches are formed around groups of Christians who worship God together.

We begin with Richard Schlitt's welcomed reminder that mission centers on our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and our ability to help others understand it too. Working with people from a variety of backgrounds taught Richard that there is no one way to present the gospel that will make sense to everyone. We therefore need to know both the gospel and our people well enough to show them the way into God's kingdom.

In our second article, Wilson McMahon lays out some basic principles of church planting. He begins by reminding us that since our theology of the church will shape our church planting positively or negatively, we should develop a robust ecclesiology that moves beyond the technical aspects of running church services and prepares people to live a kingdom lifestyle in this world. Wilson's basic principles are further developed by several articles that illustrate how church planting has been done in several different settings.

Ulrich Kohler, operating out of a Thai context, answers the question "What is church planting?" by showing how people with different gifts and interests can and should work together so that people come to know Christ and become active members in his church. While asserting that OMF's vision of seeing "an indigenous biblical church movement in each people group of East Asia" is "an inherently *church-planting* vision," he laments that much of OMF's work does not feed directly into the church. After urging us to recruit and train a new generation of church planters, Ulrich reviews some issues pertinent to growing churches in Thailand and concludes by challenging us to stop simply talking about church planting and actually do it.

John Newton Webb's reflections on church planting in Japan begin with the important observation that the church doesn't always grow in response to our plans, methods, and hopes. Nevertheless, he develops some fundamental principles that are widely applicable: evangelism, involvement in the local community, and discipling people in the faith. He then highlights some important ecclesiological issues that help us throw off "a church plant mentality" and the attempts to have a church match a particular model instead of what is taught in Scripture.

Anyone who has considered reevaluating their church planting ministry will find sound and practical advice in the paper by Chris Pain that reflects on the process by which OMF Japan reviewed and renewed its focus on church planting. He both walks us through the steps and helps us avoid obstacles that we might not have considered otherwise.

Andrew and Shona Goodman illustrate the history of seven decades of OMF work with the Shan in Thailand by telling stories of how Shan Christians came to faith and have engaged in gospel ministry. They further draw attention to special projects and spiritual encounters that led to growth. Effective principles include training in church planting and church formation, involving lay people in ministry, and making good use of media. Despite clear growth, the Goodmans recognize that the evangelization of the Shan remains a work in progress.

Drawing on his work discipling people in marketplace settings in the Philippines, Rafael Alfonso demonstrates that though such ministry is often overlooked, it can produce fruitful engagement when issues pertaining to the larger societal and workplace cultures are adequately addressed. Though clear distinctions between work requirements and Christian training need to be made, the Spiritual Development Program made available has helped many people grow in their faith and has led to several churches being planted. Both people working in contexts where "traditional" church planting is possible and those working where it is not will be challenged to see how the ideas fit into their settings.

Read this issue and see how God uses people with different personalities, gifts, and ministries to build the church that brings honor to his name.

Proclaim the Gospel so that Hearers Can Understand and Believe

Richard Schlitt



Richard was born in Canada and accepted Jesus personally at a young age. His call to missions came at age seventeen. He met Marilyn at Bible College and they were married after graduation. Richard and Marilyn arrived in the Philippines in 1980 where they did church planting with OMF. Richard completed his DMiss in 2001 and served in national and international leadership roles until 2024. Currently, he lives in Canada where he serves OMF through leadership training, coaching, and mentoring, while seeking to strengthen his local church. Richard and Marilyn have three daughters and eight grandchildren.

> I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Romans 1:16)
>
> For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. (1 Thessalonians 1:4–5)

What is the gospel? And how do I know when I have presented the gospel in a way that could be understood by the person I am currently sharing with? These are two questions that we must answer satisfactorily if we are going to be faithful to the Great Commission and our organizational Vision and Mission.

My journey of understanding

I grew up in a strong Christian home in western Canada. My parents both shared the gospel with friends and contacts, and both saw people come to faith and become faithful disciples of Christ. The church I grew up in was committed to the gospel and to missions. As a teenager, I was introduced to the Four Spiritual Laws and other tools and sought to use them under the church's guidance. Another teenager my age and I approached strangers at the city fall fair and walked them through the Four Spiritual Laws if they were willing to hear. With an elder from the church, we went door to door, conducting a survey, and presenting the gospel if we could. I did not see fruit directly through these, but I found out later that I was used by God at specific points in some people's journey to Christ.

Our church had a strong commitment to missions. The annual missions conference week was a highlight. We heard about the gospel being shared with "the heathen" (as unbelievers were then identified) and rejoiced. At age seventeen, during one of these weeks, God clearly called me to overseas mission. The obvious next step was to attend Bible College where I again received training in gospel sharing and put the training into practice in the towns nearby. This was positive in that at least we had some tool, some method, and a motivation to share the gospel, even though I did not feel confident in my sharing. None of these sharing experiences were built on any prior relationship. None of these sharing experiences required an initial inquiry about the person, their current religious worldview, or anything about their current spiritual interest. We just brought a message to an unknown person that someone else had put together for us.

Coming from a rugged outdoors background, tribal work in the Southern Philippines seemed like the right fit for my overseas service. As I understood it, these people who lived in an oppressive spirit world needed to know God and the gospel. My path took an unexpected turn when, upon arrival in the Philippines, we were directed to serve the majority Filipino population.

The Filipino majority population was primarily made up of Roman Catholics with a Spanish influence from the 1500s and who continued to actively engage the spirit world. I completed my fourteen months of language and cultural study and launched in. My first challenge was to discover that, by all first appearances, these people already believed all the same things as I did. They believed in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They believed in the virgin birth of Jesus. They spoke of receiving Jesus and of forgiveness of sin. But something was clearly missing. What was it?

The four years we spent in this context were a gift from God that allowed us to process what the gospel is. Another gift from God was the introduction of a gospel presentation that was a perfect fit for this segment of the Philippines.

Evangelism Explosion (EE) had arrived in the Philippines in 1981 and I was privileged to be included in the first batch of trainees. The approach was very quickly translated into Tagalog and I got to bring it to the provincial church we were seeking to establish and train the core church members in how to use this tool. What I came to understand later was that this presentation of the gospel very beautifully addressed what was missing in Filipino Roman Catholic Christianity. The opening sentence was right on the mark. "Suppose that you were to die today and stand before God and he were to say to you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?" The responses were strikingly similar. "I was baptized as an infant." "I take communion." "I have not done any of the big sins, like murder." The second EE question revealed the outcome based on the standard responses. "Have you come to the place in your spiritual life where you can say you know for certain that if you were to die today you would go to heaven?" The answer was constantly "No."

What was missing in their understanding of the gospel? It was a works gospel. There were things you were supposed to do and you hoped that doing them would be good enough. The fitting presentation of the gospel then spoke of trusting in Jesus alone for salvation. From this experience I learned more about the gospel and I learned a way to present it that could be understood by this segment of the Filipino population. This gospel presentation addressed the critical piece that was missing in the standard gospel understanding. Many people heard the good news of Jesus and responded positively. The numbers of true followers of Jesus were growing rapidly.

There was actually a second religious worldview operating at the same time as the Spanish-influenced Roman Catholicism. This was the belief in many spirit beings that could do harm. There were people in the society who were believed to understand this spirit world and, for a price, could protect a person from these powers or intervene and deliver them from the spirit oppression. The official Roman Catholic Church did not exactly endorse this engagement with the spirit world. But, at the same time, "the church" did provide intermediaries such as the virgin Mary who was believed to have powers over this spirit world. We would call this amalgamation of



Christian and animistic belief and practice Folk Christianity or Folk Catholicism. As people came to put their trust in Jesus only for salvation, they also had to turn from any other mediation to deal with the spirit world. Trusting in Jesus only was not just for salvation but also for the power and authority over this oppressive spirit world.

Then God unexpectedly directed us to the southern Philippines to work with people who held to the worldview of another major world religion. Now I was living among a people who believed that the Christian Scriptures had been corrupted and were not reliable. They believed that Jesus was a great prophet, but not the Son of God. They believed there was a judgement coming. They believed that our actions were being recorded, both good and bad, and the good needed to outweigh the bad. There were certain actions and activities that were essential if one was to have any hope of getting through the time of judgement. But apart from dying in the struggle for God's kingdom, there was no assurance that one would reach paradise.

Now I had a new challenge. What was "the good news of Jesus" for this people? I began to grapple with some of the typical cultural wrappings on Christianity. Many of these were a western dressing of Christianity that hindered people from actually hearing the good news. We began to look for local ways to express our faith in Christ. I began to understand the concept that people must take a journey to Christ that included many steps or stages. At this point, I came to see that there is no one nice presentation that could bring us all the way to Jesus in one conversation. I also learned more about identifying and making use of the particular aspect of "the good news" that spoke most immediately to them.

I also came to understand that these people were actually operating with two incompatible religious worldviews at the same time. One followed the world religion as one might read about it in a book. The other was the same spirit manifestations I had seen among the Folk Catholics in the north of the Philippines. I came to understand that this active spirit world could actually identify a very immediate area of life to which the good news of Jesus was really good news. More will be said about this later.

And then, through taking up a leadership role, I arrived in the villages of the tribal, animistic peoples that we had originally planned to work amongst. My coworkers taught me about these people's journey to Christ. There was no value in speaking firstly about Jesus. He was a complete unknown and did not fit into their worldview. The starting point was to go to "the beginning". "In the beginning God created . . ." Who was this Creator God? What was he like in comparison to their highest spiritual being? Genesis 1 and 2 give a great introduction. But what about the spiritual beings that make our kids sick and harm our crops? What about the spirits that require blood sacrifice so they can be appeased? At this point, my coworkers would introduce the fallen angels and Satan's grab for power. This all makes perfect sense to people from this background. The critical question was now, how do we align ourselves with the highest and

I have been exposed to all the nations of East Asia from the north to the south and have found that the principles behind a journey to Christ apply in every context. The major difference is the starting points of my listeners and an understanding of which aspect of the good news will speak the most powerfully in the early stages of the journey.

holy one? Well, that is a longer story, which will lead us to Jesus and then back to the supreme Creator God.

My exposures to these three groups took me on a deep journey of understanding. First, I had to grapple with what is the core gospel message. And secondly, I had to discern how to share the gospel in a way that could be understood in my current setting. In more recent years, I have been exposed to all the nations of East Asia from the north to the south and have found that the principles behind a journey to Christ apply in every context. The major difference is the starting points of my listeners and an understanding of which aspect of the good news will speak the most powerfully in the early stages of the journey.

And then, after forty years in Asia, we moved back to Canada. Now, I face the need to present the good news of Jesus to a secularist, anti-sacred, pluralistic Canadian. I am still working on the way forward with others, but the principles behind the journey to Christ definitely apply. We will come back to this question a little later.

What is the gospel?

Is there a different gospel for each of the peoples I mentioned above? Definitely not! The core of the gospel will be the same. It is the journey that will be different, and this will follow from beliefs and worldview a person starts with.

The gospel is so rich and deep that this short paper does not allow us to even outline it. But there are core truths and facts that must be understood and received by faith if a person is to come into God's kingdom and receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

The core of the gospel is about being reconciled to God through the work of Jesus Christ. A few verses capture this core quite effectively. I will list some key verses, and the reader may add their favorite key verses.

> Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, (1 Cor 15:1–4)

> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:22–23)

> For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:23)

You may want to argue for more verses to represent the core of the gospel, but look at what even these few verses show us. There is a sovereign God who has set a righteous standard. This God is also a God of love. We are all sinners. As an expression of love for humanity, he sent his Son to die and pay the penalty for sin. That penalty is death. We all have sinned and deserve this penalty. Accepting and believing in what God has done will restore the broken relationship and grant us the gift of eternal life.

Sharing a gospel presentation so it is understandable

If we can accept that this is a reasonable articulation of the core essentials of the gospel message, then we still have one very significant topic to tackle. How do we help people journey from where they are in their current belief system so that they encounter and understand the core truths and go on to experience God's salvation through Jesus Christ?

If we go back to the three experiences I described above, we can get a fairly good grasp of the issue. I began with the experience of working with Filipino folk Christians. By that, I mean Filipinos who have a Spanish-Catholic-influenced understanding of God and salvation and at the same time retain a very active engagement with the spirit world. In fact, these people engage in two seemingly incompatible worldviews functioning at the same time—a corrupted Christian worldview and an animistic worldview.



Most Filipinos, and, in fact, most peoples, live with some level of inconsistency and ambiguity in their understanding of their place in the world. People move towards one or the other of the belief systems to have different needs met. This means that ultimately the gospel message will need to address both worldviews. Every time a person acknowledges the sovereign Creator God and his provision through Jesus, they experience a worldview shift. No one receives God's salvation without a worldview shift. Bringing the good news of Jesus is always a challenge to the existing worldview and a call to change worldview. Though we may not like to articulate it in this way, the gospel is always a disruptor. The question we are considering now is: what is the necessary disruption for the different people you or I encounter?

Let's consider this disruption first for the Spanish Catholic dimension of the Filipino worldview. Theirs is not a long and distant journey to Christ. They already believe in the sovereign Creator God. The Bible is accepted as God's word. The stories and truths are received insofar as they are familiar with them. The virgin birth and death and resurrection of Jesus are key pillars of their belief.

Some critical pieces are, however, missing. The view they hold of the Creator God is inadequate. His absolute righteousness and hatred towards sin is lacking. Because of this lack, they do not recognize the seriousness of the human condition. While they warmly embrace Jesus, they maintain a general understanding that Jesus needs the help of his mother Mary as well as our own help so that we can be saved. This needs to be corrected.

The EE presentation mentioned above does a good job addressing the error in this view of the work of Jesus. The inadequate view of God is probably not a major barrier at this point as long as the work of Jesus is correctly understood. One's view of God can grow as the new follower of Christ grows. This is why one good presentation to a ready heart can lead a person to repentance and faith.

Though one part of the group's worldview can be addressed in this way, their relationship with the spirit world creates conflicts that need to be addressed in the very earliest stages of discipleship. The deception of these spirits that are believed to bring harm or healing needs to be revealed. It needs to be understood that Jesus has power over the spirits and that our sole allegiance is now to the sovereign God who grants us authority over the spirits. For some people, it will be this good news that Jesus has authority over the spirit world which will spark their interest to know more about Jesus. This in turn leads to an accurate understanding of the sufficiency of the work of Christ and the need to trust only in him.

Let's now consider the folk religious worldview described above that combines elements of a major world religion and animistic beliefs. Two opposing worldviews are actually clashing here.

Bringing the good news of Jesus is always a challenge to the existing worldview and a call to change worldview. Though we may not like to articulate it in this way, the gospel is always a disruptor. The question we are considering now is: what is the necessary disruption for the different people you or I encounter?

Even so, a close friend who held these two worldviews acknowledged that the one that dealt with the spirits was from the evil side, but reasoned "But it works!"

The purist religious worldview acknowledges a sovereign Creator God. Sin is acknowledged but the possibility of a substitutionary payment for sin is absolutely rejected. Everyone must take responsibility for their own actions on the day of judgement. Records are kept of one's good and bad deeds. The good deeds—including some particularly required good deeds—must outweigh the bad. Only then is there a chance—but no assurance—of getting to paradise. Jesus is a great prophet and healer and was born of the virgin Mary. He is known as the word of God and the Spirit of God. He was sinless but cannot deal with anyone else's sin. The acknowledged holy books, which make up parts of our Bible, are believed to be corrupted. There is a final holy book that is believed to be without error and that stands in opposition to key Christian teachings about God, Jesus, and salvation. Unlike the folk Catholic mentioned above, theirs will be a long journey to Christ. Where one enters the journey will depend on where they are and the length of the journey will depend on how God is working in their life to help them recognize that something is wrong with their initial belief system. Frequently, God breaks into this worldview with a vision of Jesus, calling them to believe in him. This begins a journey of getting to know this Jesus and reading the records of Jesus as found in the Bible.

But for these, tagged onto their formal religious understanding of God is the other worldview that deals with the oppressive spirit world that requires certain actions, offerings, and payments so they can live at peace with this world. This part of their worldview does not deal with matters of eternity but with how to deal with oppression. It is often within this worldview that one's journey to Christ begins. When the power of Jesus over this demonic world is seen, the interest in knowing more about this Jesus can be cultivated. Visions of Jesus may be part of this journey as they experience supernatural intervention. As this Jesus is known better and trusted, parts of the purist religious worldview begin to be challenged. It is a long journey that may begin with knowing Jesus better, then progress as they get to know the Creator God better along with learning his standards and ways, and then take them back to Jesus and salvation.

What about people from my third example? The person that we may refer to as an animist holds onto only one worldview. The belief systems of the major world religions do not fully intersect the broad spirit-world system they understand. In many cases, this person's journey to Christ is much shorter than people who hold the worldview of any of the major world religions with perhaps the exception of some with the corrupted Christian worldview.

The obvious entry point for sharing the good news is to confront the oppressive

spirit world. Life is so much harder because of rituals and payments that are needed to stay out of harm's way or to recover from harm. These people fully recognize that there is an active spiritual dimension around us. They also believe in a hierarchy of spiritual powers. It is therefore extremely good news for them to learn that there is a *highest* power, that he is good and loving, and that he has authority over all the other lower, evil powers. With a clearer understanding of who this good, sovereign, Creator God is, the question of shifting one's allegiance is not difficult. My co-workers have told me that a minimum of three hours of clear storytelling to a person with a hungry heart can bring about a change in allegiance. Part of this allegiance shift is to embrace Jesus and, through him, to be rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light. Of course, significant discipleship needs to take place after that decision is made. But it is true that significant discipleship is needed in each case where there is a worldview change when one enters God's kingdom.

The road to Jesus

"There are many roads to Jesus. Jesus is the only way to God."

I do not know where this quote originated, but I believe it to be true. I have outlined, in the very briefest form, the road to Jesus in the three examples above. I believe that one of our key tasks is to seek to understand the most likely roads to Jesus for the people God has brought us into relationship with. Seldom will there be a single brief presentation that will bring people to Jesus and to the Father. In many cases, we may be joining a journey that someone has already started and building on the work of others. We may or may not have the privilege to bring this person through the last step that brings them into God's kingdom—through Jesus.

As a matter of principle, we should always be seeking to understand where a person is, or a group of people are, on their journey to Christ. What is the next step that needs to be taken? What is the next truth about God and Jesus that needs to be embraced? I am currently teaching through the Gospel of John in my home church. It is insightful to see how Jesus engages with people to bring them to a recognition of who he is, and for people to place their trust in Jesus. There are a number of responses. Interestingly, the twelve disciples are reported to have "put their faith in him" a number of times, beginning with the wedding miracle of the water being made into wine (John 2). This would indicate that there may be more than one step of faith as disciples grow in their understanding of who Jesus is and accept this new insight.

It is also noteworthy that in John 6:66, as Jesus introduced some truths that were difficult to understand, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." And then there are also those in the crowd who, "Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him" (John 12:37). While it is clear that we, as disciple-makers, should present an understandable gospel, not all, and actually frequently few, will believe. Jesus prepared us for this when he told the parable of the Sower, the seeds, and the soils that is found in the other three Gospels (Matt 13:3–9; Mark 4:2–9; Luke 8:5–8). There are other external reasons that may keep people from receiving the good seed, the good news of Jesus.

In general, to have enough information to place their faith in Jesus, people need to know enough of the Bible stories so that they have a reasonably accurate understanding of who the Creator God is. They also need to know what he requires of those he created, and of the work that Jesus Christ did so that this could be possible. Coming to know selected Bible stories is usually a key part of the journey to Christ. It helps if we know which stories particularly speak to the worldview that needs to be corrected. I believe the Genesis 1, 2, and 3 stories lay a necessary foundation. It is also helpful to know if the person is coming from a guilt, shame, or fear culture. In fact, there is usually a primary, and often, a secondary one of these three cultures involved. These are all things for us to become familiar with as we seek to understand the journey that one might take to find Christ.

Much more could be written about the journey that one takes to Jesus, but I trust that this paper provides a framework that everyone can build on. Having recently returned to Canada, I am having to grow in my understanding of the world religions of the more recent immigrants that now surround me here, as well as the journey of the earlier immigrants of European origin, many of whom are now secular, anti-sacred, pluralistic Canadians. There is one gospel but there are different roads that lead to that good news of Jesus. When I first returned, my immediate neighbours were South Asian of the Sikh religion. I actually had to start with Wikipedia to get to know their religious belief system. I made some progress there but then ran into another challenge. They are new to Canada with very limited English. I do not speak any Punjabi. Although there was a growing friendship and a desire for a relationship, we did not have enough common language to progress very far. Interestingly, when I had left Canada more than forty years ago, the majority of the people in this city were Mennonites and there were many strong Christians and many churches. Now, some of these churches are bringing in Christian Punjabi speakers who are both reaching out and are giving training to people like me in how to reach these peoples.

> We are still looking for culturally acceptable ways to speak of our mission work. We do not want to hide it but do want to use words that would truly be "the good news of Jesus" for these people. In the first conversations, we are watching to see if those words close the door or if there is some interest and openness that will lead to the next conversation.

Almost a year ago, we saw the need to move farther north in Canada, to my old hometown. Now my neighbours are primarily the secular, anti-sacred pluralists. Last night, as we were forced out of our building by a fire alarm and huddled together in the -25°C temperature, it was easy to strike up a warm conversation. We found some common ground with the person standing nearest to us who shared in our overseas experience, he with

the military and we with the mission. After he told us about his service experiences, he asked why we had gone overseas. We mentioned the social work engagement and "mission". He warmly affirmed that. The difference in our worldviews with regard to the sacred was apparent, but there was a warmth of connection. Now, I am asking the Lord for another meeting so that I can learn more about where this person is in his spiritual journey and hopefully help him take the necessary steps forward and into the kingdom of God.

Positively, we are finding that the novelty of our forty years in Asia does spark interest and leads to more conversation. The meeting of human need is highly valued by these secularists and our work is affirmed. Because of the Canadian pluralism and the accepted social value that "I do me and you do you," there is some allowance for our "mission" activity in Asia. We are still looking for culturally acceptable ways to speak of our mission work. We do not want to hide it but do want to use words that would truly be "the good news of Jesus" for these people. In the first conversations, we are watching to see if those words close the door or if there is some interest and openness that will lead to the next conversation.

Across our Fellowship, we are engaging with people holding significantly different worldviews. There will be common people group worldviews that we need to get to know. There will be a commonality in the journey to Christ within these people groups. There will also be the individuals in whose heart the Lord is stirring, and we need to understand the entry point and the journey to Jesus that will lead to a relationship with the sovereign and loving God of creation. May God enable each of us to walk alongside those near us with wisdom, insight, and the Spirit's guidance. May God's kingdom come powerfully to where he has stationed each of us. May his kingdom come. May his will be done.
MRT

[1] All Scripture quotations are from the NIV 1984 version.

Questions for discussion

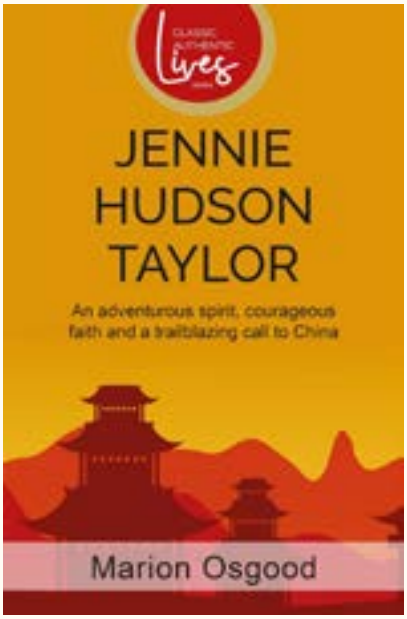
1. What methods of sharing the gospel have you learned and practiced over the years?
   Do you find them suitable to your current situation?
   Why or why not?
   What parts of your gospel presentation positively help your people?
   What makes no sense to them?
   What changes can you make in your gospel presentation that will best help them understand that Jesus is good news for them?

2. Describe the religious worldview of the people you work with.
   Where are they on their journey to Jesus?
   What obstacles lie in their way?
   How can you help them overcome these?
   What stories from the Bible will best enable them to come to know Christ?

