

Urgency and Healthy Church Planting

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In more than a decade of working with the International Mission Board, I have learned from career missionaries the ongoing tensions of (1) evangelizing with urgency and (2) planting healthy churches. I have asked some of the leaders in the South Asia affinity to help me think through these tensions, and their responses are below. Each response is a compilation of thoughts from various leaders—particularly, Will J and James M, members of the IMB's South Asia leadership team.

Chuck Lawless (CL): Why does urgency matter in your work?

Affinity of South Asia Peoples (ASAP): 94,000 people are born every day in South Asia. All are born into sin and separation from God, and all of them born each day will enter into a Christ-less eternity without the hope of Jesus. Nearly every one of them born today will grow up with limited or no access to the Gospel and will be taught to follow and worship a false god and idol that leads them away from righteousness.

One Team Leader's geographic area of focus illustrates this sense of urgency. This area grows by half a million people every year. To reach 10% of just the population growth, we would need to see 50,000 come to faith

annually and 1,000 new churches started—and that makes no impact into the existing population!

We know that God's heart is that all people would be saved and come to the knowledge; that none should perish (1 Tim 2:3–4, 2 Pet 3:9). The offer of salvation is freely available to them (Rom 10:9–10), and that salvation offers them new life and freedom from the bondage of sin (Rom 6:14, 2 Cor.5:17). Walking in newness of life will begin to restore the brokenness in their life and culture (Eph 4:20–6:9), and we want them to know how to experience that new life.

We also desire for Jesus to return and restore all things new, to bring in the new heavens and new earth. While we don't know the exact timing, we do know that the gospel will go to all nations and then the end will come (Matt 24:14). We know that there will be believers from every nation, people, tribe, and language around the throne (Rev 5:9). Therefore, we go to these peoples and places with the good news.

CL: Clearly, the reality of lostness around you compels you to share the gospel urgently. Even as you seek to engage millions of people, why does theological training matter in your work?

ASAP: First, the Great Commandment (Matt 22:34–40) calls us to love God and love others. The more we know about God, the greater we love Him for who He is and what He did for us. The Great Commission then calls us to make disciples. This is a lifelong process for each believer to continue to grow in righteousness, put off the sinful ways, and obey His commands (Matt 28:19, Heb 5:11–14).

Second, God has also called elders to shepherd the churches. These elders are tasked with protecting the flock from false teaching (Acts 20:28–31, Titus 1:9, Eph 4:14). This requires continual learning and understanding of the Word. Paul warned his churches that false teachers would arise even from their own groups (Acts 20:29) and would lead the church astray. We see

examples in Galatia (Gal 3:1), Corinth (1 Cor 8:1), and Thessalonica (2 Thess 2:2). Churches need elders who can protect the flock *and* accountability for elders who might lead the flock astray.

This pattern of false teaching in the church in the New Testament is also prevalent in the South Asian church today. Believers are led astray through an imported prosperity gospel that blends well with the karma understanding of Hinduism. Well-meaning evangelistic pushes (many organized from the West) have left behind converts, not disciples. Therefore, theological training is not something that we reserve for when leaders and elders need to know more; theological training begins at the beginning when somebody becomes a believer.

Third, right doctrine fuels right action. Theological misunderstandings will impact the way believers live out their Christian lives (e.g. the idle believers in Thessalonica). The church is meant to be the “pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), It is vital that the church protect and proclaim this truth.

CL: Do you see these two issues (evangelizing with urgency and planting healthy churches) as contradictory or complementary to each other?

ASAP: They are complementary in the same way that each of the components of the Core Missionary Task is talked about separately but overlap and