3. What aspect of the good news of Jesus might speak to an area of spiritual hunger or need and provide an entry point in this person's journey to Christ?
   What Bible story/stories would speak into this hunger or need?

Jennie Hudson Taylor:
An Adventurous Spirit, Courageous Faith and a Trailblazing Call to China

Marion Osgood. Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2025. ISBN 978-1788933414. 282pp.



You may well have read a biography of Hudson Taylor and perhaps you know of his wife Maria, who died in 1870. But how much do you know about his second wife, Jennie? This compelling new biography reveals a remarkable pioneer missionary in her own right. Jennie survived two typhoons, cholera, and near death in childbirth. She also led a party of women hundreds of miles further into inland China than any other western woman had gone before.

"Jennie Hudson Taylor would have been amazing in any generation, but in the 19th century world to which she belonged her life was astonishing. Often overlooked by historians and in missionary literature because of focus on her famous husband, James Hudson Taylor, Jennie's story is a powerful testimony to the grace of God and to a life lived for her Lord and Saviour. Her contribution to the growth of the church in China was immense. More than a century after her death, her life still challenges us today to live fully, sacrificially, joyfully as contemporary disciples. Marion Osgood has captured the essence of it all beautifully."
Rose Dowsett, Missiologist

"As a young woman she was one of the first group of CIM missionaries who went to China in 1866.… When she married Hudson Taylor in 1871 after his first wife, Maria, passed away, she would share concerns of finance, publicity, management, reputation, and a sense of responsibility for the lives of fellow missionaries in isolated and dangerous situations…. For those who seek to serve God's purpose for their lives, this book will not fail to inspire."
Patrick Fung, Global Ambassador, OMF International

How to Plant Churches

Wilson McMahon



Wilson McMahon, with his wife Irene, have been members of the Philippines field since 1989. For the majority of their time in the Philippines, they worked as church planters amongst the Manobo people of central Mindanao. Wilson now serves as president of Koinonia Theological Seminary (KTS) in Davao City, Mindanao, in the southern Philippines.

The stark simplicity of my article's title is likely to create a response from readers that ranges somewhere between incredulity and extreme irritation. I can imagine an incredulous, seasoned church planter, retorting with a good dose of sarcasm, how blessed he feels that someone has finally written a piece that is going to tell him how to do it; or the irritated reader who is astounded at the degree to which I have imbibed the sin of hubris, by daring to believe that I can accurately define this great task for the benefit of everyone else.

In response, I would say firstly that the title was suggested to me by our editor after he discovered that I am teaching a seminary class on church planting. Secondly, I think my "how to" steps are broad enough and fluid enough to make room for a multitude of perspectives and methods. I doubt anyone will find my ideas so heavily prescriptive as to exclude anything that has proved itself useful and God-honouring to others. Thirdly, I have a suspicion that all of us who have been involved in church planting have our own paradigms of this great task tucked away in our subconscious, and that they contain crucial features that we believe are critical, even non-negotiable to its success. It just so happens that mine is being made available for public scrutiny on this occasion.

I write as one of the many within OMF who has spent a good few terms of service as a church planter. My time was served in the Philippines amongst the Manobo of central Mindanao, and anything useful that I share here comes from that experience and the wisdom I gleaned from the colleagues that I and my wife Irene served alongside. I have also learned from books that I have read, and, needless to say, the best of those have also contributed to what you read here.

There is, I think, one caveat that should be laid on the table at the beginning. I have been a church planter, but have never planted a church. In other words, there is no church within the Manobo Bible Church Association of Mindanao, or elsewhere, that anyone could point to as having been planted by the McMahons. Nevertheless, there are several in the creation of which we played our part and invested our lives. Speaking for myself, I have always been more of an Apollos than a Paul—being more comfortable appearing as the second or even third act—one who waters what others have planted, content in the knowledge that both serve the same purpose (1 Cor 3:6–9).

As a general outline for this article, I have followed the development phases of church planting suggested by Craig Ott and Gene Wilson in their book, *Global Church Planting*. These are (1) Preparing, (2) Launching Evangelism and Discipleship, (3) Establishing, Expanding, and Empowering.[1] Before we dive into these, however, it is important that we give some space to the foundational value of ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology as theological framework for church planting

Evangelicals have at times been described as a people bereft of an ecclesiology. According to Vanhoozer, "evangelicals by and large do not know what they believe about the church – neither about what it is, nor what it should be doing."[2] This has been traced to a pietist trend that values focusing on conversion. We have traditionally been lovers of the gospel message that transforms the individual and liberates them from the power of sin and death. It was enough to say that the church is a spiritual fellowship of the truly converted, "a group that transcended particular ecclesiastical affiliation."[3] To say more was unnecessary, even irrelevant from the perspective of soteriology.

Some of you may find that this sounds foreign to your own experience and

thinking, but I would be surprised if it did not ring true for many of us. Personally, I confess that for a greater part of my time as a church planter, a single-minded focus on the nuts and bolts of church planting meant little time or interest in thinking deeply about the church as eschatological community, or how the church relates to the kingdom of God.

It is ironic that we can value church planting as our supreme concern, while at the same time neglect to give serious thought to a theology of the church. If we truly believe that our theology shapes how we live, we are forced to accept that our theology of the church will shape our church planting, for good or ill.

It is a weak ecclesiology that leads to church planting that focuses only on the functional "marks" of a church, such as gospel preaching and "proper" celebration of the sacraments, while ignoring the importance of body life, such as the practice of love, mercy, and forgiveness. The latter are signs of the Spirit's presence that authenticate the church's claim to be a truly eschatological community, one that provides a foretaste of the coming kingdom. It is a weak ecclesiology that allows for the planting of segregated churches or churches that become cheerleaders for any form of nationalism. Church planters with a more robust ecclesiology should be expected to teach new believers their place within the universal body of Christ, thus allowing them to develop healthy friendships and partnerships in mission with congregations outside of their own denominational affiliation, something that would also lessen the possibility of new church plants being established where churches already exist. A healthier ecclesiology on the part of younger churches would also mean that church planting is perceived as something that churches do, and not just an activity that can be done on a whim by any autonomous individual. Multitudinous forms of the latter kind of church planter can be found across the Philippines.

A brief consideration of one motif from the apostolic theology of the church helps us see how a robust ecclesiology is integral to the development of new churches. In his First Epistle, the apostle Peter wrote to believers scattered across a large sector of the Roman empire. He refers to them as a scattered people, foreigners, exiles, who at the time were suffering "all kinds of trials" and "fiery ordeals". Their righteous and respectful way of life was being rewarded with threats and insults from their pagan neighbours. They had clearly been formed as a church since specific instructions in the epistle are directed towards the eldership (1 Pet 5:1–4). The Old Testament theological theme of Israel as the "people of God" is transposed in Peter's writing and applied to the new churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. "The church as the people of God" is seen taking shape in the mind of the apostle and is woven into his message as a particular theology of church. It is declared and applied as a means to strengthen and embolden the new church in the face of hostile forces and to create in them a new identity, one that would provide the resolve they needed to be true to their calling to live in reverent fear of God alone. It is not difficult to move from the first century context that Peter was addressing to small groups of believers in South East Asia today who live as minorities—strangers and exiles—in cities that are populated by adherents of a dominant major religion or secular ideology.

1. Preparing

It goes without saying that some level of planning linked to some kind of strategy is essential for church planting. Nevertheless, it is difficult to proffer detailed advice on either for an article like this that must be limited to general guidelines. More to the point, detailed advice is in short supply throughout the New Testament accounts of church planting. Paul used synagogues, when available, as places from which to launch a gospel ministry. He appears to have targeted cities, though not in any kind of systematic fashion. His church planting mission in Greece, with Silas and Timothy, didn't begin with Greece as the objective. The plan was simply to "visit the believers" in the new churches (Acts 15:36). Having done so, the decision was then to make for the Roman province of Asia, an idea that was blocked by the Holy Spirit, as was their plan B—to enter Bithynia (Acts 16:6–7). In fact, the movement of the gospel across the Adriatic into Europe seems to have been a fully Spirit-led venture that had no part in Paul and Silas's strategy when they left Antioch—if they had much of a strategy at all. If they did, they clearly held to it very lightly, as they were willing to have their wills bent by the wind of the Spirit regarding where and to whom they should preach. Nonetheless, they did leave Antioch with a plan and they were eager to move outwards from their home base and be active in the service of the church and the unreached. Earnest souls like these will inevitably discover the mind of the Spirit and eventually find themselves part of a higher, divine strategy.

Some important decisions do, however, need to be made in this preparatory stage, decisions that will largely be dictated by context. Will the strategy be to establish a single congregation complete with building, or a group of house churches, or even a church-planting movement of reproducing churches, with or without buildings, or some variation of these? In an environment where Christian mission is restricted by political or religious authorities, a house or cell church movement is always going to be the only reasonable option. In an open access environment, any of the above will be possible, but not always preferable. It may be possible to plant a large single church, complete with building, within a huge squatter community in Bangkok or Manila, but probably not desirable. A Filipino professional, working in Kuwait, could, without restrictions, establish a

large single congregation of Filipino workers in a particular locale, provided it was not attracting converts from the majority population and was not attempting to construct a building.[4]

Despite the perceived importance of this decision, what needs to be kept in mind is the personal preference of the new believers that eventually constitute the new congregation(s). OMF church planters amongst the Manobo back in the 1970s were initially deeply committed to a simple system of multiplying house churches—something that could be replicated by groups of Manobo believers. This was all well and good until these new believers had the opportunity to visit churches in lowland towns and cities, outside of their Manobo homelands. The experience of worshiping in attractive church buildings in these places made the Manobo believers question their missionary friends about why the latter had never explained to them the "proper" way of doing church. To this day, within Manobo churches planted by OMF workers, well-argued theories on why a dedicated church building should *not* be considered essential, such as the importance of context, reproducibility, and cost-effectiveness, continue to fall on deaf ears.

Perhaps the most vital aspect of preparation—and its importance must never be circumvented—is the serious study and research of the community or communities where a new church is going to be planted. This is particularly crucial if the team is crossing into a cultural/religious context that is markedly foreign to its members. The need for this level of preparation goes beyond merely making the church planter a more sensitive preacher or Bible study group leader. Too often the phrase "culture and language study" slides off our tongues as something we need to tick off the list before we get to do our church planting. It's rather like getting the driver's license before we can drive a car—doing it is important, but at the end of the day it is an interim task, something we largely forget about once it is "done".

I would suggest that fluency in the host language along with a thorough-going knowledge of culture demonstrates love for those we are committed to sharing the gospel with. Insufficient time and effort spent on learning about the way of life, religious background, and values of those we are trying to reach, may mean that we never adequately deal with our own prejudices and stereotypical views of those we wish to serve. In his book on church planting amongst "working-class" communities in the UK, Tim Chester states that the evangelical church in Britain is largely "middle-class" and has not done well at reaching this demographic.[5] He attributes this to the prejudices of "social class and race" and suggests the need for middle-class Christians to be converted to a "culture-transcending mission".[6] Chester lays out what his own research has uncovered about the culture of these communities, but then warns the reader that his generalizations should be treated as "short cuts", and suggests that they need to be tested on a "neighbourhood by neighbourhood basis." He concludes that



> it is important to gain an understanding of your own context. Don't come into an area thinking that you know it all or understand it all. Expect that your first six months will probably not be a time of great ministry, but a time for you to learn and absorb.[7]

Chester's suggested six-month learning period is perhaps valid for the particular UK context that he describes in his book. However, in a context that demands the learning of a new language, the period of learning will stretch into years and should, I believe, be considered a lifelong discipline. So how do new church planters begin the learning process? Chester is right when he says that there is "no substitute for living among a people." We must become embedded among the people we are serving and practice the self-emptying example of Christ (Phil 2:7). There is perhaps no more vital preparatory element to our church planting than this. All of us who served among the Manobo in central Mindanao were expected to move into Manobo villages with our families. Was it difficult? Yes, of course. We moved in with two pre-school aged children who seemed to pick up every bug and infection that was available. We had to endure the grief of losing a prematurely-born child. Looking back, however, we could not imagine serving

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as church planters without the depth of understanding, trust, and friendship that was built during those years.

Learning can also be accumulated through reading and attending seminars. A good library is an invaluable assistant in the process. Even more valuable for us was the presence of senior workers. Language learning was repeatedly interspersed with trips accompanying those who had been in the game many years ahead of us or visits to us from the same. We are deeply grateful to these longsuffering brothers and sisters who were forever patient with us and our mistakes, and who made time to answer our endless lists of questions. It was the greatest learning experience any cross-cultural worker could wish for.

2. Evangelism and discipleship

Much has been made of the need for more dynamic modes of evangelism that incorporate the signs of healing and liberation from demonic affliction and



make room for the place of dreams and visions as a means whereby God reveals his saving presence to the unreached.[8] These are all points well taken and one hears countless testimonies, here in the Philippines at least, in which these elements have featured in people's journeys to faith. Paul reminds the new believers at Thessalonica that "our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction" (1 Thess 1:5). This is not to suggest, however, that the need to understand and engage people's minds with the spoken "evangel" has diminished in importance. Paul also gives thanks to God that the Thessalonians "received the word of God, which you heard from us"—a message that they accepted "not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God" (2:13). Those we reach must also understand what it is that they are actually committing their lives to and why exactly it is "good news".

Those of us who benefitted from the "Jonathan Project" training became acquainted with the term "Abundant Gospel Sowing", which refers to the practice of spreading the message of the gospel as widely as possible to as many people as possible.[9] This stage of evangelism is often implemented with the help of multi-media such as radio broadcasts, audio-visual messages on social media, or *Jesus* film showings. In areas where this might be difficult to implement, church planters will often resort to itinerant methods of evangelism, moving through an area, preaching and teaching in homes and villages for a concentrated period of time. This can then be followed up with more focused teaching of the gospel through small group gatherings in villages, local community centres, hotels, etc.

This methodology certainly worked well in church planting among the Manobo. In the 1970s and 80s, abundant gospel sowing was done through the distribution of cassette tapes (remember those!) and hand-cranked cassette players to villages. The tapes contained recordings of Scripture readings and testimonies from new believers. One player per village meant everyone gathered in a single home to hear the message. In the following decades, widespread showing of the *Jesus* film, or locally-made movies on gospel themes, with Manobo actors, were also very fruitful means of sowing the gospel. For the specific area where we served as a couple, radio broadcasts proved to be very effective. Programs were made in a small studio, copied onto a CD, and handed over to a local radio station. A monthly payment was made to the station for two half-hour sessions of airtime per week. These programs quickly became favourites for Manobo communities in numerous unreached villages and the catalyst for new church plants. Stories are told of people from these villages making their way to the radio station and requesting a "preacher" for their community.

With all communication of the gospel, the importance of context comes into play. How well the content and method used address the people of a particular context and bring about transformation is always dependent, to some degree, on the quality of learning in the previous stage. An engaged church planter, with a learning aptitude, will have begun to learn the patterns of a worldview and the components within this that either enhance or destroy life. On this basis, he or she can begin shaping a gospel message that addresses this worldview that is taking shape in their minds.

And what about the form in which this message is communicated? Hearers who are comfortable engaging with concepts and texts make it possible for Bible study groups to become an acceptable platform for the evangelist and disciple-maker. However, for those who prefer an oral-based engagement with ideas, the spoken, or embodied word is a much more powerful medium.[10] Tim Chester, for example, states that an interactive Bible Study can be intimidating for non-literate people. "It feels too much like an English comprehension exercise.… time and again we have found that working-class people enjoy listening to sermons. They can cope with complex ideas just as well as anyone else."[11]

The spoken word was the preferred and effective method for evangelizing and discipling for our team among the Manobo. Of particular value was the

chronological story-telling format. This format aligned well with how indigenous Manobo knowledge was transferred down through generations. Explaining the gospel as story invites hearers from indigenous religious backgrounds to enter a new story that feels familiar and aligns with their own in many ways, even as it subtly challenges and dismantles their old worldview, bringing them face to face with a spiritual power that is personal and invites them into a relationship characterized by righteousness, truth, and love.

What is important is that the context and worldview of those being reached is carefully considered and allowed to shape the message, its form, and its content.[12] The Manobo worldview, characterized by belief in a world of spirit beings, had to be kept in mind when storying the message and making disciples. This spiritual domain was, of course, constantly manifesting itself as the story progressed through the Old and New Testaments. This allowed for the spirit world to be addressed naturally, its claims confronted, and the need for repentance to be explained. In effect, the meta-narrative of salvation provided the raw material for both evangelism and discipleship.

This may not be the case for every church planting context. Those who church plant in a strongly secular context will doubtless need to make use of apologetics as they craft their message. Secularism has also spawned societies characterized by despair, dysfunctional relationships, and a crippling sense of hopelessness. Church planters who encounter these phenomena while studying their context will also need to teach how the gospel addresses these deepest areas of human needs. One can see how such a message would need to be constantly repeated as the core of any discipleship program.

A church planting team's message must scratch where it itches and confront the deepest fears and prisons of disobedience that afflict those they are trying to reach.

Some matters relating to discipleship will doubtless require singular treatment, perhaps even special programs that provide help to new believers. In the Philippines, programs that help strengthen marriages and families are often a part of church planting efforts if the context appears to demand it. Counselling services are also provided by some church-planting ministries if new believers have experienced domestic violence or sexual abuse or have come through drug addiction.

At some point within the discipling process, the church planters need to begin teaching new believers about the nature of the church and the place it plays in the daily life of every believer and in the purposes of God. New disciples need to understand their new corporate identity within the family of God. The reality of this new identity needs to be part of the discipleship process from the beginning. This is because embracing it and living it out can, in some contexts, mean life-threatening persecution.

The key term used throughout this section has been "context". A church planting team's message must scratch where it itches and confront the deepest fears and prisons of disobedience that afflict those they are trying to reach. I have only scratched the surface of what this means. I have provided little specific help for those who serve among the populations of East Asia that adhere to major world religions. I imagine, however, that those who serve within such contexts are familiar with the process that I have outlined above and can apply it appropriately.

3. Establishing, expanding, and empowering

This stage of the church planting cycle may seem less exciting. Some may even view it as mundane when compared with the earlier stages of evangelism and early discipleship. However, it is no less essential than the previous stages and requires levels of patience and skill



MABCAM church at Kibungkog, 2019



that may not be a natural part of the evangelist's toolkit. It is at this stage, as churches are forming and becoming established, that all kinds of relationship issues, misunderstandings, and cultural missteps can be made. If the church planting is being done by a team and a group of churches has emerged rather than a single congregation, it is critical that people who are equipped for and passionate about this stage of the process are set aside for the task.

The teaching on the church that hopefully was begun early in the discipleship stage should be continued and deepened at this stage, especially if the new church or churches are being born within a potentially hostile environment. Teaching on and development of spiritual gifts is critical at this stage. If the new church has been birthed through the work of a team of outsiders, the new believers may already feel that the exercise of spiritual gifts is strictly the purview of those responsible for bringing their new community to birth. New believers need to learn that they have spiritual gifts and that these are given for the purpose of serving one another within the new fellowship.

A decision needs to be made on beginning public worship. Should worship be a public event in plain sight of the wider community? Public worship makes a new church very visible and care must be taken within certain environments. For some contexts, worship within homes might be the only viable option. Local believers must have the primary voice in matters like this as they must continue to live in the neighbourhood after the church planters have gone. We know that church is meant to be a counter-cultural community, one that challenges cultural norms with regard to race, gender, and class. Changes demanded by the gospel to these cultural norms may be resisted in some places. The reasons may be related to how deeply a certain practice is ingrained within the lives of new Christians, or to the fear of reprisals from local people who see aspects of their cultural identity being threatened by this new teaching. The church planter will want to continue teaching how the gospel challenges these cultural practices while exercising patience at the reluctant obedience of some.

Establishing and training new leaders is always a delicate matter. Many members will feel a sense of loyalty to the church planters who led them to faith and mentored them. This is why those who advocate for church planting movements insist on local leaders being active right from the beginning of a new fellowship and that one's position or professional qualifications should play no part in assessing anyone's suitability for leadership. This is often easier said than done. New converts who are professionals with college degrees under their belts may not always be willing to submit to a leader who lacks the professional qualifications that they or their church planter have. This process requires delicate handling and wisdom on the part of the church planters who are overseeing this stage of things. Oswald Sanders puts it well when he reminds us that "The need is not so much for leaders as for saints and servants, and unless this fact is steadily in the foreground, the whole idea of leadership training in Christian leadership becomes dangerous."[13]

When it comes to expanding and empowering, the received wisdom once involved helping a new church towards implementation of the three selfs. It would be strange nowadays to hear of practitioners, or those who write and research on church planting, ever mention the three selfs, though the principles of self-propagation and self-governing are still desirable. New churches need help to develop their own missional vision. If mission has been a central quality of the discipleship process from the very beginning, then this task should be straightforward. It is important that new believers learn to read their own community and develop ministries that will witness to the new church's love and concern for those they live amongst. They must also be trained in planting churches. Whether a new congregation is a single church or one of a number within a new movement of churches, it is incumbent upon the church planting team to mentor these new believers in this task and provide them opportunities to be involved alongside them in the task of church planting.

OMF no longer has members serving as church planters among Manobo churches. The Manobo Bible Church Association of Mindanao (MABCAM), which was formed in the 1980s, continues to grow and expand its own church planting activities into new provinces within Mindanao. It maintains a warm friendship with OMF, but is also forming its own partnerships with other churches and organizations that operate in

New churches need help to develop their own missional vision. If mission has been a central quality of the discipleship process from the very beginning, then this task should be straightforward. … It is important that new believers learn to read their own community and develop ministries that will witness to the new church's love and concern for those they live amongst.

Mindanao. Many of us who served as trainers and mentors to emerging leaders in the 1990s and in the first decades of the 2000s, sometimes doubted that MABCAM would survive and doubted the value of our own training programs. The history of this small, struggling, but nevertheless growing association of churches, bears witnesses to an unseen reality. For though as church planters we do our bit, labouring like Paul as wise builders, working tirelessly and with great dedication, there is an unseen Lord who is constantly at work, day and night building his church upon a foundation that he himself laid. Until this very day, he personally establishes the works of our hands and continues to bring our deeds of faith to fruition.

The spread of the gospel across the world since the first century has always been accompanied by the establishing of new churches. The Spanish Catholic friars who evangelized the Philippines began new churches wherever they were stationed. The American Protestant missionaries who succeeded them continued to do the same. Of course, the term "church planting" was not much in vogue at that time, but theories and ideas about better ways to start new churches and structure them were already being heard through the voices of people like Henry Venn of the Church Mission Society (1796–1873) and Rufus Anderson of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (1796–1880). However, it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that the term "church planting" became common coinage and that the ministry of church planting began being thoroughly researched and analyzed. Donald McGavran was made the first dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary in 1965, a position that provided him a platform for disseminating his ideas across the world. Since then, church planting has become the key ministry of most Protestant mission agencies across the world and the number of publications on the subject continues to expand. My point is that ongoing attempts to improve our practice and understanding of church growth continue to build on the knowledge and experience of practitioners and researchers who have gone before us. This edition of *Mission Round Table* is our attempt to share our own aggregated knowledge and experience and make it available to each other, with a view to continuing the learning process. Constant research and review of how we do church planting can only be a good thing and something that should make us a better church planting mission long into the future.

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[1] Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 158. I would also recommend this book as one of the best volumes on church planting. The book is a comprehensive study of the church planting task by authors who are well versed in church planting theory, take seriously the need for a foundational ecclesiology, are realistic in their approach, and able to demonstrate the practical application of their own methodologies.

[2] Kevin Vanhoozer, "Evangelicalism and the Church: The Company of the Gospel," in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, ed. C. Bartholomew, R. Parry, and A. West (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 42.

[3] Vanhoozer, "Evangelicalism and the Church," 47.

[4] A myriad variations are possible in terms of the model of church that a church planting team endeavors to plant. Ott and Wilson refer to a church planting model not listed above, which they term "Catalytic Church Planting". This model involves considerable investment in the initial church, which becomes, in effect, a hub that launches new church plants and ministries. The new church plants do not eventually plant their own churches; this continues to be supervised by the initial "mother church". A very successful example of this is the Christ Commission Fellowship, based in Manila. The center of operations for this fellowship is their large multi-storied building in Ortigas, Manila—complete with training facilities and auditorium—which provides the training and leadership for the ministry of CCF within the Philippines and throughout the world. Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 93–95.

[5] Tim Chester, *Unreached: Growing Churches in Working-Class and Deprived Areas* (Nottingham: IVP, 2012).

[6] Chester, *Unreached*, 41.

[7] Chester, *Unreached*, 61.

[8] A popular and recent book that focuses on this is David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: Wigtake Resources, 2014).

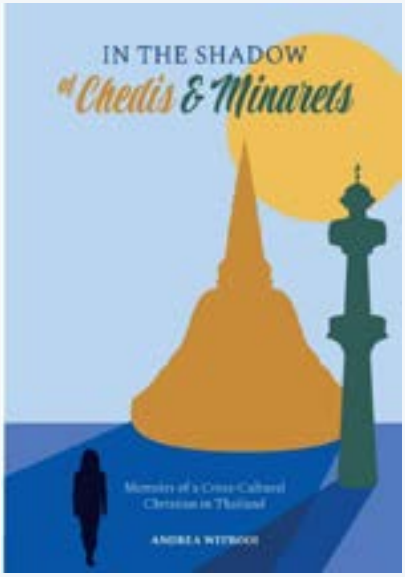
[9] The term features as one of the essential features of a "Church Planting Movement" as delineated within the writings of David Garrison. See, for instance, David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: Wigtake Resources, 2003).

[10] According to research into orality, eighty percent of the world's population prefer oral-based rather than text-based Scripture engagement strategies. Billy Coppedge, Samuel Chiang, and Ricki Gidoomal, "Orality: The Embodied Word in the Age of AI: Part 1," *Lausanne Movement*, last modified 22 October 2024, https://lausanne.org/about/blog/orality-the-embodied-word-in-the-age-of-ai-part-1 (accessed 27 March 2025).

[11] Chester, *Unreached*, 145.

[12] Filipina theologian, Melba Maggay has said that good contextual communication "mines Scripture as text and culture as context for a gospel fit for the needs of a specific people." Melba P. Maggay, "Towards Contextualization from Within," in *Doing Theology in the Philippines*, ed. ATA Forum Contributors (Quezon City, Philippines: OMF Literature Inc., 2005), 44–45.

[13] J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 180.



In the Shadow of the Chedis and Minarets

Memoirs of a Cross-Cultural Christian in Thailand

Andrea Witbooi. Norderstedt: BoD, 2024. ISBN 978-3759787217. 232pp.

Born in South Africa in 1956, Andrea Witbooi grew up between two opposing laws: the rule of apartheid with its enforced racial segregation and discrimination, and the law of God to love your neighbour as yourself. Through the life and ministry of her father, she witnesses how God's love overcomes racial barriers and brings hope and transformation to youngsters living in perilous conditions in Johannesburg's townships. This awakens a deep yearning to also invest her life for God's purposes. Following God's leading, Andrea's journey takes her to Thailand. Together with her growing family, she makes her home in provincial towns and villages. As a Christian foreigner, she experiences both friendship and hostility, trust and suspicion, acceptance and rejection. This biographical narrative reflects how God's nearness, help, and protection carried Andrea through times of upheaval, loneliness, and confusion. Her story also opens a window into the lives and struggles of individuals and families she grew to love deeply.

Church Planting—An OMF Thailand Perspective

Ulrich Kohler



Ulrich and Renate Kohler have been ministering with OMF in Thailand since 2001. They have three boys, all born in Thailand, with the youngest in his final few months at high school in Thailand. Initially involved in grassroots church planting, Ulrich and Renate served as regional leaders for the Central region of OMF Thailand from 2007 to 2016. While leading a diverse team, they have closely worked with the Thai Church in Central Thailand in lay-leadership and church planting training. Since 2016, Ulrich and Renate have served as field director for OMF Thailand as well as working with a number of ministries like the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand, Kanok Publisher, and seminaries like the Bangkok Bible Seminary and the Chiang Mai Theological Seminary.

Introduction

Mission agencies from around the world have long recognized the importance of church planting in fulfilling the Great Commission. Yet the phrase "church planting" itself sometimes raises questions—particularly in contexts where people associate mission primarily with social concerns such as anti-trafficking, creation care, or relief and development. These are vital concerns, to be sure. But as OMF Thailand, we see these as facets of a much broader calling: helping people encounter Jesus Christ, come to faith, and grow together as his body—the church.

What follows is an exploration of how OMF Thailand understands church planting, why we believe it lies at the heart of our calling, and how we have attempted to live this out among the Thai people. Along the way, we will ask challenging questions about whether we truly remain focused on planting churches, examine a fresh movement that highlights both the possibilities and dilemmas of explosive growth, and discuss the question everyone always asks: *Where is the practical "how-to" model?*

In the end, this article will suggest that "models" by themselves seldom solve the deeper issues. The real limiting factors are often *who* we are, *what* we champion, and *how* we live out our calling as an organization. If we are collectively committed to using every gift, ability, and passion for the central purpose of helping people know and follow Christ in local bodies of believers, then church planting happens naturally. Indeed, as we will see, the wide range of OMF Thailand's ministries—from theological education to social concerns, from student outreach to relief work—becomes profoundly "church-planting ministry" when animated by that central vision.

1. What is church planting?

Scores of books and articles on church planting have been written, covering everything from biblical-theological foundations to practical methodologies and missiological or anthropological insights. One outstanding resource is *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* by Craig Ott and Gene Wilson—a highly recommended "big-picture" introduction for anyone joining OMF.[1] There are also more specialized works, including George Patterson's *Church Multiplication Guide* or Alex Smith's writings on Thai contexts (e.g., *คริสตจักรทวีคูณ*) —each offering valuable insights.[2]

For OMF Thailand, however, *church planting* is not confined to any single methodology or narrow activity. We define it simply as:

> Using whatever ability, gift, or passion the Lord has given you so that people hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, experience the love of the Lord, come to faith, and become a part of the body of Christ.

We arrived at that phrasing after repeatedly hearing that "church planting" is misunderstood or even off-putting in some mission-mobilization contexts—especially in the West where prospective mission workers are often drawn to social-justice issues but unsure about "church planting." Our response is *not* to abandon the term, but rather to clarify its biblical core and broad scope: church planting, when understood rightly, encompasses the multitude of ways in which the body of Christ engages with broken lives and communities, always aiming for *spiritual transformation* and local churches that reflect God's redemptive love in Christ.

Transformation through church planting

To clarify further what we mean by church planting, we sometimes

point people to our short piece, "Transformation through Church Planting."[3] It argues that:

- *Church planting* addresses the broader redemptive mandate God gave his church. Issues like sex trafficking, creation care, or community development, while important, are still only facets of this larger task of making disciples who gather as the body of Christ in their own context.

- As biblical Christians, we want to address every kind of human suffering or injustice—but always in tandem with evangelism and discipleship, not as a standalone project or separate NGO-type focus.

- This comprehensive approach means workers bring their *giftings and passions* into whatever situation or community they serve—yet their underlying aim is the same: to see *people come to faith in Jesus* and be knit together as local expressions of his body, the church.

Accordingly, when we say "church planting," we are talking about "using *whatever* ability, gift, or passion the Lord has given you so that people hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, experience the Lord's love, come to faith, and become a part of his body." Under that umbrella, OMF Thailand members have done *95+ different kinds of ministries*: community development, teaching English, biblical training, orality ministries, counseling, sports outreach, social media evangelism, microfinance, theological education, and so on. The list keeps growing whenever new workers with new gifts join us.

This breadth, however, does *not* mean that we lose our focus on the essential outcome—local believers who form a local church. An authentic, biblical church in turn becomes the life-transforming presence of Christ in its community. Even the shape of Thai society can be transformed, as happened in tribal communities of northern Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s, when the spread of local churches contributed to the decline in the number of girls being sold into prostitution. I am convinced that this lasting social change was at least in part the fruit of indigenous church movements. Hence, we see how "church planting" in a comprehensive sense is about transformation of families, communities, and even entire cultures.

2. Church planting and OMF

If that is how we understand church planting at the field level, how does it fit within OMF's organizational mission and priorities worldwide?

OMF International's stated mission is: "We share the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness with East Asia's peoples to the glory of God."

We summarize our overarching vision as: "An indigenous biblical church movement in each people group of East Asia, evangelizing their own people and reaching out in mission to other peoples."

That is an inherently *church-planting* vision. Chapter A of the OMF International Handbook ("Purpose and Principles") outlines core spiritual commitments—our dependence on God, the lordship of Christ, the authority of Scripture, prayer, incarnational ministry, partnership, and a clear focus on the unreached—and calls us to establish indigenous churches in new areas. Chapter B emphasizes how we organize ourselves, clarifies our ministry priorities (the second of which is "Planting Churches"), and underscores partnership with local believers. We are to work so that local communities of faith can be formed and nurtured to healthy independence, and so that they in turn become sending bodies for further evangelistic outreach. The entire structure of OMF's values, policies, and strategies aims—when followed!—to keep us aligned with biblical church planting.

Unfortunately, *not everyone* who joins OMF—whether in Thailand or elsewhere—comes fully aware of, or deeply committed to, that central purpose. Some are drawn to a particular social issue or skill-based ministry. Those passions are wonderful, but unless integrated into an overarching drive to *see* churches planted or strengthened, we risk drifting from OMF's God-given distinctives. We want to *help* every worker see how their ministry—medical, educational, social, whatever—fits into the bigger picture of church planting, so that *together* we remain faithful to our calling.

3. Are we planting any churches?

A key question for every mission organization that has "church planting" in its official priorities is: *Are we actually planting churches?* Stated differently, if we have over 1,000 workers worldwide, how many new churches have we helped establish in the last decade? And, proportionally, is it what we might expect, given our size and history?

For OMF Thailand, the answer is somewhat mixed. Yes, we are planting churches. Yet if we tally up the number of new churches established over, say, the last ten years and relate that to our total number of workers, many of us feel that the total is fewer than we would hope. This is due to limitations from two sides, which we might call "positive limitations" and "negative limitations."

One of the "positive limitations" is that *not all our people* serve at grassroots "pioneer evangelism" levels, and rightly so. We have many who serve in theological education, leadership training, student ministry, community development, children's ministry, or administrative roles. All of these ministries remain deeply valid under



OMF's second (Church Planting) and third (Perfecting and Discipling) priorities. These still "feed into" the formation of healthy, reproducing churches and provide a crucial background foundation to a growing, national church. But these ministries do not directly result in new churches planted that we could claim as direct fruit of OMF church planting. Some would argue that this is the direction OMF should be taking anyway: since Thailand already has a national church, foreign missionaries should not be involved in pioneer church planting at all and instead concentrate solely on leadership development or theological training. In OMF Thailand, we see *both* as necessary. While established Thai churches do exist, there are still entire regions with minimal gospel presence, and grassroots ministry in these areas remains critical. Moreover, any meaningful training of church planters and leaders requires *first-hand, lived experience* in Thai culture and language. A new worker who has never engaged in evangelism, discipleship, or community outreach at ground level has limited credibility when later instructing others to do so. By serving in real-life, on-the-ground ministry, our missionaries gain insights, relationships, and cultural fluency that form a solid basis for more specialized roles—such as theological education, leadership coaching, or other vital ministries that empower the national church.

Yet alongside these "positive" reasons for fewer direct church plants, we also see more challenging issues—what we might call "negative limitations." They are not unique to new workers alone; all of us can be affected. In some cases, people come primarily wanting to run a specific project or type of ministry or are hesitant to invest in the long, painstaking process of learning Thai language and culture deeply. Others may simply lose sight of how their ministry connects to church planting or the focus of their ministry becomes fragmented due to the demands of our digital world. It is also true that much of the Western church—still OMF's main sending base—no longer emphasizes personal discipline or perseverance or a robust theology of suffering. As "children of our time," we in OMF can easily absorb these cultural mindsets as well. Frankly, we have sometimes been too quick to accommodate personal preferences rather than

A new worker who has never engaged in evangelism, discipleship, or community outreach at ground level has limited credibility when later instructing others to do so.

guiding and challenging workers toward broader gospel ends. Addressing these realities requires ongoing reflection, honest self-assessment, and renewed commitment at every level, ensuring that whatever gifts or passions people bring are intentionally woven into the larger tapestry of planting and strengthening the local church.

I believe OMF has a particular, God-given role to play in his wider kingdom. We are part of his global effort to form and strengthen local churches among unreached peoples of East Asia. If someone only wants to focus on, for example, "feeding the poor," without maintaining a vision for "people coming to faith in Jesus, growing in him, and forming new churches," we might gently suggest that they might be able to more effectively do that through organizations that do purely relief work. For OMF, even feeding the poor is best done by workers whose driving purpose is to see people come to faith and be integrated into a local fellowship. That is the calling we must steward faithfully.

We need a new generation of church planters—in the broad, biblical sense—who do many different kinds of ministry but keep this single, sharp focus: "so that people hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, experience the love of the Lord, come to faith, and become part of the body of Christ." When that focus pervades our mobilization and shapes our conversations, OMF's actual church-planting activity and impact upon the Thai church will expand.

4. Church planting in Thailand

"What should church planting in Thailand look like?" The short answer is, "It depends." It depends on the organization's core ethos (we have discussed OMF's) and on the local context. OMF's core values of trusting God in prayerful dependence, being passionate to reach the unreached, ministering incarnationally, working in partnership, and leading from the ministry context all point us to adapt humbly to Thai realities.

4.1. OMF Thailand's framework

At the field level, OMF Thailand's own Handbook clarifies that our target is the Thai Buddhists—who make up the vast majority of the population. We express our strategy as *comprehensive church planting*—that is, we do not see "evangelism and church planting" as something simplistic. Instead, we encourage all manner of relevant sub-ministries (internet outreach, sports, theological training, relief work, children's ministry, community development, etc.) if they arise naturally within a bigger framework of establishing local churches. Our policy statements also emphasize:

- *Working primarily through the Associated Churches in Thailand (ACT)*: This is the denomination we have partnered with historically. We have a lengthy, trusting relationship with them and have found strategic advantages in focusing on a single network.
- *Encouraging the reproducibility* of any methods or resources we use so that Thai believers themselves can maintain and replicate them.
- *Empowering local lay leaders* from the start.
- *Avoiding* making buildings or paid workers a "must" for new congregations.
- *Holding firmly* to the authority of Scripture in shaping both life and doctrine.
- *Ensuring* that evangelism remains ongoing and not a one-off event.
- *Respecting* existing Thai organizations that OMF helped start (e.g., the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand, Bangkok Bible Seminary, Chiang Mai Theological Seminary, etc.) and cooperating with them as appropriate, in light of our vision for seeing churches established or strengthened.

OMF Thailand organizes its work in several regions across the country, each

adapting to the unique challenges and opportunities of its local setting. In areas where Christians are scarce—sometimes under 0.2 percent of the population—teams often concentrate on saturating unreached districts with reproducible methods, while regions with stronger existing churches may focus on deepening discipleship or training local leaders. Urban centers like Bangkok require creative approaches for finding "hidden" communities within sprawling neighborhoods, whereas coastal or more rural provinces present very different realities, such as interactions with neighboring populations who follow different religions or long travel distances between scattered villages. Despite these local variations, all OMF Thailand teams share the same overarching priorities: *partnering* with local Thai believers, *investing* in lay and pastoral leadership development, and *committing* ourselves to see new churches planted or strengthened. In each location, our role is not to take over but to *encourage, equip, and empower* Thai Christians to fulfill the Great Commission in ways best suited to their particular context.

4.2. Learning from history: Mark Leighton's "lessons"

An excellent summary of some key insights for evangelizing Thai Buddhists comes from one of our former Field Directors, Mark Leighton. He distilled decades of missionary experiences and research into *four lessons*:[4]

1. **It is costly to reach Thai Buddhists, but possible.** Mission history in Thailand shows that real breakthroughs do happen, but they require perseverance, prayer, sacrifice, and love. There are no easy "magic keys."

2. **Truth and love are keys to reaching Thai Buddhists.** Historically, Thai people opened themselves to the gospel when they witnessed both faithful biblical proclamation—truth—and compassionate service—love.

3. **The Thai family as the avenue for gospel spread.** "To be Thai is to be Buddhist" is a powerful identity marker, but many have come to Christ through family networks—especially when the gospel is shared respectfully with heads of households and older relatives. As Mark writes, "Relatives and family are the single most significant factor for conversion."



4. **Addressing vulnerability** Thai Buddhists often become more open to Jesus when confronted with personal vulnerability—health crises, spiritual oppression, social struggles, or bereavement. Christian ministries that engage these vulnerabilities with biblical truth and prayer see many responding.

These insights remind us that *familiar models*—medical outreach, community compassion, personal evangelism, friendship, consistent discipleship—remain surprisingly fruitful when combined with *patient perseverance* and *family-oriented* approaches.

4.3. A Thai-led movement: Association of Free Churches in Thailand (AFT)

In recent years, one of the most striking developments in Thai church growth is the *Association of Free Churches in Thailand (AFT)*, a dynamic network reporting enormous numbers of new churches across multiple provinces. As of early 2025, AFT statistics cite:

- *7,068 churches* with an average attendance of about 5
- *38,821 members*
- *94,431* people who responded to evangelistic efforts, of whom 27,325 have been baptized.[5]

No other Thai denomination has reported growth that approaches this explosive rate of planting churches. None is even close. When one encounters such impressive data, the natural question that arises pertains to its reliability. In this instance, I find no reason to question the validity of the data. Having personal knowledge of the individual responsible for monitoring and recording it, I am confident that the statistics are as accurate as one can reasonably expect.

4.3.1. Strengths and controversies

Nevertheless, *questions* about AFT abound:

- *Theological concerns*: The AFT practice of baptizing only "in the name of Jesus"—rather than the Triune name—raises suspicions of a "Jesus-only" or "Oneness" theology. AFT leaders deny non-Trinitarian doctrine, but skepticism persists—especially since they parted ways with the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT) after refusing to adopt Trinitarian baptismal wording.

- *Depth of discipleship*: Some wonder whether new believers' understanding is superficial, or if they add "PhraYesu" alongside many other local deities and then drift away. The movement uses an emphatic "power-encounter" approach that draws many to pray for miracles. Critics worry that if their prayers later remain unanswered, they might abandon the faith. (On the other hand, earlier studies among more "traditional" churches also showed discouraging retention rates, so this question applies widely.)

- *Future stability*: Will these small house churches survive and grow in depth? Can they integrate to

become a sustainable network and maintain fellowship, discipline, and leadership development?

All that said, AFT's outreach does appear to be *bearing fruit*. And from an OMF perspective, it is instructive. On the surface, they do not use radically new techniques. They employ well-known Thai evangelistic posters, straightforward gospel presentations, and they do intense systematic visiting of every village. They simply *do* it, and *keep* doing it, saturating entire districts. In short, they practice relentless evangelism and immediate follow-up, establishing small groups that begin meeting and then connecting them to a district church as soon as enough house groups emerge. As a previous Field Director once said, *"Where there is frequent and consistent evangelism, Thai people will come to Christ."* One can debate theological nuances, but the phenomenon underscores how intensely a single-minded group can reach thousands.

4.4. OMF's place in the larger landscape

OMF is *not* linked with AFT, but we certainly desire to learn, and we have gleaned lessons from the movement. Beyond the theological concerns, it is also possible that not every context will see the same dramatic harvest. We know of certain pastors in Central Thailand who likewise do frequent, faithful evangelism but have so far seen much less "breakthrough".

Still, the AFT experience challenges us:

- Are we *saturating* our regions with as much consistent evangelistic follow-up as possible?

> … persistent, consistent evangelism coupled with personal discipling is the abiding principle we should never neglect.

- Do we at times rationalize meager results by attributing them to "resistance" or "spiritual hardness," when perhaps we are not truly engaging families and communities persistently enough?

- Or do we assume that "pioneering" or "frontline evangelism" is no longer needed, when in fact, large pockets of the country remain under 0.5 percent Christian?

In sum, no single approach fits all contexts. Nonetheless, *persistent, consistent evangelism* coupled with personal discipling is the abiding principle we should never neglect.

5. But where is the practical model to follow?

By this point, some readers might be wondering: *"Where is the step-by-step method I can use to plant a church in Thailand?"* This is *exactly* the question we often hear. Yet our conviction is that simply handing out "models" is rarely the key to more effective church planting. We already have an abundance of "how-to" guides—e.g., "Four Fields," "T4T," "Discovery Bible Studies," "CPM methodology," "DMM approach," "Orality-based discipleship," etc. Additionally, in the Thai context, Alex Smith's *Strategy to Multiply Rural Churches* or Dwight Martin's "Biblical Church Planting Methodology" (used widely by AFT) outline highly workable frameworks.[6]

The real **roadblock**, at least for OMF, is often *ourselves*:

- *Do we truly champion* the cause of seeing local churches formed? Or do we talk about everything else?

- *Are we mobilizing people* who share this heart for church planting or who at least are eager to integrate their specialized ministry into a bigger church-planting vision?

- *Are we humbly learning* language and culture deeply enough to share the gospel meaningfully and persuasively with families in a community?

- *Are we busy* with so many organizational demands or other worthy pursuits that we do not actually spend enough time evangelizing or nurturing new believers?

If our vision, daily priorities, and mobilization are shaped around "planting, strengthening, and multiplying local churches," then whichever workable approach we choose will bear fruit. Conversely, if we are *not* living, teaching, or allocating resources in ways that focus on seeing new believers gathered into new churches, all the "best models" in the world will not significantly boost church planting.

5.1. Alex Smith's "7E strategy"

For those who *do* want a concise strategic outline, we often commend





Alex Smith's *Strategy to Multiply Rural Churches*, known for its "7 Es":[7]

1. *Explore widely for responsive* – The church must cast a wide net in evangelism, strategically identifying communities and individuals most open to the gospel for effective discipleship and church planting.

2. *Evangelize the receptive intensely* – Once receptive individuals and communities are identified, the church should prioritize concentrated evangelistic efforts to ensure sustained gospel exposure and deeper commitment.

3. *Establish churches immediately* – New believers should be swiftly integrated into functioning churches, ensuring that worship, teaching, and fellowship are established early to prevent isolation and stagnation.

4. *Edify members continually* – Ongoing spiritual growth is essential, achieved through prayer, worship, Bible study, and discipleship, fostering strong, mature believers who actively participate in evangelism and church life.

5. *Evolve local pastors speedily* –Indigenous leaders should be rapidly trained and appointed as pastors to provide spiritual guidance, ensuring church stability and facilitating further multiplication.

6. *Extend churches persistently* – Churches should maintain a vision for multiplication, continuously planting new congregations beyond their immediate reach to fulfill the Great Commission.

7. *Evaluate the program constantly* –Regular assessment of church-planting efforts is crucial, allowing for the refinement of strategies and the reinforcement of effective practices to sustain long-term growth.

Though originally written in the 1970s for rural Central Thailand, the biblical logic still resonates. Just adapt it to your local context, whether rural or urban.

5.2. Dwight Martin's "Biblical Church Planting Methodology" (AFT)

Dwight Martin's short paper for the AFT also offers a practical outline: intentionally visiting every village in a district, meeting people, sharing a gospel presentation focusing not on sin as the initial key point but rather on Jesus as the answer to life problems, collecting contact information for consistent follow-up, returning weekly to do basic discipleship, establishing small "house churches," then eventually launching a district-level "mother church." This method is direct and unapologetically evangelistic, and it appears to work—especially in a shame/fear context like Thailand—if done with repeated teaching so that new believers keep growing.

> … if we are not living, teaching, or allocating resources in ways that focus on seeing new believers gathered into new churches, all the "best models" in the world will not significantly boost church planting.

5.3. The hard part: Actually doing it

We have *no shortage* of "methods". The challenge is *whether* we do them day in and day out with genuine focus. And that is precisely where we want to keep calling OMF workers—and indeed all who share our burden for Thailand—to *live out* that definition: "Church planting means using whatever ability, gift, or passion the Lord has given you so that people hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, experience the love of the Lord, come to faith, and become part of the body of Christ." If we embody that in humble partnership with Thai believers, and if we shape everything we do—from training, to social ministry, to theological education—so that it leads to local expressions of the church, then we *will* see new churches planted.

Conclusion

Church planting does not require a narrow skill set. It has a *holistic* orientation: all of us, together, using every ability and opportunity the Lord provides so that people might *experience* Christ and become part of a local fellowship of believers. That is the heart of OMF's calling in Thailand and beyond. Of course, the day has long passed when foreign missionaries can or should "do it all themselves." It is essential to work in genuine partnership with national Christians whose deep understanding of their own culture, language, and networks is indispensable to effective gospel witness. For us, that typically means collaboration with ACT or other Thai churches. We see ourselves as *3E* workers alongside them: *Encourage, Equip, Empower*.

In practice, this can look messy as it might include short-termers helping with relief projects, a doctor offering weekly village clinics, a theological educator training future pastors, or an art specialist doing creative evangelistic programs. All of those ministries



remain anchored in the bigger aim: the proclamation of the good news, disciples being made, and communities of believers being formed. *That is church planting.*

Yes, we still have plenty of areas where we can improve. We need to sharpen our communication when mobilizing new workers so that prospective members see that OMF is not just another NGO—*we are a church-planting mission*. We need to keep exploring the spiritual readiness of towns and villages. We need to saturate receptive pockets with the gospel, evaluate the fruit, and then repeat—always following the Holy Spirit's leading. We must overcome complacency and use the wide variety of proven strategies—whether it is Alex Smith's "7E" or what Dwight Martin outlines in his "Biblical Church Planting Methodology"—and simply and faithfully *do* it. Our hope is that the next decade will see a significantly greater number of new congregations spread across Thailand, each one reflecting Thai culture in a biblical, Christ-centered way and shining the light of the gospel into unreached communities.

At its core, *church planting* is not merely a set of techniques or a line item in a mission handbook; it is the outworking of the Spirit's purpose in forming "one body" (Eph 4:4) out of those who have come to faith. May this purpose—people encountering the risen Christ and gathering as local expressions of his body—continue to shape OMF's ministry here in Thailand, for the joy of Thai believers and for the glory of God among all peoples. **MRT**

Note: All organizational statements, and references to OMF Handbook and policies are summarized or paraphrased from internal OMF documents. Alex Smith's "7E Strategy" and Dwight Martin's "Biblical Church Planting Methodology" are referenced for illustrative purposes.

We have no shortage of "methods". The challenge is whether we do them day in and day out with genuine focus.

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[4] Mark Leighton, "OMF History Reaching Thai Buddhists." Paper presented at the SEANET 2019 Conference, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2019, https://e.pcloud.link/publink/show?code=XZ3KOKZbvw0z6dsNYuqRDfapLdDnLCfTVb7 (accessed 11 February 2025).
[5] Statistics provided under the "Baptism" tab at https://estar.ws/AFT (accessed 10 February 2025).
[6] Dwight Martin, "Biblical Church Planting Methodology," Association of Free Churches in Thailand, 2 October 2022, https://e.pcloud.link/publink/show?code=XZzlOKZ3sU7jJV2yKpwNgA5X6ci0JB59FYV (accessed 10 February 2025).
[7] Smith, *Strategy to Multiply Rural Churches*, 197 (140 in the PDF of the book).

A Few Reflections on Church Planting

John Newton Webb



John Newton Webb is British and has served in Japan with OMF since 2010. From 2016, he has worked as the pastor of Hiragishi Izumi Christ Church. He is also on the board of Hokkaido Bible Institute. In his spare time, he writes poetry in English and Japanese and translates Japanese poems into English. He is married with two children.

The Lord Jesus had a brief but fruitful ministry in Samaria (John 4), but following his ascension into Heaven, many people were converted and churches started there. How did this happen? Not by the apostles' careful planning, but through the gospel proclamation of scattered believers (Acts 8:1–8). Paul had no plan to plant a church in Macedonia, but the Lord led him there to preach the gospel and the church in Philippi was born. This past Christmas, eighty-six non-Christians came to the church where I work and heard about the coming of the Saviour. But the person who seems to be most eagerly seeking the Lord is a man who turned up to a normal Sunday service the week after Christmas, having picked up a church leaflet. In this article, we will largely be considering our role in planting churches, but we must begin by remembering that it is Jesus Christ himself who will build his church, and not always according to our plans, methods, or hopes. Our first responsibility in church planting is to be on our knees before our God in worship, repentance, and persevering prayer.

Without taking our eyes off Christ, we will now look at our responsibilities in church planting, thinking about them biblically, asking hard questions of commonly held assumptions, and pointing towards practical application. My ministry context is Sapporo, Japan, where I have been pastoring a church for the last eight-and-a-half years, and I will refer to situations there and in other parts of Japan. At the same time, I will focus on fundamentals that are widely applicable.[1]

Evangelism

When Jesus or the apostles arrived at a place, their first activity was normally to proclaim God's salvation; the same was true for the scattered believers referred to in Acts 8 who spoke about Christ in Samaria. As a church is a gathering of Christian believers, church planting begins with evangelism, that is, with verbal proclamation of the good news about Jesus, accompanied by a lifestyle and deeds that adorn the message. This requires gospel-confidence, the assurance that the gospel of Christ remains "the power of God for the salvation of all who believe" (Rom 1:16), and that the Holy Spirit is at work. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). As people are saved, they become the "living stones" out of which the church is built (1 Pet 2:4–5).

Researching the area we are seeking to start a church in, contextualising our ministry to the people living there, and planning how to proceed are of great importance in the building up of a church, but, with a few obvious exceptions,[2] it is a mistake to think that they are activities that must, in some sense, be *completed* before evangelism begins.

Japanese Christians commonly assume that you need a certain level of relationship with someone before you can tell them about God. The example of the New Testament shows this to be untrue, and experience shows the damage it can do. In most cases, believers find it harder to share the gospel once a relationship is built, and the non-Christian often feels tricked or that Jesus cannot be that important since their friend hasn't mentioned it until now. It also robs the non-Christian of the chance to watch the believer's life as a witness to Jesus. At the individual level, speaking about Christ and getting to know the person to whom you are speaking are best done concurrently.[3]

Contextualisation is similar.[4] It is difficult to claim that a Christ we have hitherto concealed is the Lord of all, and it denies the power of the Holy Spirit to say we can't proclaim Christ until we have found precisely the right clothing for him. In any case, at what point can we

say we have sufficiently contextualised the message of Christ? Contextualising the gospel and gospelising the context go hand-in-hand, and it is as we proclaim Christ in a particular setting that we can begin to truly understand that setting and know best how to speak into it.[5] Proclamation is also how people are saved, the church is started, and the way we see how God is going to recreate *these people* into his image.

The question is sometimes asked whether a church's evangelism will be relationship-based or events-based, but this is a non-question and such an either/or distinction narrows the biblical witness. In the Gospels and Acts, we find the gospel being preached to both large crowds and small gatherings, and also being shared one-to-one. One approach does not exclude the other. In fact, although the local context might change the emphasis, to reach an area with the gospel both personal relationships and public proclamation are essential.[6] Furthermore, relationship building and evangelistic gatherings can and should be mutually supportive; those we are building relationships with can come and meet Christian believers and hear more of the gospel, and we can build relationships with those who come to events.

The New Testament, of course, knows nothing of handing out flyers, or of English (Aramaic?) classes, kids' clubs, or Christmas services, but as Paul made opportunity for people to gather and hear about the Christ (Acts 19:8–10), so any means which is not deceptive (1 Thess 2:3) may be used to provide opportunities whatever our contexts.

We seek to equip and encourage every believer to tell the people around them (those they already know and those they don't) how much Jesus has done for them (Mark 5:20). And we recognise that there are many people who will not hear about Jesus in this way, and so we also create opportunities for others to hear.[7] In our context, these have included (for example) special evangelistic services, a Mums and Toddlers' group, Christmas events, Harvest Festivals, Men's socials, lectures on historical Japanese Christians, and many others. We also regularly distribute gospel tracts (written by church members) and information leaflets about the church. Our aim is that everybody in our area has the opportunity to hear about Christ.[8]

Contextualising the gospel and gospelising the context go hand-in-hand, and it is as we proclaim Christ in a particular setting that we can begin to truly understand that setting and know best how to speak into it.

Community

Whether through volunteering at a school or being part of a community project or organisation, being involved in the community provides an opportunity to meet local people and know your area better. In a country like Japan where proactive religious groups are often viewed with suspicion, community involvement can also serve to reduce suspicion. I used to volunteer at the local school library. One time, a parent at the school said to one of my fellow library volunteers, "My child got a flyer for an event at the church. It looks fun and my child wants to go, but I don't know if it's safe." The volunteer replied, "The pastor volunteers at library here and is a friend of mine. It's safe for your child to go."

The Lord has blessed our church with an unusual opportunity—we were invited to join the local business association. One of the aims of the association is to contribute to the flourishing of the local community, and a member of the steering committee who attended some of our events felt we were doing more than anyone else to encourage this and recommended that we join. After prayer and careful discussions, we joined and this relationship has enabled us to feature in the catalogue of local organisations, participate in the local summer festival and other events, and leave church information in local shops. These things are normally not permitted to churches in Japan. At the monthly social, I am able to stand up and introduce the church and meet and speak evangelistically with many different people. It also brings us a level of trustworthiness that lowers the barrier to attending church.

As well as participation in activities outside the church, the church can also effectively serve the community by creating ministries that meet local needs. For example, a breakfast club for children, a drop-in café for the elderly, marriage seminars, advice on job-hunting (or any area where someone in the church has sufficient expertise).

Without any planning, our church has become a place of counselling for those with mental health issues; people started coming and continue to turn up. Some come just once. I meet with others regularly, and some now attend church services. We have been able to pray with them, share the gospel, refer them to appropriate medical services, offer some counselling, save some from taking their own lives, and a few have started attending a Bible study.



However, we must be careful to not compromise our faith or proclamation in order to gain a standing in the community. Awareness of the importance of community engagement is increasing amongst many pastors here, but I have heard a few pastors phrase it in a way that suggests a good reputation in the community is the mark that we are being good witnesses. However, there will be times of favour and times of persecution.[9] Our primary responsibility is always to live and speak faithfully for Christ.

Community involvement is an opportunity to serve our neighbours, build relationships, show the love of Christ, and share the gospel. It can also be an important component in building a church that is rooted in the local community. "Live such good lives amongst the pagans that, though they

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accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet 2:12).

Discipleship

In Paul's prayers for the Ephesian church, he shows clearly that the power and wisdom for growth in Christ is the Lord's, which he delights to pour out on his church in answer to prayer (Eph 1:15–23, 3:14–21). "From (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph 4:16). Discipleship is from Christ, in Christ, and towards Christlikeness; it is God's will and purpose for the church. Discipleship is the process through which the church and each individual believer becomes "mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). Before it is about techniques or training, it is about Christ.

The Bible's teaching on discipleship is multi-faceted and profound. Our discipleship of believers must be equally broad and deep. For the sake of the present discussion, however, we will focus on the theme of equipping for service.

The call of the gospel is not just to salvation, but to a life worthy of that call (Eph 4:1), and the context for a church's growth into that life is humility, love, and the unity of the Spirit (Eph 4:2–6). The Lord Jesus himself gives gifts to his united people for their maturing (Eph 4:7–11), and Paul spotlights the gift to the church of those who proclaim his word to his people (v 11). Alongside prayer, the primary responsibility of the church leader in building up the congregation is the faithful teaching of the Bible.[10] In other parts of the Scriptures, many purposes are given to the preaching of God's word, but here Paul begins with "to prepare God's people for works of service." Though the extent to which this is true is often overstated, there is a tendency in Japanese churches towards the pastor doing more than he ought and the "works of service" open to the congregation being overly restricted. However, the will of the Lord Jesus is that each member is equipped to serve in the diversity of their gifts. Churches grow through the ministry of every member.

In our church, people naturally think of service as being primarily things that one might be put on a rota for, and particularly things done during the Sunday service. However, praying with someone, meeting someone for coffee and encouraging them, welcoming a new person, playing with children, or helping someone move house are equally important acts of service.

We will here home in on two related areas that are particularly vital to equipping a church for the long-term.[11] The first is leadership—biblical, not business.[12] Jesus himself provides the church with leaders, and God has created the church in such a way that leaders are needed for its health (Eph 4:1–16, Heb 13:7, 17, etc.). However, neither a "one church-one leader" model nor a sharp distinction between those who lead and those who don't captures the fullness of the Bible's teaching on church leadership.[13] A vital part of building a church is examining, preparing, and appointing leaders, and then respecting their leadership. Many churches have foundered because leaders were not raised up from the congregation, or because they were appointed but all real responsibility and authority remained with the missionary or missionary team, or because leaders were rashly appointed and proved unworthy for the task.

The appointing of elders is an essential stage for a maturing church (Titus 1:5; etc.), but if we think more broadly about leading, we can also see the value of giving responsibility to church members in different areas of church life. One church we have close links with and that has a high level of maturity amongst its members is notable for the way it hands over the leadership of specific ministries to church members. If we can stretch our definition of leadership a little further, more mature believers discipling less mature believers also requires equipping and responsibility being handed over (Titus 2:3–5; etc.).

The second area is teaching others to teach (2 Tim 2:2). All believers are called to, and are able to, teach one another (Col 3:16), but there is also a specific gift of teaching given to some, and those who have it to any degree need to be developed and encouraged to use their gifts faithfully. Whether this be preaching, leading Bible studies, delivering Sunday School messages, giving evangelistic talks, or opening the Scriptures in other settings, godly, gifted, and willing teachers of the word will be a great strength to any fellowship. It is never a waste of time to invest in the training of teachers.

At a recent pastors' conference, I was advocating for developing preachers from the congregation, and a few of the participants expressed concern about the damage that might be done by unqualified preachers. This is a legitimate concern, but the biblical qualifications for teaching do not include graduating from Bible College and being ordained. Rather, they are reliability, faithfulness to the apostles' teaching, ability, and holiness. I asked a senior Japanese pastor who has raised up many lay preachers in his church—four of whom have gone into full-time pastoral ministry—to share his experience. He emphasised the importance of devoting time to each one, thorough training, and keeping them accountable. The answer to the potential danger of lay preachers teaching unhelpfully is not to deny them the chance, but to test them and equip them well.

Japan has many pastorless churches, and many churches are closing each year. There is much prayer and discussion at the moment about how to support and "replant" struggling churches. One key is surely the discipling of multiple teachers and leaders within congregations. Not only does that make it easier for a church to continue without a full-time pastor, but it also gives churches greater capacity for serving other churches. Pastor, theologian, and rural church researcher/advocate Yamaguchi Katsumasa writes,

> Especially in rural churches with no pastor, we cannot do without the nurturing and work of the lay preacher. It is impossible for one pastor to pastor and evangelise multiple churches/areas. However, in Japan the



> stereotype of one church one pastor is stubborn and hard to change. Neither pastors nor believers are attempting a reform… But the raising up of lay preachers is an urgent work.[14]

Returning to the full range of works of service, fanning into flame the gifts of every believer, encouraging them into good works, and entrusting them with real responsibility are keys to building a healthy church. And returning to the even fuller range of discipleship, may we be able to say about our ministries, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Col 1:28).[15]

Throwing off a church plant mentality

"The reason that we're so active in evangelism is because we're a church plant." "I suppose we do Sunday services this way because we're a church plant." I heard many of these sorts of sentiments expressed when I came to pastor Izumi Church (which started in 2009) in 2016. Talking to the believers who thought like this, I discovered a mistaken ecclesiology and a large set of unbiblical assumptions about the difference between having a missionary leader and local pastor.[16] Working through these issues led me to reassess the church and church plant distinction.

My conclusion was that the distinction between church plants and churches is mistaken and unhelpful. If you plant a chrysanthemum, as soon as it begins to grow you have a chrysanthemum. Whether it is a tiny shoot or in full flower, it is nonetheless a chrysanthemum. There may be *significant* differences between a new church and a more established church (for example, a lower number of mature believers, a greater need for outside help, more rapid change, etc.), but I do not find in the Scriptures a *fundamental* difference between the two.

In the model where a church plant graduates into a church at some point in its life, we may ask at what point this would be. The answer that is often given is independence. Financial independence, legal independence, independence from a missionary organisation or mother church, and so on. But we must ask where in the Bible independence is used as part of the definition of a church, or as a mark of a mature church. Rather, the New Testament surely values interdependence over independence and never thinks of a church as immature because it is still dependent on outside help.[17]

This is not simply a semantic issue. A church plant-mentality can adversely affect a church's growth. As in the examples given above, common assumptions about church plants include the following. (1) They are more proactively evangelistic than a mature church (and therefore that once independence is reached the evangelistic drive will lessen). (2) They can't mature beyond a certain point until they are independent. (3) There are certain essential functions of a church that they can't perform. More assumptions could be added. One particularly damaging attitude is that the way things are done in a younger church is temporary. Of course, many things are—a growing church will and must change—but this attitude can lead believers to relativise Bible teaching that they don't like. I have, on more than one occasion, had someone say in response to clear biblical teaching, "that will change when we're a proper church."

A few years ago, I talked these issues through with our church members and encouraged them to no longer think of us as a church plant, but just as a church. As a result, we have seen church members invest more in the church, grapple more seriously with the Bible's full counsel about church life, and have more confidence in what we believe and do as a church. While the verb "to church plant" may be valid, the noun "church plant" seems confusing and largely meaningless.[18]

Related to the distinction often made between a church and a church plant is the sharp distinction between a missionary church leader and a national church leader. This also needs rethinking in light of the word of God, and secondarily, in light of its helpfulness. As touched on above, missionary leadership (often supported from overseas) is frequently equated with the church being immature, and a church-supported national church leader with the church being mature. Again we ask, where in God's word is this distinction made?[19]

I believe in local leadership and that it is healthy for churches, where possible, to support their own workers. However, I also believe that it is unhelpful to emphasise a missionary/pastor distinction.[20] Again, it can lead to believers relativizing the Scriptures or dismissing teaching because it comes from foreign lips. I have been told such things as, "But Japanese people don't like being told about sin" (i.e. you shouldn't talk about it here). I have also heard criticism that an element introduced into our Sunday services was too Western, even though it was something we learned from other Japanese churches and that I have never seen done in the West!

The distinction also contributes to the mistaken view that missionaries evangelise and pastors disciple,

> … there is also a specific gift of teaching given to some, and those who have it to any degree need to be developed and encouraged to use their gifts faithfully. … It is never a waste of time to invest in the training of teachers.

whereas both should surely do both. Recently, a couple of young (and very gifted) Japanese pastors have publicly voiced a view that it is not possible for foreign missionaries to effectively disciple Japanese believers.[21] These are wise men with much experience (including that of working closely with missionaries) and their views reflect past and present failings of missionary work here. However, to say it is not possible overlooks the work of the Holy Spirit, makes shared cultural background of greater importance in discipleship than the Scriptures, and implicitly discourages missionaries from discipling believers. Irrespective of who is leading the church, all congregations need careful and thorough discipling.

Emphases and practical application will change with the age of the church and the gifts and experience of the leaders, but unnecessary emphasis on distinctions between foreign leaders and native leaders, or between church planters and pastors, can lead to churches having wrong expectations, imbalances in the church's activities, and leaders neglecting important parts of their roles.[22]

Throwing off a church model mentality

Beginning at the birth of a church and continuing throughout its life, there are many issues that demand us to think through what sort of a church it is or is going to be. How will it be led? When and in what form will believers gather? How will it engage with the local community? Where will it devote its energies? One approach to answering these questions has been to select a church model (e.g. cell church, multi-site church, "traditional church",[23] incarnational mission community, etc.) and attempt to build the church according to that model. However, I think the "model" approach has weaknesses that can hinder the healthy development of a church.

The variety of proposed models is bewildering, and the names of some models mean quite different things depending on one's church background. Each one has normally been developed in a particular cultural context, and whilst some are very adaptable, others may not fit a different culture.

> … we must ask where in the Bible independence is used as part of the definition of a church, or as a mark of a mature church. Rather, the New Testament surely values interdependence over independence and never thinks of a church as immature because it is still dependent on outside help.

More concerning is that reliance on a particular church model may blind us to biblical elements of church that the model does not bring out. In many cases, the model, rather than God's word, may have become the ultimate guide to church life. We may note that the Bible does not give us a church model, nor even a range of models. The apostles clearly thought that many things were more important than models. Though this may not always be the case, a model-directed approach to building a church can also lack flexibility and discourage creative thinking. We can learn from many of these church models, but it seems unwise to tie ourselves to one particular model, especially in the early stages when we do not know who might constitute the church, or what particular challenges and opportunities might be presented to us.



A better approach is to simply prayerfully ask, "How can we apply the Bible's full teaching on church *in this situation* and *at this time*?" This is a harder course than choosing and sticking to a particular model, but a more profitable one, and one that enables the church to find an appropriate expression of its identity as God's people in its particular setting, and also to adapt and change in line with its changing situation. The community we are trying to reach is ever changing with different challenges and opportunities arising, and the members, gifts, maturity, and needs of the church will also be in flux. This approach also encourages ongoing reflection about what the church is, should do, and can do. By keeping our eyes firmly on the Scriptures and regularly turning to it for guidance, we see areas where the church is weak, Bible teaching we are neglecting, and beliefs and practices that could be improved. Even good things sometimes need to be replaced by better things.

One church here began as a house church with the intention of always being a house church and, over time, a network of house churches. However, after some time evangelizing and getting to know local people, the leaders realised that this approach did not fit the context and changed to renting rooms and seeking to build up a single congregation that would in time plant other churches. Interestingly, visitors to this church often comment on its "at home" feel. On a smaller scale, reflection on Colossians 3:1–17 and other passages about church fellowship led us to reconsider how we did our church small groups so that they would come closer to fulfilling the full scope of the Bible's teaching on fellowship.

I have witnessed cases where struggling churches have stuck doggedly to a particular model and ended up closing, other cases where churches have got comfortable in their ways and have not pursued further growth, and others

where adherence to a static model has served some members well but excluded others. In a similar way, a church that is focused on reaching young families may miss opportunities to engage with the elderly and vice versa. As we saw earlier from Acts 8, the church God is building may be very different from the church we envisioned we would start. Constant reference to Christ the cornerstone and God's word the foundation is the way to build a God-glorifying church.

A final reflection

As I have written this article, I have been acutely aware of my own failures and weaknesses in leading Izumi Church, and also to the challenges of starting and building a church. Just how do you raise up leaders and teachers in a country where so few younger people are coming to Christ? I am also reminded of the great joy of seeing the Lord at work saving the lost and remaking his people into the image of his Son. As Christ said, "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18). All my confidence is in him. **MRT**

A better approach is to simply prayerfully ask, "How can we apply the Bible's full teaching on church in this situation and at this time?" This is a harder course than choosing and sticking to a particular model … This approach also encourages ongoing reflection about what the church is, should do, and can do.

[1] Japan is an open country where churches are free to work. Work in CAN contexts will differ significantly.

[2] For example, where the church planter has as yet no shared language with the local people, or in situations of intense persecution.

[3] I hope it is obvious that I am not arguing against the importance of contextualisation. This is something we work hard at and, amongst local Japanese pastors here, our church and preaching are considered to be well contextualised. I am also not denying the need for preparation for cross-cultural work. On the latter, see David Harley, "Training and Attrition," *Mission Round Table* 17, no. 1 (January–April 2022), 16–25, https://omf.org/mrt-training-and-attrition (accessed 27 February 2025). There are two phenomena we see when contextualisation becomes overly dominant in our thinking. One is that new missionaries are so concerned that they might make a cultural mistake that their evangelism becomes paralysed. The second is that some missionaries think they have found "*the* way" to contextualise the gospel and end up not teaching the full counsel of God.

[4] Japanese theologian 丸山忠孝, in his superb book on Christ and Japanese culture, 十字架と桜 (東京：いのちのことば社, 2019), points out that most books on Christianity and Japanese culture look at the question, "How does Japanese culture view Christianity?," putting culture as the standard and judge for viewing God. He argues that the more important question, and the one that truly reflects Christ's lordship is, "How does Jesus view Japanese culture?" In other words, cultural engagement begins with Christ, not with culture, and he is to be Lord in all interactions between the two. How then do we contextualise? 丸山's answer is profound and I can't do it justice in a footnote, but here is a taster, "We must face up to history, responsible to the God who rules history. We must not flee our responsibility but serve our neighbor who lives with us in history." (Translation, and all others in this article, mine. His definition of history includes the present culture.)

[5] This requires deep humility, ears constantly open to God and to our neighbour, a willingness to learn and adapt, and a knowledge of the full range of the ways the Bible speaks. I am neither advocating a blindness to culture nor an arrogance that thinks we already know how to live and speak in a foreign culture.

[6] In some contexts, speaking to a crowd may be impossible.

[7] Recently, since some people are moving away and other members are in ill-health, we are reconsidering our capacity to run some events. One church member expressed concern that we might be in danger of stopping evangelism, but this certainly won't be the case. What will change is not our being evangelistic, but the way in which we evangelise. I re-emphasised that even if a church has just two or three members, those members can and must be speaking of Christ in the place the Lord has put them. Events are good, but we are not reliant on them.

[8] The nine people who have been baptised at Izumi Church since we started working here have first come to church in a variety of ways. Four were invited by church members, one by a short-term missionary, one received a tract at the station, one received church leaflets through her door, one came via a flyer to an English class. One, who had been wanting to know the "true God" for twenty years, saw there was a church near her new home and took the brave step of turning up at a Sunday service, and some months later put her trust in Christ at another Sunday service. All of these people heard the gospel multiple times through evangelistic events, one-to-one Bible studies, Sunday services, and in conversation.

[9] Contrast Acts 2:47 and 14:19.

[10] It also includes setting an example by your life, which requires opening up your life and spending quality time with believers.

[11] In some cultures, Japan included, there is a danger of overemphasising works of service, but our discipleship must include teaching the "whole counsel of God" and include, for example, training in holiness, building a biblical worldview, teaching on prayer, family life, work, evangelism, etc.

[12] Though he overstates his case in places and not all his conclusions are equally convincing, a basic argument for plural leadership that can be found in Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, expanded edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995). This book has been translated into Burmese, Chinese, Indonesian (as a booklet), Korean, Mongolian, and other languages.

[13] This is not the place to go into this issue in depth, but while the New Testament teaches the role and authority of particular leaders within the church, we may question whether the clergy-laity distinction accurately captures the Bible's teaching. For this reason, I avoid the term "lay leaders" in this article. For this, too, see Strauch.

[14] 山口勝政, *閉塞感からの脱却—日本宣教神学* (東京：株式会社ヨベル, 2012), 24.

[15] I have emphasised the discipleship of leaders and teachers, but we must not focus on them to the neglect of discipling other believers. One Japanese pastor observed with concern that though there is (rightly) much emphasis on pre-baptismal Bible study, many churches do not provide any post-baptismal Bible study. Another pastor I know, realising that he was not effectively discipling his whole congregation, introduced a cell church system wherein he disciples the cell group leaders and they disciple their group members.

[16] I am using the word pastor here as shorthand for "church leader" rather than assuming a particular structure of church leadership.

[17] A brief side point on independence. In one area of Japan, an overemphasis on independence has led struggling churches to keep their problems to themselves with other churches not being able to approach them with offers of help. The result has been that some have closed and others are in danger of doing so. A pastor from that area has recently written, "Emphasising each church's independence and making a rule of non-interference in other churches has created an insurmountable wall. I think it has left our fellowship and co-operation superficial." He also wrote that this situation "has, in a profound way, taught us a vital perspective on the future of rural mission. That is, the value of honestly sharing difficult situations and actively seeking prayer and co-operation, and the value of a stance of co-operation and relating to other churches with love and courage in response to God's word, 'There is no fear in love.'" This was written by Pastor 菅原豊 in an open letter.

I have witnessed cases where struggling churches have stuck doggedly to a particular model and ended up closing, other cases where churches have got comfortable in their ways and have not pursued further growth, and others where adherence to a static model has served some members well but excluded others.

[18] A few years ago, I was talking to the leader of another mission organisation at a conference, and he told me that he is trying to jettison the verb too, in favour of "to make disciples". He said they are no less committed to the church or to starting new churches, but that he has found that talking about church planting often leads to an early emphasis on buildings, models, structures, and finance, whereas the more directly biblical command "to make disciples" leads to an emphasis on evangelism and discipleship. As people are saved and nurtured in the faith, they are, in Christ, "built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:22).

[19] We might also consider the oft-noted internationality of church leaders in Acts.

[20] For a different perspective (not within a cross-cultural context), see David Whitehead, "How is a Church Planter Different from a Pastor?," Redeemer City to City, 23 November 2023, https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/how-is-a-church-planter-different-from-a-pastor-1 (accessed 27 February 2025). While I agree with some of the points made, I do not accept them all.

[21] These are good friends of mine. In private conversation, their comments are less absolute and they are certainly happy that we are discipling our church, but their concerns about poor discipleship done by missionaries are very real.

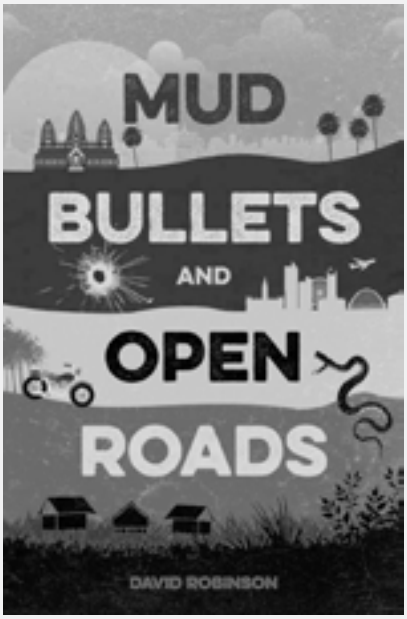
[22] In the Japanese context, there are some pragmatic reasons why it may be better not to use the term missionary at all, at least outside the church. The word for missionary (宣教師) is more readily associated with the cults (especially the Mormons) and therefore arouses suspicion, whereas the word pastor (牧師) or church worker is associated with the Christian church, and a pastor is seen as a valuable member of the community and someone who could be approached to talk about spiritual matters. Some missionary colleagues who work at a church with no pastor recently expressed frustration that relatives of church members and other local people wanted to talk about funerals or personal issues with a pastor but not with missionaries. Identifying as the pastor of Izumi Church, I have never experienced this resistance; people come to talk about many things.

[23] I lament the recent trend to view "traditional" modes as necessarily negative. If we may quote Gustav Mahler (though he was talking about music), "Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire."

Mud, Bullets and Open Roads

David Robinson. Leyland, England: 10Publishing, 2024. IBSN: 978-1-837280-28-5. 166pp.

Reviewed by Laura-Jane Meas



A "Caleb" Perspective on a Life Called to World Mission

Perhaps you have asked questions like the following. How can I meaningfully pray for missionaries and people in other places and cultures? Could someone like me serve the Lord? How can I come through unexpected challenges trusting and obeying him? Does God still reveal himself so people can know him? What pathways and attitudes matter in trust-building between cultures and in church planting? Where is God when loss and suffering impact Christian life? The stories in this book respond to questions like these and inspire your vision for God's grace at work in the world.

Mud, Bullets and Open Roads promotes confidence in God who has been faithful over David Robinson's 80-year life-journey. From trusting in Christ while hearing Billy Graham preach in the 1960s, growing through the ministry of his local church, and following the Lord's leading to East Asia, David's story could easily be a fireside chat with the reader, who will sense that God entrusts his heart for the nations to those who obey him. God first gave David a heart for Thailand, then Cambodia, and surprised him with a final stage of ministry among Thai people in the UK. It is David's hope that each reader be willing to give their lives fully to serving the Lord and embrace his calling, whatever and wherever that may be.

David's stories illustrate God's saving and life-changing power. Serving with his wife Jenny in Central Thailand, he witnessed people's lives transformed as they came to know Jesus, faced Jenny's terminal illness with his family, and absorbed her "home call". Reflecting honestly, David's takes us through highs and lows of ministry and leadership. He is frank about struggles, and specific about evidence of God's grace when navigating changes of country, role, or stage of life. For Thai and Cambodian Christians, as for missionary colleagues, David testifies to God's presence in grief and pain, highlighting how he mysteriously strengthens us precisely through such trials.

The Lord later brought David and Mary together, giving them the responsibility of building a supportive context for missionaries to serve in post-war Cambodia. With every new stage, David demonstrates that God's ongoing work is not dependent on the servant but on God himself, as submission leads to peace and blessing.

After many years of sharing in building God's church amidst "mud" and "bullets", when David and Mary entered "retirement" in the UK, the Lord impressed on them that "the best is yet to come." They had no idea the Lord was about to lead them into great adventures along "open roads" all across the UK. With the increase of global migration, the Lord connected them with Thai diaspora people. God worked in the lives of Thai friends one by one, connecting cluster after cluster of Thai people who were ready to grow in Christ and become his witnesses. A network of Thai Christian Fellowships across the UK came into being, and David and Mary still hope "to see the vision increasingly fulfilled" (161).

From David's vantage point, God's mission has been in, to, and through each nation, sending his people from place to place so that people may know him and make him known. He concludes his memoir by asking, "Would I repeat the journey?" and concludes, "By God's grace, yes. There is nothing greater in this world than being a servant of God, ready to follow his direction" (163).

Mud, Bullets and Open Roads is a great gift that David is passing on to the next generation. It would likewise be a great gift to pass on to a Christian friend. It is long enough to allow those looking for deeper inspiration to find it, and just right for a those looking for a very accessible read. I highly recommend it.

Reflecting on OMF Japan's Church Planting Strategy Review

Chris Pain



Chris Pain has been serving in Japan with OMF since 2007 and as Field Director since 2017. He and his family have served in several different churches, all Japanese-led. Their current church is a church plant just outside Tokyo. He is married with four children.

Introduction

In 2018, the OMF Japan Field renewed its commitment to church planting in Japan when, at our Field Conference, we agreed that a goal for the period 2020–2030 to be "involved in 50 church plants (both initiating our own and supporting others)."[1]

OMF's work in Japan started in 1951 with a strong focus on evangelism, church planting, student work and theological education. As it is an open-access nation, almost all our workers have come on religious visas and we continue to focus on disciple-making ministries that will, by God's grace, lead to "vibrant churches impacting every community" in Japan.[2]

However, as we pushed deeper into the planning and implementation for this church planting goal, the Japan Field Leadership Team (FLT) recognised a need to not only keep going with our ongoing work, but also to step back, review our work in church planting, and assess the challenges and opportunities we faced. We summarised the reasons in the report we eventually published after the Church Planting Strategy Review (CPSR):

> Since 1951 OMF missionaries in Japan have been seeking to make Japanese disciples and see churches planted that would then continue under Japanese leadership and make new disciples and plant new churches. By God's Grace, we have seen over 70 churches planted and we praise the Lord for all that He has done.
>
> However, in recent years we have seen a considerable slowdown in the progress of the work and some significant questions being raised about whether the style of church planting we have pursued is still appropriate in today's Japan. Alongside this, we have seen great interest in church planting movements and discipleship making movements around the world. Workers coming to the Field have some different expectations and aspirations about how they will continue the task of making Jesus known in Japan. All of this makes it timely to review our church planting work and seek the Lord's leading for the next chapter of our service of Him in Japan.[3]

This article reflects on the process of the CPSR and the lessons we learned from the research. The final report is available as free download at https://cpsr.omf.or.jp/ and includes a short executive summary for those who don't have time to read the whole report!

When we decided to launch the review, we did not have a clear plan for how to conduct it, so we will start with a description of the process in the hope it will be helpful for others considering a similar project.

The review process

After the FLT decided to launch a review, our first step was to consult Field members at our *Spring 2021 Members' Meetings*.[4] At this time, we introduced the FLT's decision to conduct a review, and then placed all our members into small groups and asked them to provide feedback to the following questions:

1. What should we review and learn from OMF church planting done so far? (Think about both strengths and weaknesses.)

2. Imagine there is a new church planting strategy for the Field in place. How should it help church planters and the Field in our church planting work?

3. What are the key elements necessary to achieve the results desired in question 2?

4. Who should we consult as part of the review?

At our *June 2021 Field Leadership Team* meeting we reviewed the feedback received from members and clarified the scope and method for the review. We decided to launch a "Listening Project" as a key first step that would allow us to interview Japanese partners,[5] church planting missionaries from other agencies, and some of our own church planters. The initial list of topics we wanted to learn about in the listening project included (in no particular order):

- Handover of our church plants and how to do this well—method/timing, etc.
- Successful church planting models/approaches in Japan
- How to raise leaders (Japanese and within OMF)
- Team dynamics and their impact on church plants
- How to establish good foundations/DNA in a church plant to enable growth and coping with change
- Why churches OMF had planted didn't go on to plant daughter churches
- How to do church planting partnerships well
- Impact of missionary patterns of service in church planting
- Priority of church planting versus revitalisation of existing churches[6]
- What our partners think of OMF/working with us
- What our partners think we should be doing

July 2021–December 2021

To help lead the project, we established a CPSR Team that included Field members with experience in different approaches to church planting and partnering and a Japanese Pastor who had previously served as missionary with OMF. We wanted the listening project to be appropriately rigorous in its approach so that we could feel confident in the findings. As we started to plan it, we realised that:

1. A good process should also include a review of significant literature on church planting in general and about church planting in Japan in particular.
2. We would need help from a trained sociological researcher to produce good questions, avoid bias, and design a reasonable process.[7]



The CPSR Team researched literature we should read and consulted Field members and other experts in OMF International for their recommendations. We identified forty-seven different books or articles to review in both English and Japanese. The full list is available in appendix 1 of the report.[8]

We also started to search for a sociological researcher who could help us. Although we were able to talk with a number of people who kindly provided one-off advice, we struggled to find anyone with expertise and time to engage deeply with us.

After some months, we were introduced to Eido Research[9] who had worked with OMF UK and other groups on research in the UK. Our initial discussions were positive, and we were able to identify a collaborative approach that used the CPSR team's knowledge of Japanese language, culture, and context and Eido Research's expertise in research projects. The FLT decided to employ Eido Research to help us run the project, concluding that their involvement would make the project results more reliable and bring needed resource to help us complete the project on time. With Eido Research's involvement, we were able to refine the focus of our research to make it more manageable.[10]

January–November 2022

In the early months of 2022, our CPSR Team read and took notes on the forty-seven resources we had identified. The results were written up and now form an appendix to the final report.[11] The literature review was used to help us refine the questions we should ask in the listening project.

Under Eido Research's guidance, we decided to conduct the research using an online survey to gather responses from a wider group of people, followed by interviews with a smaller sub-group.

Purposive sampling was used to create a sample of 71 individuals who were invited to engage with the questionnaire and 47 who were asked to engage with the interview. This sample consisted of three research populations who were identified by OMF Japan: firstly, Japanese church plant leaders (19 participants); secondly, missionary church plant leaders (11 respondents); and thirdly, agency leaders and experts on church planting in Japan (12 respondents). The individuals were selected by the OMF Research Reference Group following consultation with OMF missionaries, other agency leaders, and Japanese partners. The team worked to ensure that the sample covered individuals from a spread of geographical areas, denominations, experience in different types of church, and Japanese as well as non-Japanese leaders.

The online survey was also circulated with a wider selection of

We wanted to ensure that we listened to a wide variety of perspectives from different Japanese churches and that Japanese partners' voices were in the majority. Interviewing missionaries from other agencies allowed us to learn from their experiences, including those regarding partnering with different groups.

OMF Japan members, particularly missionaries with church-planting experience. This wider sample allowed for more bivariate analysis, especially on differences between missionaries and Japanese pastors.[12]

Of those interviewed, twenty-six were Japanese leaders, nine were OMF members and seven were missionaries with other agencies. We wanted to ensure that we listened to a wide variety of perspectives from different Japanese churches and that Japanese partners' voices were in the majority. Interviewing missionaries from other agencies allowed us to learn from their experiences, including those regarding partnering with different groups. About fifty people was the maximum number we could interview and then analyse the results within a realistic timeframe.

We recruited a small team of OMF members to help us with the interviewing. They were trained in interviewing and note-taking through an online session run by Eido Research. We also employed someone to help with translation of the interview results from Japanese to English.

We ran a pilot survey and interview in June, and, after adjustments, the other online surveys and interviews were conducted during June and July 2022. Notes of each interview were sent to Eido Research and they analysed the results using qualitative analysis software and then compared it to the results of the online survey.[13] They were able to achieve a level of sophistication that was beyond anything our team could have achieved.

The CPSR Team and Eido Research met to discuss the results and work through some issues of language and cultural understanding necessary to interpret the results. Eido Research then wrote up the final report with input from the CPSR Team.

The 80+ page report was finalised in time for the FLT's meeting in November 2022. At that meeting, the FLT analysed the results and agreed that we should publish them in English and Japanese both online and in book form as they are likely to be of interest to the wider mission and church community in Japan. We also agreed that the report provided a solid foundation for discussing our Field church planting strategy.

Due to comings and goings on the Field, we refreshed membership of the CPSR team for the next stage—using the report to shape our Field strategy.

January–April 2024

In preparation for our *Spring 2023 Members Meetings*, we asked all Field members to read the report and identify the findings they thought were particularly relevant from their experience in Japan. We also discussed anything that was surprising or concerning in the report and how the findings of the report should be implemented within OMF Japan strategy.

Following this, the CPSR Team drafted a set of documents that reflected the feedback received.[14] These were:

1. OMF Japan Ministry Values and Strategy—setting out our core values in ministry and the strategy implications that flowed from them.

2. Statement on Disciples and Discipleship—capturing key findings from the review, including important lessons specific to working in Japan.

3. Statement on Core Emphases when Church Planting—setting out core emphases identified by the research that help lead to healthy churches. These would be expressed differently depending on the church planting model used.

4. Statement on Teams and Partnerships—describes some attitudes, values, and practices that help promote healthy teams and partnerships.

We discussed these documents in small groups over several sessions at our Field Conference in June 2023, receiving a total of 120 pages of feedback. The CPSR Team reviewed and used it to refine the four documents, leading to significant edits and amendments. We also added a fifth document in response to the feedback:

5. Statement on deciding church planting approach—to promote a prayerful, intentional, and reflective approach to setting a strategy that



places leadership on the local team, but also engages with Field leadership.

The intention had been to finalise the documents and complete the process in November 2023, but limitations in leadership capacity due to other urgent tasks meant that we deferred this to the Spring 2024 members' meetings. These meetings gave our Field members opportunity to give final feedback on the documents and helped us shift to thinking proactively about how to use the statements in our life and ministry on the Field. We asked:[15]

1. As you think about your current or future ministry what did you find personally helpful about these statements?

2. How can we use these statements well as a Field to help our ongoing ministry? (The following are suggestions to help the discussion, but other ideas are welcome!)

a. In what format would you want them?

b. Would regularly re-reading or discussing the content help? How could that be done well?

c. Any thoughts on how they should be used with different groups? (Candidates, First Term Workers, new Church Plant Teams, established teams, etc.)

3. What are potential challenges that would stop us using these statements well as a Field?

As a result of the feedback, a further round of edits was completed. In particular, the CPSR Team noted that the whole process had led to comprehensive discussion of our values in ministry and how they should shape our work. The values identified in this process were quite similar to the pre-existing Field values, but there were some key differences. The team did some further work on whether it was possible to combine the two sets of values. The FLT decided that the values from the CPSR process were the result of significant theological reflection, research, and discussions and should therefore be used as our Field values and that it would be confusing to have two sets.

We are currently praying through our values month by month as a Field and are planning different ways to actively use the statements produced in our Field life and ministry.

Reflections on the review

In this section, I will share some reflections that I hope will be helpful to others who may be thinking of beginning a similar process.

Decision to hire Eido Research

We had not originally intended to hire outside help for this project and thought we could find sufficient help from a volunteer who could provide



some guidance to us. Moreover, there was an unspoken expectation that this ought to be a project we could run as a Field. However, the more we thought about designing a credible research process, the wider and more significant our questions about methodology became. How to select people to interview? How many? What questions to use? How to avoid bias? How to analyse the results? How to interpret the data? How to write it up?

In a paper to the FLT, I commented that without outside help it is "inevitable that we will make some methodological mistakes and miss ways to maximise the benefit to be gained from the effort of doing all these interviews."[16] The FLT concluded that the financial cost was justified by the likelihood of a high-quality outcome that would help inform OMF and the wider community. In the context of our intention to be involved in fifty church plants and the costs involved in doing that, this was a tiny cost, but one we believed would have a significant impact in helping us towards that goal. Moreover, the initial discussions with Eido Research showed us we had significantly underestimated the hours of work needed to complete the project. We needed help, as busy field leaders and church planters would not have been able to complete it in a timely manner.

Looking back, the decision to hire Eido Research was one of the best ones we made in the course of the project. Because of their experience and expertise, they were able to guide us smoothly through the questions that had previously caused us weeks of delay.

Although we initially contracted for help in designing the research, we finally employed Eido Research to do the analysis and write-up in collaboration with us. They were able to carry out a level of analysis we would not have been able to with their expertise in analysing large volumes of quantitative data such as we had from the interviews. They were also able to give us clarity in evaluating whether differences were statistically significant or not.

There is also great benefit in having the report written by a third party who placed a clear focus on the data, as some of the conclusions drawn are critical of OMF or missionaries and some could be taken to be critical of some partners' approaches. For instance, missionaries and mission agencies are encouraged to have greater flexibility and humility,[17] while pastors are challenged to allow missionaries to be more involved in evangelistic ministry (and not just internal church activities) as well as work at better communication with missionaries serving with them.[18]

Questionnaire design—thinking about the end user

Looking back, some questions in our online survey were too complex and did not elicit the responses we were hoping for. One of the proposed questions in our survey initially required respondents to rank sixteen key principles of church planting in order of priority. Eido Research had advised us it would be better to change this as it was at the outer limits in terms of length and risked survey respondents becoming disengaged. Although we made some adjustments to list ten principles,

In the strategy statements that came out of this process, we have been careful to describe key emphases that should be worked towards in any church plant, without describing a model. Instead, we emphasize that church planting teams should decide their approach, taking account of the nature of the community they work in and the gifting of the team, and not just come with a preconceived approach.

our enthusiasm for the topic meant we still had too many options to be effectively ranked. This meant that, in the end, "there were some signs in the data that respondents had randomly ordered lower-ranking preferences."[19] Fortunately, Eido was able to draw some conclusions through analysis that focused on reporting the top two or three most frequent answers.[20] This data was still useful and showed, for instance, that leaders with a stronger track record in church planting, "were even more likely [than those in the general sample] to prioritise prayer, communicating the Gospel in word and deed, and having a clear vision for church-planting —suggesting the centrality of these aspects of church-planting."[21] However, better questionnaire design may have enabled us to gain more reliable data.

Impact of the report:

Readers who would like to understand the key findings of the report should read the executive summary on pages 3–7. Some of the conclusions may seem simple to those unfamiliar with the Japanese context, but they were highly significant to those of us working here. I will briefly share some personal reflections here.

Church planting model

Historically, most of our work has followed a similar model of church planting (referred to as the "Traditional model").[22] Many of the churches we partner with, that our first-term workers attend during language school and then train in during their first ministry designation are the fruit of this method. Many OMF members and pastors assume that this is the correct method to use. So, the conclusion "there was no 'one right model' for church planting. Instead, leaders should choose a model or combination of models according to their context and the gifts of the church planter" was significant.[23] Most revealing was the sentiment among some pastors interviewed that this resource-heavy traditional model was not something they could replicate and put them off church planting. Having said that, whilst having a dedicated building is not the only feature of the traditional model,[24] most of our current church planting partnerships are looking towards obtaining a building as a key part of establishing what they consider to be a contextually appropriate church in Japan. These pastors see that meeting in homes is often not practical and finding other locations to meet is challenging. Many publicly owned facilities will not be rented to religious groups and privately owned facilities are expensive.[25] While other groups OMF is networking with are seeking to try discipleship making movements or home-based church models, there are real challenges in a Japanese context that they and we continue to wrestle with.[26]

These findings and the ongoing debate among church planters in Japan urge us to think carefully about our methods. If we want to take replicability seriously, we have to look at different ways of working, which will require a significant shift in mindset for us as a Field. In the strategy statements that came out of this process, we have been careful to describe key emphases that should be worked towards in any church plant, *without describing a model*. Instead, we emphasize that church planting teams should decide their approach, taking account of the nature of the community they work in and the gifting of the team, and not just come with a preconceived approach. Moreover, we are committed to continuing to plant churches in partnership with others (an approach clearly emphasised by the research), so our workers will need to be flexible to work in line with the leading of our partners when we do so.[27]

Discipleship

Training and equipping believers for service as part of discipleship was identified as key in building healthy churches. Perfectionism, fear of mistakes, and the busyness of church members were identified as significant barriers to doing this. The research suggests that tackling these barriers is an important topic for OMF and for churches in Japan. The research also showed the need for clarity regarding what it means to be a disciple, and what works of service disciples should be equipped for (Eph 4:12). This was highlighted as an area for particular discussion to help with building successful partnerships[28] with a need to discuss what disciple making and disciple equipping look like in practise and not assuming a shared understanding of the same word.

In our follow-up discussions as a Field, we created a statement about our disciple making that includes sections on key matters to emphasise and matters to avoid when disciple-making in Japan. This latter section identifies some common themes that need to be proactively considered when making disciples here. They are also some of the issues that are helpful to talk through with partners:

"Research and our experience in disciple-making in Japan suggests that the following are areas we need to be particularly careful about.

- Only emphasizing growth in knowledge and neglecting the need to also grow in obedience to and love for God.
- Emphasizing discipleship as focused on a worship service without connecting it to the whole of life.
- Encouraging/Allowing reliance on the missionary/pastor rather than Christ.
- Being content with relationships that are harmonious at a surface level without developing the ability to give and receive forgiveness and pursue reconciliation."[29]

Partnerships

As we prepared for the listening project, Field leaders who were responsible for forming partnerships identified some challenges that they experienced in this process. Experience showed us that the questions or issues we wanted to address were often not those uppermost in the minds of Japanese partners. We therefore designed a part of the online survey to try and gain insight into whether this was true and what was causing it. The outcomes were helpful. We could see that missionaries tended to think about more functional aspects of the relationship first—do we share purpose and values? do we have good quality communication?—whereas pastors tended to focus on the quality of the relationship first—do we have a trust relationship?[30]

The research challenged us to acknowledge that if OMF wants to build partnerships in ways that our partners prefer (rather than in the way that we prefer), we will need to continue to refine and improve our approach. Building a trust relationship takes time, and this requires us to give time and attention to relationships and networking before we even begin to think about working together.

A resource for others

Between 2019 and 2024, the number of Christians in Japan dropped by about 660,000 or about 30 percent according to the latest government census data.[31] If current trends continue, it is predicted that half of Japan's Protestant churches will close by 2030,[32] in part due to dwindling congregations but also because of a chronic shortage of pastors.[33] In this context, talking about church planting is challenging, but by God's grace the publication of this report has sparked conversations with others who want to assess some of the causes of the decline and the challenges that Japanese churches face. These conversations have still not led to a clear direction, but it has helped identify like-minded partners that want to collaborate in the face of the implosion of the church. Some of these think that church planting has a role to play in seeing this decline reversed. Others want to see radically different mindsets and approaches to church planting. One group used this report for their own discussions about their work.



Outcomes for Japan Field

The fact that we have spent significant time and effort discussing our work and how we will do it has, I believe, been positive for the Field. There is a greater clarity about the challenges we face, mistakes we need to avoid, and the kind of church planting we want to pursue. We have wrestled with the thorny question of whether we work in church revitalisation or prioritise church planting and have a guiding statement in our new strategy document in a section titled "New Church Plant or Church Revitalisation? OMF-led work or working with a partner?":[34]

- "Our focus is on serving with others to make disciples who make disciples, and seeing them gathered into churches that plant churches until there is a vibrant church impacting every community in Japan. We will therefore evaluate opportunities for church planting and church revitalisation on their potential contribution to this aim.

- Where we are able to partner with existing churches in a community for revitalisation, we will usually prioritise this over starting a new church in that community.

- Giftedness of workers to work in partnership is also a factor to be considered. We encourage all our workers to grow in ability and willingness to serve alongside and under Japanese leadership.

- We prefer to start work where there is Japanese-led initiative, effort, or responsiveness rather than alone. However, we do also take initiative to start work, especially if starting a church or ministry to reach a community no or few other churches/ministries are working to reach."

Having a statement like this does not solve all our problems, but it helps that we, as a Field, have discussed this and together have agreed on a direction. The report and the new statements are also helpful resources for mobilisers and candidates assessing if the Field is a good fit, as well as for equipping new workers who come to the Field. A key next step is for us to keep using this research and our subsequent statements to shape and reevaluate our ministries.

We anticipate that having moved to a values-led set of strategy documents, we will have greater flexibility in how

We could see that missionaries tended to think about more functional aspects of the relationship first—do we share purpose and values? do we have good quality communication?—whereas pastors tended to focus on the quality of the relationship first—do we have a trust relationship?

The research challenged us to acknowledge that if OMF wants to build partnerships in ways that our partners prefer (rather than in the way that we prefer), we will need to continue to refine and improve our approach. Building a trust relationship takes time, and this requires us to give time and attention to relationships and networking before we even begin to think about working together.

we work in church planting along with greater clarity about emphases that are important for ministry in Japan.

Conclusion

Looking back on the CPSR process, it took a significant amount of work, but it was necessary and timely given the challenges we are facing with the rapid decline of the church in Japan. By God's grace, even as we see decline in many churches, we have also seen rapid growth in missionary numbers[35] and it is important that we help them to work in the most effective ways possible. Our CPSR process has been one way to help us reflect deeply with Japanese partners on how to do this.

Moreover, the research process, as well as the report that followed, has allowed us to deepen connections with Japanese partners who are wrestling with the same issues that we are. By God's grace, we have been able to start partnerships and join networks that we pray will lead to fruitful ministry together.

Finally, the significant time we invested in discussing the outcomes and agreeing on our values and strategy in response, will, we trust, help us learn from the past while being attentive to the Holy Spirit's leading as we continue to serve the Lord and the gospel of Jesus in Japan. **MRT**

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[1] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan: Learning from Pastors' and Missionaries' Perspectives" (2023), 60, https://cpsr.omf.or.jp/ (accessed 6 February 2025). Other goals were agreed upon too, but this goal, along with training Japanese believers in evangelism and related aims in church revitalisation, were those we expected to commit most personnel, time, and effort towards for this period.

[2] OMF Japan Vision statement.

[3] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 58.

[4] On the Japan Field, we gather all our members for meetings twice a year. In years when we have Field Conferences, we meet together in the same place, but usually we run the same meeting in three key locations across Japan so that all our members can attend even if there is some significant travel involved. These Members' Meetings were a key forum for us to explain the CPSR and get feedback from our members at each stage.

[5] We had previously updated our Field mission statement (in 2016) to "We work with others to make disciples of Jesus Christ." Strictly speaking, the phrase "we work with others" is about "how" we do our mission, not "what" our mission is. However, we still decided to include it in our Field mission statement to help us reflect on the changed context in Japan. Compared to the early days of OMF pioneering in unchurched areas, we are now blessed with Japanese churches with whom we can serve. Although the Christian population is still very small and churches face many challenges, it has grown by God's grace. We wanted to acknowledge this and the necessity of partnering in our renewed mission statement. So, when we came to plan our review, it was essential to hear from Japanese brothers and sisters about their views on these topics and on working in partnership with OMF.

[6] Many churches in Japan are struggling with declining numbers and the lack of pastors. Some say that planting new churches in this context is not appropriate and resources should be directed to stopping further closures of existing churches and helping them grow instead. This approach is usually called "revitalisation". At the Seventh Japan Congress on Evangelism in 2024, one of the key topics was the "2030 problem"—a prediction that, based on current trends, half of the Protestant churches in Japan will close by 2030.

[7] I was able to talk with those involved in a listening project on indigenous mission movements in a large CAN who advised from their experience that getting qualified help with the questions was essential.

[8] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 68.

[9] https://www.eidoresearch.com/. I give thanks for Peter Rowan who introduced us to Eido Research.

[10] See "Research Questions" in OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 8.

[11] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 57.

[12] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 10.

[13] We would like to express a huge thanks to Tyler Overton from Eido Research for his expertise, interest in, and commitment to this project.

[14] These have now been published as "OMF Japan – Who we are and what we do" and are available on the OMF Japan SharePoint site (OMF internal intranet for OMF Members only. Non-OMFers may inquire about access to this document via jp.jhqadmin@omfmail.com)

[15] Spring 2024 Members' Meetings Group Discussion questions (OMF Japan internal document).

[16] Chris Pain report to FLT, November 2021.

[17] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 39.

[18] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 5.

[19] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 10.

[20] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 10.

[21] See OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 12 for how this was measured.

[22] For the definitions of the models we considered, see OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 83.

[23] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 3.

[24] See OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 83 for how we defined the models for our research.

[25] Personal conversations with partners.

[26] See OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 81 for additional discussion about the research on models.

[27] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 39.

[28] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 55.

[29] "OMF Japan – Who we are and what we do," 13.

[30] OMF and Eido Research, "Church Planting and Partnering in Japan," 37–38.

[31] *宗教年鑑 令和6年版* (東京:文化庁, 2024), https://www.bunka.go.jp/tokei_hakusho_shuppan/hakusho_nenjihokokusho/shukyo_nenkan/pdf/r06nenkan.pdf and *宗教年鑑 令和6年版* (東京:文化庁, 2020), https://www.bunka.go.jp/tokei_hakusho_shuppan/hakusho_nenjihokokusho/shukyo_nenkan/pdf/r02nenkan.pdf (accessed 1 April 2025).

[32] See footnote 6.

[33] One missionary from Operation Mobilization estimates over 3000 churches either have no pastor or a pastor needing to retire, and only about 120 students graduate from Bible Colleges and enter pastoral ministry each year. (Personal Correspondence and Church Planting Roundtable presentation.)

[34] "OMF Japan – Who we are and what we do," 7.

[35] OMF Japan has grown from 104 to about 150 workers in a three-year period and Japan Evangelical Missionary Association (JEMA) reports a 5 percent increase in membership since 2021. Including OMF members, the increase is 11 percent. Extrapolated from the JEMA 2024 Membership statistics, JEMA 2025 Annual Report.

Shan Church Planting—A Story of Growth over the Past 25 Years

Andrew and Shona Goodman



Andrew Goodman is from the UK and married to Dr Shona Goodman, who comes from the Orkney Islands, Scotland. They have worked with OMF amongst the Shan/Tai people for twenty-eight years. The Shan/Tai mainly live in North Thailand, Southwest China, and Myanmar. Andrew has been involved in field leadership for several years.

Introduction

For five or six years, missionaries working with the Shan have said, "We are on the cusp of seeing a movement to Christ taking place amongst the Shan." When considering church planting among the Shan, it's crucial to remember those who shared the gospel in challenging times when the Shan people were less receptive. From 1863 to 1965, expat missionaries worked with Karen missionaries to reach the Shan and Shan-speaking minority groups in Burma.[1] The Shan work in Thailand began much later, in 1953. Over these decades, between 0.05 and 0.1 percent of Shan people have believed in Christ. Only since the late 1990s have the Shan people responded in groups instead of as individuals.

Millions of Shan people live in the Shan State of Myanmar, but hundreds of thousands have moved to Thailand. They refer to themselves as Tai, but other related groups also describe themselves as Tai. Within the population, subgroups such as Tai Long, Tai Nua, and Tai Mao can also make it difficult to explain who the Shan/Tai people are. The name Shan originates from the word Siam, the name of Thailand until 1939, so at the risk of oversimplification, they are the Thai-type people of Myanmar. The Shan people share a strong affinity with Thailand. Their language has the same roots as Thai, although they have a distinct script.

OMF's "modern" engagement with the Shan began in Maehongson Province, Thailand, in 1953. OMF missionaries used different strategies over the first forty years with the various people groups in North Thailand. Shan/Tai indifference to the gospel led to their reputation as being difficult to reach. The North Thailand missionaries promoted fellowship-wide "prayer thrusts", seeking breakthroughs amongst the Shan in 1959–60, 1975–76, and 1996. During that time, small groups of believers formed, and some believers died. A few "bright lights" amongst the believers partnered with the missionaries to reach their families, neighbours, and surrounding towns and villages. From 1973, teams of Phayao Bible Training Centre students travelled to Maehongson for outreaches to the Shan up to three times a year.

New Beginnings[2]

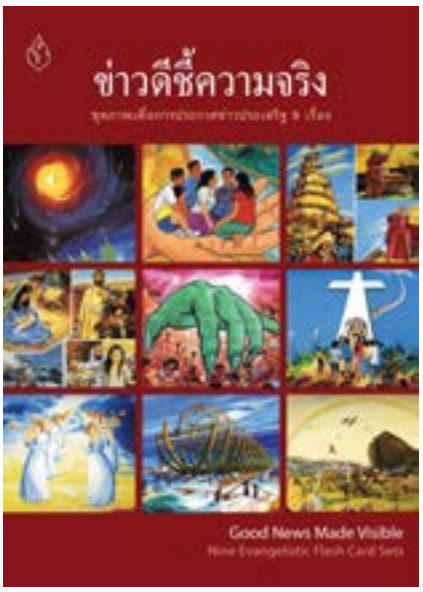
After thirty years of church planting in Thailand by OMF and other organisations that sowed seeds and lived incarnationally in Shan villages, small churches grew in five villages. Though they remained weak and compromised until the end of the 1990s, individual believers partnered with the missionaries to share the gospel. Over the years, these Christians who developed a strong faith became evangelists, Bible teachers, and preachers. Shan Christian growth and maturity followed the 2002 Shan Bible



First Shan/Tai church in Maehongson Province, Thailand, 1985

publication in the new script. OMF ministry in Maehongson provided a "seed bed" for a broader engagement with the Shan, which has begun to sprout over the past thirty years.

As Shan Christians matured, they partnered with OMF, independent missionaries, YWAM, Korean Presbyterians, and Finnish Pentecostals. Together, they worked to reach unreached



Bible posters

villages and plant churches in Thailand's Maehongson and Chiang Mai Provinces. As their faith grew, Shan Christians wrote tracts, Bible study materials, and worship songs for the growing church. In 1986, the OMF Thailand publishing house (Kanok Bannasan) printed a booklet of Bible posters, which missionaries and Shan believers used widely in evangelism among the Shan in Thailand.

Uncle Jing – Maehongson

Uncle Jing turned to the Lord in the 1980s in the village of Maesagyt after losing his leg in a logging accident in the forest. He joined OMF Shan missionaries in outreach to Palaan and other villages. Then, in the early 1990s, he began an outreach in Sam Mok village, south of Maehongson town, supported by the OMF Shan team. He joined the Maehongson church leadership team for fellowship and worship while continuing as an evangelist in the area.[3]

Simon – Maehongson and Mae Sai

In the mid-1980s, a young man called Beng came to the Lord through a Dutch missionary north of Napajat village in north Maehongson Province. As he grew in faith, he moved to Maehongson town to work as an evangelist. He wrote tracts and, later, helped an OMF missionary review Bible translation scripts for accuracy through back-translation. In the late 1990s, after he became a Thai citizen and chose a new name—Simon—he moved to Mae Sai town on the border between Chiang Rai Province and Myanmar. He worked to share the gospel with Shan migrants and helped to begin a Shan outreach and church.

Napajat Church, Maehongson

A young couple, Len and Ruth, grew in their faith when an OMF missionary couple moved to Napajat village in 1997. Len attended the New Tribes Mission Bible Training Centre in the south of Maehongson Province and returned more confident in his faith.

A young missionary family moved to Napajat the following year to begin Shan ministry. Ruth taught herself Shan literacy to teach the new missionaries. Other Christians in the growing church learned to read and write their heart language instead of worshipping in Thai. This encouraged interest in the gospel but also led to spiritual opposition.

Napajat village had more than five active spirit doctors who opposed the growing interest in the gospel. After the younger missionaries invited a group of believers and seekers to watch the *Jesus* film in the Shan language, a young man manifested signs of demonic possession. He suffered from heart and liver disease and could not work, yet it took several healthy adult men to restrain his supernatural strength in order to bring him into the church for help. Following three days of ministry by the local Christians and missionaries, the young man Jim gained freedom from demons and professed his faith in Christ. Partners in the UK, Switzerland, and America had prayed for Jim during this intense ministry time.

When the senior missionary couple retired two months later, the younger missionary couple partnered with Len and Ruth to disciple the new believers. Over two years, the church grew from seven baptised members to sixty, and Christians began sharing the gospel in nearby villages. Like in the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:5–8), responses varied. In most villages, people expressed "smile-veiled hostility" or indifference. In three or four villages, one or two people followed, and then, as family and village pressure opposed their faith, they returned to Buddhism and animism. However, the gospel took root in a remnant, the Christians grew, and their lives changed from a world-focus to a gospel-focus.

In 2024, an OMF missionary with decades of experience wrote a paper for the annual SEANET conference. In it, he described the early Shan believers as "one in a thousand"—those who persisted in faith despite persecution, discouragement, and isolation, with little or no support from other believers.[4]

As Ruth matured in her faith, she wrote Shan tracts and discipleship materials based on books in the New Testament. Initially, she translated the materials from Thai, but Ruth discovered she could write simple materials that used a "concrete thinking style" rather than one that was more conceptual. This suited the context and enabled new believers to engage with the Bible, asking simple questions and gradually challenging the Buddhist background worldview of the new believers.

Each year, the Christians in Maehongson gathered for a Shan believers' conference, during which they received teaching, worshipped together, and shared their testimonies to encourage one another. Churches invited villagers to meetings on Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, the annual children's camp, Christmas, and Easter. They shared the gospel, performed skits, and played video clips of the *Jesus* film or the Nativity. Funerals, which had been a very sensitive subject, also allowed Christians to share their hope in Jesus, whether the funeral was Christian or Buddhist. According to Shan custom, every family in the village sent a representative to the funeral.

One of Ruth's tracts reached a man sentenced for murder who was in prison near Korat, Nakhon Ratchasima, in Northeast Thailand. He wrote to the address on the back cover of the tract, asking for a Shan Bible and discipleship materials. Ruth sent him a Bible and Bible study books she had written. He began sharing the gospel in the prison, and a group of Shan-speaking prisoners gathered for Bible study and worship. Concerned about a gathering of dangerous inmates, the authorities dispersed them among three different prisons. In each location, new groups

formed and requested additional Bibles and resources. The initial believer grew in his faith, and his conduct changed. Over about five years, his status changed from Category A (dangerous to the public) to Category D (low risk), and he gained his freedom and returned home.

Lisu outreach in Shan villages in Myanmar

In 1999, Lisu churches in Myanmar contacted OMF for help to disciple Shan believers with whom they had shared the gospel. The Shan culture differed from the Lisu culture, and the Lisu church found the behaviour of the new Shan Christians unpredictable. They requested OMF missionaries engaged with the Shan to visit, teach them about Shan culture, and teach the Shan believers in one-week Bible seminars. This encouraged a broader vision of Shan coming to Christ in areas where expat foreigners could not enter. Previously, the vision was limited to Maehongson, a province in Thailand that borders the Shan and Kayah states in Eastern Myanmar.

New strategies

Facilitated partly by an organisational change within OMF, the Shan team developed a strategy plan targeting Unreached Tai groups. Field leadership gave a mandate to people group teams, and initiatives like the "Jonathan project" fuelled the vision.[5] This corresponded to the Shan team's vision of seeing Shan and other Tai-related groups respond to the gospel even in areas inaccessible to foreign missionaries.

Strategy to promote growth in church planting:

1. Develop a Strategy Plan.

2. Prioritise the prayer movement. The Shan missionaries from several organisations sent out regular short prayer bulletins and initiated a Month of Prayer for the Shan each October. This has continued for over twenty years.

3. Mobilise a team to serve in areas where the Shan people are present, such as Myanmar, Thailand, and elsewhere.

4. Cast a vision and build relationships with groups and churches adopting the Shan.

5. Focus on partnering with Near-Culture groups,[6] then concentrate on Shan leaders once they emerge.

6. Use the Shan Consultation (see below) to develop a vision for the movement and foster collaboration among agencies, Near-Culture groups, and the Shan people.

7. Employ social media in the increasing formats available.

8. Cast a vision among diaspora Shan in Thailand for ministry in Shan State, followed by annual seminars for returnees.



Shan consultation worship meeting

Shan Bible new translation

For thirty years, a committee of Bible translators and editors worked to translate the Bible into the new Shan script. They collaborated with the Bible Society to produce a Bible that could reach a broader population of Shan people than the old-script Shan Bible, which few could read. An OMF missionary who engaged with Shan believers in Maehongson Province was part of the committee that reviewed the translations for accuracy and corrected any spelling or grammar errors. The Bible Society printed the New Testament in 1997 and the complete Bible in December 2002.

Shan Consultation

The "Shan Consultation" was an initiative that missionaries working with the Shan/Tai developed in the early 2000s. Similar initiatives for people groups in Vietnam and Myanmar were concurrent. Its purpose was to gather workers from various organisations alongside key Shan nationals and people from neighbouring cultures. During the meetings, they prayed for the Shan, fostered an understanding of Shan culture and language, and discussed strategies for engaging with the Shan community. The Consultation encouraged a commitment to heart-language ministry by recognising that Shan people speak the Shan language, enabling the emphasis of the meeting to change over the years. Shan leaders from different areas gathered to discuss how to conduct weddings, funerals, and cultural festivals within Shan culture without compromising their faith. One notable outcome of this collaboration led to worshipping with Shan gongs and drums, which the first-generation Shan believers had rejected. This re-appropriation of Shan identity makes Christianity appear less foreign. The Shan gongs and drums have been integral to Shan culture long before the Shan/Tai people adopted Buddhism. Over the past twenty-five years, the meetings have transformed from an expat-led event—with translations provided for all sessions—to a gathering led by Shan individuals. Shan leaders from various ministry contexts now take the lead, while foreign workers have shifted to a more peripheral role. Shan Christians gather annually from diverse backgrounds and regions to worship, pray, and discuss Shan Christian cultural expressions. The Consultation has resulted in pulling together an informal cohort of Shan leaders from different backgrounds who respect each other and can collaborate on various ministry projects.

Month of prayer, Shan prayer guide, and "adopting" the Shan/Tai

Missionaries who met regularly for prayer and at the Shan Consultation envisioned a movement to Christ across the Shan State of Myanmar, North Thailand, and anywhere the Shan/Tai dispersed. This vision began initiatives like the

Month of Prayer for the Shan/Tai and a booklet of thirty daily prayers for the Shan/Tai. As a result, churches in North America, Switzerland, Singapore, and Hong Kong "adopted" the Shan. They have focused their prayers on the Shan/Tai and supported ministries such as AIDS care, radio work, and work with Shan youth. Over the past decade, the churches have sent short-term teams to experience the ministry context. Shan team missionaries have visited these churches and continue to report progress to them. Each October, several mission groups working with the Shan produce *31 Days of Prayer* Facebook posts and emails with information, prayer requests, and a picture. Thousands of people of various nationalities worldwide receive these posts each year.



Day 1
Faith Comes From Hearing!
In April we had the opportunity to visit a 100-year-old Wa lady named Grandmother Lee in Taunggyi, the capital of Myanmar's Shan state. She was so excited to speak with us in Shan and was pleased to hear the gospel for the first time on Shan radio. For many Shan people, especially in the war-torn nation of Myanmar, the radio is the only way people are receiving the gospel, because the roads are no longer safe to travel to reach many villages. Please pray that Grandmother Lee will accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and Saviour and be able to share the good news with her family and friends. Pray for radio ministry, that people would hear the good news and believe in Jesus even when there are no other Christians around to tell them.

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." (Romans 10:17)

Sample page from the Month of Prayer for the Shan/Tai

Over the years, this prayer guide has provided a resource base for prayer, finance, and personnel. OMF mobilised a team that spans three countries and facilitates an effective witness among the Shan. Initially, they focused on cultural groups with a strong historical connection, such as the Lisu, which continues to be part of the picture. However, over the past fifteen years, a group of Shan leaders with a collaborative mindset and relationships formed through the Shan Consultation has shifted the balance. Therefore, the expat initiative has gained momentum within the Shan community. The role of the expat in fostering a movement among the Shan increasingly leans towards a supportive or "walking with" role.

Radio ministry

In 2007, a mature Shan Christian, Leng Peung, partnered with OMF to develop a radio ministry. FEBC and local Thai radio stations broadcast the programs, and Shan church planters work with Leng Peung to follow up with interested contacts in Thailand and Myanmar. The radio ministry shares the gospel, teaches the Bible, and encourages interaction between believers. It continues to be a valuable resource that reaches areas remote from Christian contexts. The discipleship teachings from the radio broadcasts recorded on CDs and micro-SD cards support the broadcasts. Leng Peung uses a chronological approach[7] to teaching the Bible and Shan idiom to provide an entrance to further sharing.

Highlights

Ollie and his family were UNHCR refugees in a camp near Maesot, Thailand. After hearing the Shan radio broadcasts, he became convinced of the gospel's truth. Torn about whether he should seize the opportunity to move to a "third country" through the UNHCR, he became troubled by the thought of Shan people dying without knowing Jesus. Eventually, Ollie's family moved to Bangkok. In 2013, Ollie led thirty-five Shan people to Christ across various locations. Later, Ollie felt called to return to Myanmar to share the gospel with his family and friends. After returning to Myanmar, Ollie travelled over a wide area around his hometown in Shan State, sharing the gospel and discipling believers in the churches planted. He continues to follow up with contacts from the radio broadcast ministry. Several of those who Ollie led to Christ in Bangkok have followed his vision to return to the Shan State and to partner in seeing churches planted.



The radio recording studio



Media used since the radio broadcasts began

Terry, a young tour guide in Myanmar, received a Bible from a short-term team. Two years later, he moved to Thailand and came to faith. Leng Peung and other Christians discipled him, and he worked on the radio project for a time. Later, he returned to Myanmar to see his family. When he shared the gospel in his village, his neighbours and friends welcomed him and began listening to the radio broadcasts. Since then, Terry has developed a church planting team. They have planted two churches and are sharing the gospel in fifteen to twenty nearby villages inaccessible to foreigners. One church has established another church three hours away by road.

Depressed and suicidal, an older man began listening to cassette tapes of Buddhist teachings. He sought a teaching that "didn't lead to death." As he swept his porch one morning, he accidentally knocked his radio cassette player onto the floor. The impact switched the setting from the tape recorder to the radio exactly at the wavelength of the FEBC Shan Christian broadcast while it was airing, and he heard about Jesus Christ. He continued to listen to the radio broadcasts for three years before he called the radio station. When Leng Peung visited him, he confessed his faith in the Lord Jesus as his Saviour.

Three other Shan believers, Justin, Sam, and Nancy, also work in the Shan State to share the gospel with their neighbours and surrounding areas. They travel around the area nearest their home base, sharing the gospel and discipling those who believe. Each believer who shares the gospel encourages those they disciple to do the same. These Shan Christians work as a team in a network to reach unreached areas. They conduct workshops to train keen Christians and encourage them to learn to share the gospel. Each year, expat workers and Shan co-workers travel to lead and contribute to workshops to build up the Shan church in Myanmar. The local believers are taking the lead with these initiatives.

Signs and wonders

The retired colonel lay unconscious, dying of liver failure in a Thai hospital. A missionary prayed for the colonel, convinced that the Lord wished to spare his life. He called a colleague to pray in agreement for the Lord to heal the colonel and grant him another five years. The colonel recovered and lived to plant a church in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand. This church has continued to grow following the colonel's passing thirteen years after the prayer for another five years.

A short-term worker went to teach English in a remote Shan village near the border with Myanmar. He shared the Bible story of the woman who bled for twelve years (Luke 8:43–48), unsure of its appropriateness but convinced that the Lord gave him this passage. Later, a woman pondered the story's message at home. She, too, suffered from bleeding, and the doctors could not help. How could she touch Jesus' garment? She saw a picture of Jesus on a calendar on the wall and touched his garment while praying for healing. The following day, she shared her testimony of healing, and its news spread throughout the village.

Recently released from prison, Leeanne sat with her sister, preparing peanuts for planting. They talked about their lives, and Leeanne felt despondent. In prison, she had heard someone share about a Saviour, Jesus, but knew little about him. As they chatted, a telephone number appeared on Leeanne's notification screen. She didn't recognise the number, so she phoned to find out who wanted to contact her. The Shan radio broadcaster, Leng Peung, answered, but he hadn't called her. She asked him about Jesus, and he said he would send someone to her village. He contacted Ollie, who travelled eight hours to share the gospel with Leeanne and her village. A church of forty believers grew over the following year. Then, a nearby village also heard the gospel and a church of thirty believers grew there.

Spiritual opposition

After Jim's spiritual battle with and deliverance from demons and reception of Jesus Christ, others have had similar experiences, both in Napajat and other places.

A young person with AIDS returned to Napajat from Bangkok, having dabbled in demonic spiritual experiences. His violent behaviour frightened his family and neighbours, so they called for the local spirit priest. He could not free the man, so they chained him to the wall to protect him and themselves and asked the church for help. A group of mature Christians and missionaries transferred the young man to the church to deliver him from the spirits in the name of Jesus. After two days, he was sane and confessed faith in Jesus Christ, but within the week, his AIDS-related illness worsened, and he died in hospital knowing he belonged to Jesus.

In Chiang Mai, Eve showed evidence of demonic possession, the demons tormenting her and speaking through her in a voice that was not hers. A local Shan pastor and a missionary ministered to her for over two days, and through their prayers in the name of Jesus, she was set free. As the demons left her, she received the Lord Jesus as her Saviour. Seeing how changed his wife was, her husband also believed. Eve is now a vibrant Christian in the local church and shares her faith with others.

The present context

Over the past twenty years, Shan Christians and expat missionaries have developed Shan church planting with reproducible strategies. Thailand's Shan migrants, fleeing Myanmar's unrest, demonstrate a more welcoming attitude towards the gospel than settled Shan communities. In Myanmar, Burmese military and ethnic conflicts have divided the Shan State for sixty years. Issues of land ownership, taxation, and recruitment to various armed groups have caused widespread displacement both within Myanmar and neighbouring countries.

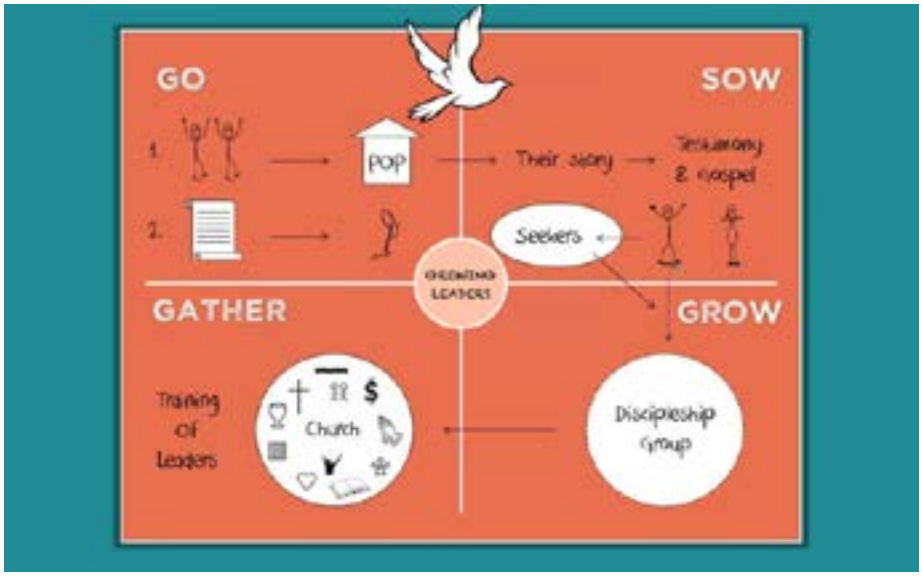
Lisu churches have partnered with expat workers to plant Shan churches in northern Shan State, providing annual discipleship and evangelism training. Although only 0.3 percent of Shan people are Christians (up from 0.1 percent in the 1990s), increasing turmoil has led to greater receptiveness to the gospel. More recently, Shan leaders have taken the lead in spreading the gospel. Shan believers are now leading Lisu to Christ and warning Lisu and others about the threat of false teachings and cults.

War-torn and weary

The present civil war in Myanmar began on 1 February 2021 when the Myanmar military overthrew the elected government. Since then, ethnic militias have taken sides to fight for or against the Myanmar military, and the people of Myanmar have risen in revolt against the oppressive regime. The generation that lived through the failed

popular uprising in 1988 supported the younger generations, making this a multi-age, multi-ethnic revolt.

This sets the background for recent church planting among the Shan/Tai people. Thousands of refugees have fled their homes as soldiers from the Myanmar forces or other ethnic militias have destroyed towns and villages in the fight to overcome their enemies. Recent enforcement of conscription by the Myanmar government's army and the ethnic militias/armies has caused increasing numbers of young men and women to flee the country. The breakdown of education, healthcare, and everyday work has led to rapid inflation and increased crime.



Four Fields method used in IBCM training[8]

Even in the dense rain forests on the border between Myanmar and Thailand, the Myanmar army bombs refugee settlements to destroy the morale of the people. Neighbouring countries have taken in refugees, but lack the resources to cope with the influx of people fleeing from a disintegrating society in a nation at war. The war has led to a boom in opium and amphetamine production, devastating lives both within the country and in all the nations affected by increasing drug use.

Strategies for church planting

Training

The Indigenous Biblical Church Movement (IBCM) training for missionaries and Shan/Tai colleagues has fostered a united multi-cultural team reaching out to Shan-speaking individuals in Thailand and Myanmar. Expat workers and Shan/Tai colleagues share a common vision of seeing Shan people worship God in their own language in a culturally meaningful manner and engage in efforts to plant more Shan/Tai churches. IBCM training encourages a reproducible church-planting model in which believers in each church reach out to those around them.

In evangelism, the "Four Fields" refer to a framework encompassing four key stages in the disciple-making process: Entry (initial engagement), Gospel presentation (sharing the good news), Discipleship (training new believers), and Church Formation (gathering disciples into a community). Essentially, this framework focuses on reaching individuals distant from God, sharing the gospel with them, nurturing them as disciples, and building a church community.

Many organisations are working and praying for Church Planting Movements (CPM) and have promoted the Four Fields method as a valuable and reproducible way of encouraging church growth.

In Myanmar, Shan believers lead this work in areas where foreign missionaries cannot enter. In North Thailand, Shan believers work alongside expat workers from several mission groups to reach unreached villages and towns across an increasing number of provinces. Each week, teams travel to remote communities where the influx of refugees since the war began in 2021 have increased the Shan/Tai population. They share the gospel, sing, share testimonies, and worship God with the new believers they are discipling. With each meeting, those searching draw nearer to faith, and some believe. The IBCM model encourages lay ministry, so the Shan Christians baptise the new believers. The team uses hsocial media to allow a widespread audience to participate in these meetings, share the gospel, and disciple believers.

In every generation of outreach to the Shan/Tai people, more Shan-speaking minorities have turned to the Lord than the Shan. In Burma during the 1800s, the movement of the Kachin people to Christ began with American Baptist outreach to the Shan, which brought Karen missionaries to work alongside them. Because of the Karen kinship ties with the Kachin, the gospel spread more rapidly among the Kachin than among the Shan/Tai. Similarly, in Toungoo, Mongnai, and Taunggyi provinces, the Pa-O and other Karen groups (including Red and Black Karen) were more responsive to the gospel than the Shan/Tai.[9]

In Kengtung, American Baptist missionaries reached out to the Shan/Tai. The Lahu and Wa people travelled hundreds of miles to hear of the Creator God they'd been waiting for. In each generation, their sages shared that one day, white men with a Holy Book would come to share about the true God. News of a white man with a Holy Book filtered through to remote villages in the early 1900s. The movement of Lahu and Wa people to Christ lasted over twenty years, and tens of thousands became Christians. Meanwhile, the Shan/Tai church had fewer than twenty believers.[10]

Today, many Shan-speaking Pa-O, Palaung, and Black Karen (Riang) are becoming Christians during outreaches to the Shan. We praise God for this, but we also pray that more Shan/Tai people will respond to the gospel and join the body of Christ.

Lay-led ministry

As gifted evangelists, preachers, songwriters, and leaders emerge within the Shan Christian community, they take on the roles once held by missionaries. This reinforces the idea that a Shan church exists among those who believe "to be Shan is to be Buddhist." Currently, no Shan Bible colleges offer courses in the Shan language. If a Shan Christian wants to attend Bible college, they will need English, Thai, or Burmese for their lessons. This situation can create a

disconnection from the Shan community unless the individual is resolute in maintaining their heritage. Despite their lack of formal training, God has called eloquent biblical preachers, teachers, and evangelists within the Shan church. The radio ministry discipleship lessons provide informal training and, besides personal Bible study, a foundation for believers to build on. Missionary-led training weeks, the Shan Believers Conference, and the Shan Consultation contribute to spiritual growth. There are now several Bible scholars within the multi-cultural team of missionaries reaching the Shan/Tai. This is a step towards formal training for Shan believers in the Shan language.

The IBCM approach encourages Christians to share their testimonies with neighbours, friends, and family. As small groups emerge, local teachers travel to meet with these groups to disciple them and promote further outreach to neighbouring villages. The growing Christians baptise new believers and teach them to share their testimonies within their networks of family and friends. As the groups expand, small churches form with regular worship meetings. Posters with Bible stories continue to be helpful.

Media

Since the initial adoption of teaching tapes, media usage has surged over the past twenty years. The growing popularity of mobile phones with SD card slots has enabled the Shan team to distribute SD cards pre-loaded with audio content, the *Jesus* film, and discipleship materials. Since then, social media posts and videos have expanded the audience to thousands. Various groups have uploaded the 2002 Shan language Bible onto mobile phone app stores and computer Bible applications. This has made the Bible accessible for many Shan people who lack access to the printed version of the Bible.

New technology has revolutionised translation techniques, enabling a team of missionaries and Shan co-workers to update the Cushing[11] Shan Bible. In the 1880s, American Baptist missionary to the Shan, Josiah Nelson Cushing, translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into the Shan language. His Bible, written in the old Shan script, is illegible to modern Shan people. Only Shan language scholars and dedicated Shan Buddhist monks can read the old script now. An updated format of the Shan language has improved readability. The 2002 Shan Bible translation, written and reviewed by hand and early computers, took thirty years from start to publication. However, the translation committee used the Good News version of the Bible. As the Shan church expands, the believers seek a Bible version more faithful to the original Hebrew and Greek. The recent computer-aided transliteration of Cushing's Bible from the old to the modern script has taken a fraction of the time to produce the 2002 translation.

A work in progress

Church planting among the Shan is a work in progress; hence, this paper omits a conclusion. Efforts continue to reach unreached Shan communities. Individual believers and teams share the gospel, resulting in people who believe, are baptised, and grow in faith. Though the Shan church remains small, it is growing faster than ever. Alongside this growth, the Pa-O, Palaung, and Riang churches are also taking shape. God is at work as Christians in many nations pray, mission organisations partner in gospel ministry, and more Shan believers share the gospel with Shan and other ethnic groups.

Growing in faith and scriptural authority, Shan believers realise the future of their church is in their hands. No one is better equipped with language and cultural skills to reach Shan people than the Shan believers. As they share with their own people, they see the need to share with other Shan-speaking groups. So it is our vision that they shall be witnesses to Jesus "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). **MRT**

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[1] Shwe Wa Maung, *Burma Baptist Chronicle* (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, 1963); A. T. Houghton, *Dense Jungle Green* (London: Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society, 1937).
[2] Names changed for security reasons.
[3] North Thailand Roundup December 1989, February 1990, May 1990, June/July 1990, September/October 1990.
[4] Neel Roberts, "Belonging through Supernatural and Relational Experiences," SEANET XXV, Chiang Mai, Thailand, February 2024.
[5] The Jonathan Project originated as an "in house" OMF training program that became independent of OMF. The training focused on strategic planning and reproducible methods for church planting with an aim to catalyse Church Planting Movements (CPMs).
[6] Near-culture groups are people with the same root language or groups who speak the same language and live near the target people.
[7] Teaching through the Old Testament and then the New Testament to ensure the believers understand the salvation message in biblical history.
[8] Kenneth Hayward, "A Brief Evaluation of the Four Fields Method," *Church Life and Ministry* (blog) 4 March 2022, https://abwe.org/blog/brief-evaluation-four-fields-method/ (accessed 20 March 2025).
[9] Hayward, "A Brief Evaluation of the Four Fields Method."
[10] Harold Mason Young, *To the Mountain Tops: A Sojourn Among the Lahu of Asia* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2013).
[11] St. John Wallace, *Josiah Nelson Cushing: Missionary and Scholar* (Rangoon, Burma: American Baptist Missionary Press, 1912), https://archive.org/details/josiahnelsoncush00stjo (accessed 7 April 2025).



Small group meeting



Lay ministry baptism

A Proposed Discipleship Framework in the Filipino Marketplace Context:
The Case of All Because of Christ Fellowship Spiritual Development Program (SDP)

Rafael V. Alfonso



Dr. Rafael "Rafa" Alfonso and his wife, Lou, are among the founders and movers of All Because of Christ Fellowship Spiritual Development Program (SDP) of the company featured in the paper. This SDP has been in existence for over a decade. Rafa started the same SDP ministry in Habitat for Humanity Philippines at Makati City in 2021. He is the head pastor of All Because of Christ Fellowship – Florence at Taguig City, and a pulpit minister in Marikina Faith Bible Church in Marikina City, Christ Jesus Our Lord and Savior Ministry in Pandi, Bulacan, and Hill Crest Family Life Church in Quezon City. Rafa earned his MDiv in Pastoral Studies and DMin at Asia Theological Seminary, where he currently serves as the OIC of the DMin program. He is the President and CEO of The Latria Construction Corporation.

Introduction: Context and rationale of the research

The marketplace has been an open mission field among Christians. Not only is it made up of a growing population in need of the gospel, but Christians also spend most of their time in offices giving them more opportunity to share the gospel and make disciples. Unfortunately, some faith communities do not see the marketplace as a place for disciple-making. Some institutional churches erect a divide between the sacred and the secular and overlook marketplace ministry altogether as they focus on the spiritual development of Christians inside the church. Other Christians who ventured into the task found out that applying conventional church discipleship may not work in the marketplace. Marketplace ministry is an entirely different ball game, as they say. The culture, language, and values of the discipleship framework need to fit in the context of the business sector. Many zealous disciples were disheartened due to the lack of preparation and available resources for starting a Filipino marketplace ministry.

Given the said issues, this research proposes a framework that could serve as a guide for discipleship that is intentional, purposeful, and effective in the Filipino marketplace context. Furthermore, this essay illustrates how a discipleship program primarily intended for the marketplace context can produce a church-planting ministry both in urban and rural settings. While this is written primarily in and for the Philippine context, the author recognizes that there are aspects of the research that could resonate with the wider global audience. These include the emphasis on the holistic nature of God's mission and the value of taking into consideration the cultural situatedness of the life experiences of the target people in any attempt to construct an effective discipleship ministry.

The framework discussed below is informed by relevant insights from the experiences of the leaders of the All Because of Christ Fellowship Spiritual Development Program (SDP), the spiritual formation program for employees institutionalized within the human resources department of a corporation based in Metro Manila. This study aimed to answer the question: *How can the experience of All Because of Christ Fellowship SDP help develop a discipleship framework in the Filipino marketplace context?* To produce a discipleship framework, a phenomenological research method was employed for this study. This method aims to describe a phenomenon as accurately as possible from the perspectives of the people involved.[1] In addition, this method considers the narratives or life experiences of the respondents as "text" from which new information and meanings can be derived.[2] The experiences of the leaders of All Because of Christ Fellowship SDP are a substantial resource for constructing a discipleship framework suitable for the Filipino marketplace. But before we consider that, allow me to provide some biblical, theological, and cultural insights on which the project of contextualizing a discipleship framework for a Filipino marketplace rest.

Marketplace ministry and Filipino values

Marketplace: A potential space for disciple making

The marketplace is something that should be properly understood by Christians seeking to advance the gospel in all spheres of life. Neil Johnson defines the marketplace as "the forum through which human economic commerce is conducted."[3] Its focus on economic commerce makes it a critical and comprehensive area of ministry, not merely because of its great potential of becoming a source of funds, but because of it being a melting

pot of all sorts of people. Johnson even describes the marketplace as perhaps the only institution that touches, directly or indirectly, virtually every

> person on planet Earth. In one way or another, it is a pervasive part of every society, culture and people group. It is found in the midst of every religion and every political system in every historic era.[4]

Being a place where various kinds of people interact with each other almost every day of the week, it is a paramount task for Christian ministers to connect with them where they are. Nevertheless, connecting to the people is only a means to an end: that is, to advance the kingdom of God in the marketplace through making disciples.

Critical to this task of connecting with people is understanding and acknowledging the various cultures that shape the perspectives and ways of life of these people. Since culture is a broad concept that is beyond the scope of this research, it will suffice to deal with one aspect of culture—values. Among other cultural elements, this research chose to focus on values since a good amount of Filipino literature dealing with the interface of culture, marketplace, and faith do so by emphasizing the important role of Filipino values in understanding a people's context.[5]

Filipino values: Interface among culture, faith, and marketplace

At this juncture, it is helpful to present various definitions of "values", especially as they (1) undergird and direct the perspectives and behaviors of a certain group of people, particularly as they relate with each other, and (2) determine what is desirable, acceptable, right, and important to them.[6] Writing about values in the context of management, Andres proposed the concept of "Management by Values (M.B.V.)". This promotes the practice of presenting and clarifying the values of the company to the employees so they can see whether their values are aligned with those of the company. This is an important prerequisite to the implementation of projects and programs in pursuit of the company's goals, which if sidelined, might cause unnecessary tensions stemming from miscommunication of values.

Along the same line, F. Landa Jocano understands values as "standards against which actions are organized and experiences are interpreted and evaluated."[7] For Jocano, understanding the values of the people, especially the employees, should be a primary task for managers, since management at its core is about overseeing and mediating people's interaction within an organization in pursuit of the institutional goals.[8] Being cognizant of the people's values, the manager should be able to harness the people's strengths that will lead to harmony within the organization, contribute to the attainment of the organization's goals, and avoid unnecessary tensions that might arise from differences or conflict of values.

Following the above-mentioned definitions, it is now appropriate to present the salient Filipino values before we proceed to discuss how these values, in the context of the marketplace, interface with faith, particularly in the pursuit of developing a discipleship framework in the Filipino marketplace.

A pertinent piece of literature on Filipino values in an organizational setting is Joel Ortiz's study on the effects of cultural values on decision-making. He observes that Filipinos put primary importance on values identified with personal relationships. These values are: "smooth interpersonal relationships, *makadios*, *kabuuan*, personalism, go between, *awa*, *pakikisama*, social mobility, economic security, *utang na loob*, familism, *amor propio*, euphemism, authoritarianism and regionalism."[9]

How do we make sense of these Filipino values, especially if we are considering them in the process of developing a discipleship framework in the context of the Filipino marketplace? Vitaliano Gorospe is insightful in this matter. In analyzing and appreciating Filipino values, he says that it is incorrect to think that these are not shared by other cultures (i.e., not universal); rather, he notes that "the difference lies in the way these elements are ranked, combined, or emphasized."[10] Concerning this, he argues that it is important to acknowledge that "Filipino values are clustered around core values like social acceptance, economic security, social mobility and are always found in a definite context of a set of circumstances."[11]

In essence, the implications of Gorospe's insights to this research's goal of developing a discipleship framework in the marketplace cognizant of Filipino values are the following: (1) we can be open to ideas and models of discipleship outside our culture, provided that we become critical of the value system that undergirds those ideas and models; and (2) we should become aware of our core values (i.e., deeper motivations and/or ultimate goals) that bring other values together and direct our actions.[12]

An important addition to this is Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano's comment on the interface between the Christian faith and Filipino values. She says that as Filipino Christians, we have to identify and help make flourish those that could be considered good and beautiful in our culture; and on the other hand, we must liberate ourselves from those "that cannot pass the test of clear biblical mandate."[13]

In a nutshell, the marketplace is a sphere of life that should be taken seriously by ministers seeking to advance the gospel of the kingdom of God. A crucial task for these ministers is to understand the values of the people in the marketplace to determine what is fundamental in their lives. For a discipleship framework to be effective, therefore, ministers should be cognizant of the cultural elements in a certain context that need to be cultivated, challenged, and transformed by the gospel.

… the marketplace is a sphere of life that should be taken seriously by ministers seeking to advance the gospel of the kingdom of God. A crucial task for these ministers is to understand the values of the people in the marketplace to determine what is fundamental in their lives.

Discipleship

No one will argue against the idea that discipleship is one of the key elements of church growth. It helps the church to multiply and expand its ministries. In my observation, churches in the Philippines that have strong discipleship programs are really growing in terms of their numbers. However, one can argue that numbers are not the only criteria for assessing whether discipleship is both biblically based and properly focused. But what is biblical discipleship? This is the question that we seek to answer before we can develop a discipleship framework for the Filipino marketplace. Lua's research on the contextualization of discipleship ministry in the Philippine setting includes a general overview of the development of discipleship from the Old Testament to the New Testament. While the term "discipleship" is a modern invention, we can still glean biblical principles, particularly on what it means to follow Jesus, that could serve as the bedrock upon which a discipleship framework can be built.

In the Old Testament, the teacher-follower system is present in some subgroups within Israel. This gave birth to the later rabbinic master-disciple relationship, which in turn became the basis of the formal educational system for training rabbis.[14] Meanwhile, the term "disciple" in the New Testament is derived from the Greek word *mathētēs*, which refers to an apprentice of some trade or a student of a mentor.[15] This relationship implies personal attachment.[16] The expected relationship between disciples and teacher is that the disciples were expected to submit to their teacher's wisdom and become like a servant performing all kinds of menial tasks for his master. However, Jesus flips this model of discipleship. Even though he is master and teacher, he taught his disciples that the way to have the greatest impact was not by exerting power and authority over others, but by laying aside personal aspiration to become their servant. Furthermore, Lua observes discipleship strategies from the example of Jesus and his disciples. These include concentration on small groups, life-to-life transference, the importance of community life, formal teaching, on-the-job training, and holistic approach to learning.[17]

What is the essence of biblical discipleship? Fundamentally, biblical discipleship must be based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. N. T. Wright believes that "the true Jesus is summoning us to follow him, to a life of discipleship."[18] I agree with Wright that Jesus is calling us to a life of discipleship; that discipleship includes the totality of our being. Discipleship is not simply adopting a random assortment of facts and propositions and behavior. It is the process by which a person becomes more like Jesus by observing Jesus' teachings and following Jesus himself.



Speaking of discipleship in the marketplace, David Gill's book, *Workplace Discipleship 101*, argues that the term "workplace discipleship" is preferable than "faith at work" because the former connotes "active obedience to Jesus Christ as shown in our convictions, decisions, and actions in the workplace."[19] This does not mean, however, that we should try to reform the organization; rather, the focus is on discipleship of workers.[20] Furthermore, he views workplace discipleship as an alignment of our work to God's work, which implies bringing the meaning and purposes of God to our work. "It inserts our daily work into the grand cosmic story of God and humanity."[21] If this is the case, being a disciple of Jesus in the marketplace implies that there will be times when Christian values will clash with the "business as usual" principle, and that our work as Christian employees will be seen as a contribution to advancing God's kingdom on earth, in particular in our respective companies.[22]

The necessity of a discipleship framework for the Filipino marketplace

In view of the above cited works, knowing some biblical and theological basis for discipleship, while a requirement, still needs a supporting structure and system if we aim to come up with a relevant, actionable, and sustainable discipleship ministry. For this research, there is a need to have a discipleship framework for the Filipino marketplace. As early as 1994, the Christian community had already been challenged to begin developing ministries in the marketplace. According to Dr. Isabelo Magalit, the recognition of the necessity to include the marketplace as a Christian mission was not a theological shift but an acceptance of additional responsibility.[23]

This shows that the Filipino Christian community had recognized the need to reach out to the marketplace and accepted the role to expand their ministries in the business world by the early 1990s. However, the only thing that was clear was the acceptance of the challenge. Of course, there are churches and other groups that have been conducting their respective spiritual activities (e.g., Bible Studies and Prayer Meetings) in the marketplace. Nevertheless, there is an apparent need for a discipleship framework that is contextualized for people in the marketplace. So, the main objective of this paper is to present a discipleship framework that is contextually and intentionally designed for Filipino marketplace discipleship ministry. Hopefully, the ideas presented here will resonate with a wider global audience that is seeking to do the same in other contexts.

The All Because of Christ Fellowship SDP experience: A proposed discipleship framework for the Filipino marketplace

Now that some foundational insights have been provided in the preceding sections, I will respond to the main research question of this essay: *How can the experience of All Because of Christ Fellowship Spiritual Development Program (SDP) help develop a discipleship framework in the Filipino marketplace context?* I will proceed by presenting the components of the discipleship framework for a Filipino marketplace context based on the

> … there is an apparent need for a discipleship framework that is contextualized for people in the marketplace.

experience of SDP. These components include how SDP is implemented, its biblical/theological foundations, the values that shape its convictions, and the behaviors of its members. I will add some proposed lessons on how the distinctives of SDP can serve as a source of guide for other Filipino marketplace ministries.

How is the All Because of Christ Fellowship as a company's SDP being implemented?

Unlike common Filipino evangelical workplace ministries, SDP's uniqueness primarily lies in it being a legitimate insider ministry of the company. In other words, it is institutionalized as part of a corporation's human resource department's programs to take care of employees' spiritual well-being. As a legitimate insider ministry, SDP was able to call a worship service fellowship every second and fourth Wednesday of the month and use the first and third Wednesday to run a session to equip the core group. The worship services and the equipping sessions are held after office hours, making it more acceptable in the eyes of the corporation, for SDP does not have to compete, or even take the precious man-hours of the employees so they can attend the fellowship. The worship service on Wednesday starts at 6:00 p.m. and ends at 7:15 p.m. SDP ensures that it honors the time schedule of the fellowship since it is truly difficult to get the employees to commit to attend. An additional mid-week meeting can be challenging to add to a person's schedule, depending on workload, distance of their home from work, and family constraints.

Knowing that more is involved than simply showing up at every fellowship and sharing the gospel of Jesus, and that discipleship involves sharing of life together, SDP calls on everyone who attends the fellowship to join and participate in a discipleship small group. SDP now has twenty-seven small groups across the company that meet at times that are convenient for their members. So, basically a small group discipleship meeting is scheduled every day inside the corporation, so that members can study and share the word of God, and pray for the company, its leaders, and for each other. Through the small groups, the employees' faith in God and their relationships with their co-employees inside and outside of SDP grew. This discipleship happens during lunchtime and/or after office hours and even during weekends. Special fellowships like parenting seminars and biblical leadership seminars are among the many other seminar topics that SDP offers. These are open for all the interested employees of the company and are held on a Saturday to avoid conflict with the corporation's schedule.

With the acknowledgement of the human resource department, SDP was able to extend its pastoral care to the entire company, from praying for the sick and hospital visitation, to dedication of business centers and company showrooms. SDP has been an instrument not only in bringing the word of God to the people in the company but has also been a channel of the blessings and love of God in the company. SDP provided help to the company's members, addressing the needs brought about by the pandemic or other health issues. It extended its ministry even in mission work outside of the company by supporting pastors, ministry workers, and orphanages with financial assistance and even giving out cash assistance to some of the children of the rank-and-file employees.

How can the theological foundations of All Because of Christ Fellowship inform a discipleship framework for the Filipino marketplace?

Based on the experiences of the selected SDP members, the following are the primary theological foundations that have been instrumental in shaping their perspectives and behavior as disciples in the marketplace: (1) "leave it up to God" mentality, (2) don't dichotomize between faith and work, and (3) see work as worship. The first one might be interpreted as being similar to the Filipino cultural value *Bahala na* (*Bathala na*), which is commonly associated with the Filipino's powerlessness and fatalism.[24] In one sense, that might be true, especially if we are talking about the sense of powerlessness. However, the experiences of the SDP members could not be interpreted as a form of fatalism. Rather, their "leave it up to God" mentality strengthened their resolve to face the seemingly insurmountable challenges at work, since surrendering their cares to God allowed them to have peace and assurance that he will carry them through.



The second theological foundation is the most pronounced among the three theological foundations, as far as their testimonies are concerned. One respondent described his life as being similar to "living in boxes" prior to learning about the non-dichotomy of faith and work. By this, he meant that he was used to compartmentalizing his perspectives and behaviors, depending on whether he is, for instance, at work or at home. SDP helped him and the other respondents realize that being a Christian or a disciple of Jesus meant that faith is not a private matter; instead, it encompasses the whole of life, especially their life at work where they spend most of their waking hours.

The last foundation is closely related to the previous one. Since they now realized that faith can be integrated into their work, they now viewed their work as a form of their worship of God. In their experience, this does not imply that they have been spiritualizing every aspect of their life at work. Rather, it points to a reorientation of motivations and aspirations. If before they were motivated by personal gains, they are now doing their work with the same

or much more zeal and excellence because it is also a way to glorify God and have a good Christian testimony.

In view of all of these, a discipleship ministry in the Filipino marketplace context will do well if the learning opportunities provide space for people to be exposed to these kinds of theological reflections and spiritual practices. The holistic nature of faith must be emphasized, while the dichotomized view of sacred and secular should be challenged. There should be caution, however, against over-spiritualizing things. Bringing faith to work does not imply being lax in terms of fulfilling one's job responsibilities.



How can the primary values of All Because of Christ Fellowship inform a discipleship framework for the Filipino marketplace?

Going back to the definitions of values by Andres in the context of Filipino management, which emphasize that values guide people's perspectives and behaviors,[25] here are the prominent values that SDP members mentioned as part of their most significant learning:

1. Integrity
2. Humility
3. Community
4. Spiritual Disciplines: Bible Reading and Prayer

Making sense of these values from the lens of Ortiz's claim about Filipino culture in an organizational setting, which highlights the values that have something to do with personal relationships,[26] I can say that based on SDP's discipleship experience, these values are vital elements for a Filipino discipleship ministry in the context of the marketplace. Additionally, they are conducive to the nature of Christian discipleship because of the primacy it places on building relationships, forming character, and fostering spirituality.

It is worth mentioning that the values that the members learn from SDP not only benefit them in their personal walk with God, but also impact how they perform their duties as executives, supervisors, and/or rank-and-file employees. Common among their narratives are the experiences of the implications of these values—especially integrity and humility—in their relationship with their co-workers and the company as a whole. On the bright side, these values render them people of good character in the eyes of their coworkers and help them to have a more positive outlook, especially in the midst of challenges at work. At the same time, these values pit some of them against people in the company whose convictions and behaviors are contrary to the SDP members' Christian convictions.

Meanwhile, in terms of the last two values—community and spirituality—it is worth mentioning that SDP as a community of believers inside a company helped the members to have exemplars in terms of obedience to Christ and inspired them to live out their Christian values—especially integrity and humility—in the midst of some personal and institutional convictions that are at odds with the Christian faith. This conviction of the members is undergirded by one of SDP's core theological foundations—refusal to make a dichotomy between faith and life. Because of this theological perspective that SDP members have been hearing from services, small groups, and equipping sessions, they have become more intentional in striving to view their life at work as part of their Christian witness, or in the words of some of the respondents, "Our work is also our form of worship."

Speaking of the value of spirituality, particularly as expressed in Bible reading and prayer, some respondents narrated how SDP managed to inculcate in them the need and desire to seriously study God's words and include prayer in their lifestyle. At first, as the other respondents stated, these disciplines appeared to be taxing and even unnatural. Later, due to the example of the community and stories shared (like answered prayers and strength to navigate life at work and when facing family trials), they learned to really value personal and communal Bible reading and prayer.

How then can these values help inform a discipleship ministry in a Filipino marketplace context? Referring once again to Johnson's remark that Christians aiming to form discipleship ministries in the marketplace must be cognizant of the contexts of various people in the marketplace.[27] One window to the people's context is their values that inform their beliefs, convictions, standards of morality, and behavior.

Based on the experience of SDP, Christians seeking to establish or enhance their discipleship ministry in the Filipino marketplace will do well to ensure that the topics covered in learning sessions—for instance, services and Bible studies—are truly relevant to the needs and issues of the workers. It is also crucial that there is a community present inside the company from which both new and mature believers will see examples in terms of spirituality and character. While there is no problem with inviting outside pastors as guest speakers, employees from within the community who embody

It is crucial that there is a community present inside the company from which both new and mature believers will see examples in terms of spirituality and character.

the values that a discipleship ministry is trying to inculcate among the people should be allowed to share. A community embedded in the company that nurtures and serves as a conducive space for learning about faith and as a safe space for opening up one's heart is vital for a discipleship ministry in the context of the Filipino marketplace. The focus on learning in this manner reflects both the relational nature of Christian discipleship and the emphasis Filipino culture puts on learning with and in a community.

Lastly, a discipleship ministry in the marketplace is expected to seriously tackle issues pertaining to integrity and humility. It should be remembered that it is common in the corporate world or marketplace to strive to get ahead of everyone or to climb the ladder as quickly as possible. It is also common among people in the marketplace to feel the pressure to conform to that culture, which might render some Christian convictions—especially integrity and humility—impractical and even detrimental. Churches or pastors ministering to people in the marketplace must ask themselves, "How can we help people to obey Jesus Christ in the way of integrity and humility if it is very tempting to live according to the values of a dog-eat-dog world of the marketplace?"

What can other workplace ministries learn from the distinctives of the All Because of Christ SDP?

SDP as integrated into the corporation's human resource department programs

To begin with, I want to discuss the integration of SDP with the human resource department of the company. SDP was integrated and acknowledged as a core component of the program of the company through the human resource department to provide spiritual guidance to the employees of the company. Having the approval of the human resource department, the ministry can freely engage the employees in a public setting or in a one-on-one presentation of the gospel. The ministry can similarly tap into the resources and the support of the company as their partner in building and molding enlightened, competent, socially responsible employees of the company.

SDP's activities are not seen as programs only for the Christians in the company. They are also seen as an important tool for the company to address the spiritual and emotional well-being of their employees. This also helps the corporation address some of the issues their employees face, as the SDP and human resource department have the liberty to design their curriculum in line with the needs of the employees. By integrating SDP with the programs of the company's human resource department, it has secured its existence and continuity.

SDP as a church-planting ministry

Another distinctive feature of SDP ministry is its expansion. By the grace of the Lord, SDP has grown beyond the marketplace and is now visible in some local communities. The marketplace ministry birthed a worship service held at the Florence Condominium, Venice Mckinley Hill, Taguig City on the first Sunday of each month. This ministry primarily caters to SDP core team members and their families, unit owners, and tenants. This is a milestone for SDP that shows the tangible growth of the ministry. The Lord extends its impact outside of the premises of the company and its ministries reach even the households of SDP members. This only happens through the grace and mercy of the Lord who is able to make a community through the ministry of SDP. Growing from a simple Bible study to a community of faith in the marketplace, SDP has become a family of faith that serves and worships the Lord in church.

SDP has also expanded into church planting ministry. Two of the churches they have planted are both situated in the South—one in the province of Batangas and the other one in the province of Cavite. Both churches are led by the resident pastors of SDP. The church planting in Batangas started in 2022 and now serves the local community by having a regular Tagalog worship service every Sunday. For nearly two years, the Lord has been faithfully using the SDP core and its community to provide support for the ministry. The ministry in Cavite just started in 2024. The family of one of the members of the SDP works in this ministry. This church planting outreach is an extension of God's work in the lives of SDP members. This shows the impact of the SDP ministry on their members. They become more mission-oriented and passionate in doing the ministry of the Lord. These ministry expansions are tangible evidence of God's faithfulness and goodness to SDP.

SDP's strategy in funding for operational expenses

Lastly, the All Because of Christ SDP is unique in terms of its strategy in funding its operational expenses. Unlike a local church setting—where funds for operational expenses and other expenditures are derived from the regular collection of the members' tithes and offerings—SDP does not collect offerings as it is not allowed to collect money from the employees for that purpose. The integration of SDP with the human resource department of the company also binds them to follow the corporation's rules and regulations. But by the grace of the Lord, even with this setup, the needs of the ministry are sustained through the generosity of the SDP core group members. Although SDP does not have regular collections through tithes and offerings, the needs of the ministry are provided through voluntary sponsorships of the SDP core group. The SDP's pastoral council spearheads the sourcing of funds by first discussing and praying

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for the needs of the ministry. After that, the council communicates the need to the SDP core group. This does not mean that the SDP council demands the SDP core group members to give towards the needs of the ministry; rather, the needs are just presented to them. Because of the culture of generosity among the core group, they have faithfully contributed to cover necessary expenses. By the grace of the Lord, for ten years now, the needs of the SDP have always been provided through this process.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to offer an invitation to consider this discipleship framework for the Filipino marketplace as a contribution to the advancement of God's kingdom:

1. **Theological foundation.** There is no dichotomy between faith and work. This provides a framework for understanding the purpose and significance of work in the context of faith and spirituality.

2. **Integration of the discipleship ministry with the human resource department.** Integrating the ministry with the human resource department is of great help in securing the existence and continuity of the ministry in the corporation.

3. **Presence of structural support in the form of a pastoral council and core group.** The marketplace is too big for a single pastor to handle! These two groups will play vital roles in the function and success of the ministry by praying, providing guidance, support, and leadership to ensure the spiritual well-being of the flock. The pastoral council and the core group are essential for the smooth and fast operation of the SDP ministry, making sure that the ministry operates within the boundaries of company policy.

4. **Learning opportunities: Equipping sessions, small groups, and worship services.** Equipping sessions are for deeper and more comprehensive learning opportunities for spiritual formation, character building, and ministry skills development of the core group. Small groups are for life-to-life sharing and for accountability. Worship services are designed for larger audiences, regardless of their faith commitments.

5. **Emphasis on values of integrity, humility, community, and spirituality.** The experience of SDP showed that a discipleship ministry for the Filipino marketplace must include teaching, embodying, and modelling the values of integrity, humility, community, and spirituality (particularly, as expressed in Bible reading and prayer).

As mentioned at the onset, I hope that this discipleship framework will also provide insights into non-Filipino contexts. While we hold on to our core belief that we have one God and one mission, it is also true that we have the duty to seriously think about and work on how we can effectively contextualize God's message to the place he has placed us. **MRT**

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[7] Jocano, *Toward Developing a Filipino Corporate Culture*, 107.
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[10] Gorospe, *Filipino Values Revisited*, 105.
[11] Gorospe, *Filipino Values Revisited*, 106.
[12] "Frank Lynch identifies social acceptance, economic security, and social mobility as the three basic aims that predominantly motivate and control the behavior of the Filipino. Of the three, he considers social acceptance as the most important." Andres, *Understanding Filipino Values*, 16.
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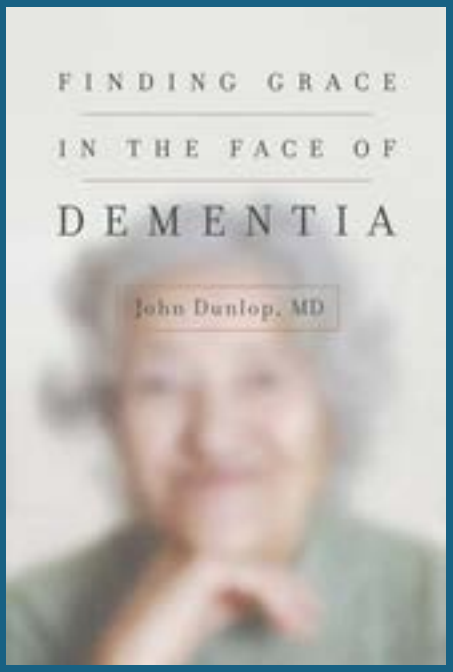

Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia

John Dunlop. Wheaton: Crossway, 2017. ISBN 978-1433552090. 208pp.

Reviewed by Bekah Newell Farber

Through a friend's recommendation, God brought this book to me at the time I needed it most—when I was filled with feelings of grief, fear, and helplessness regarding my mother's Alzheimer's. *Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia* was one of the most eye-opening and helpful books that I read in 2024. This book, both wonderfully theological and intensely practical, helped me grow in my understanding of dementia and filled me with courage for the journey ahead.

But what is a book about dementia doing in a missions forum? As the author explains, because of the life-prolonging technologies and healthier lifestyles we now have, in the future, "dementia will become more and more of a problem for society as a whole but also for the church of Jesus Christ, which will need to assume a greater role in the care of those who suffer from it" (16). If churches respond to those with dementia with loving care, the communities around will take notice, as they recognize God's love at work. Dementia is, indeed, an important topic for missions workers in today's world to consider, if not for personal reasons, then ministerial ones, as it is likely that we will one day either have dementia, care for someone with it, minister to someone with it, or minister to a caregiver.

In this book, John Dunlop (a long-time geriatrician who holds a master's degree in bioethics from Trinity International University) explores several key questions:

- Do we view people with dementia as whole persons, or does their personhood diminish with their cognitive ability?
- How can a good and powerful God allow such a tragedy? Is dementia meaningless, and if not, what are God's purposes?
- What is it like to experience dementia?
- What strategies can allow us to honor God as we navigate the challenges of dementia?

Although Dunlop is clearly a man of intelligence and expertise, he writes in a friendly style, weaving true stories throughout the book. Dunlop first explores dementia in the context of the Bible's overall storyline (creation, fall, redemption, and future hope). Next, he gives some background information to help readers understand what it must be like to experience dementia. Then come several chapters focused on caregivers: the experience of caregiving, help for caregivers, how we can honor God through dementia, and respecting the dignity of those with dementia while meeting their needs. Finally, he closes with suggestions of what the church can do, as well as addressing practical end-of-life issues.

Dunlop's stated purpose in writing *Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia* is "to provide a theological lens through which we can view dementia and then give a number of practical ways in which it can be applied" (19). He does an excellent job of fulfilling this purpose, especially for the "everyday" reader.

I found the chapter "How Can We Honor God through Dementia?" simultaneously convicting (personally) and wonderfully affirming (about my mother's inherent worth, despite her decreased abilities). The scripturally based principles outlined here can be applied to how we view and treat people with any perceived (on our part) "disability." For example: "*How much does God value our intellect?* The answer is—not as much as we do" (104).

I wept as I read "How Does it Feel to Have Dementia?" (Emotions listed included *alienated, apathetic, bored, depressed, dominated, embarrassed, fearful, frustrated, ignored*…)

"End-of-Life Issues" was sobering, but I'm thankful for the guide it provides in planning ahead, before certain issues take one by surprise.

"What Should the Church Do?" lit a fire in me, and I found myself wishing that somehow every pastor/elder could be persuaded to read this chapter, as, among other things, it exhorts churches to "teach what it means to be fully human" (147).

My father spent his entire adult life in missions, working in a remote area of Indonesia for fifteen years, then traveling throughout Asia as a missions administrator, then visiting nearly every continent as a missions leader and board member for various international organizations. He's a world traveler, and for his final assignment from the Lord, he is spending most of his days in a small home in a small town, keeping my mother company as her confusion and anxiety worsen. From world traveler to dementia caregiver, God will give him (and maybe eventually me) the grace to do this, but we are both thankful for the compassionate insights and meaning shared with us through John Dunlop's wonderful book, which re-oriented us and set us on a path of compassionate and informed care for my mom.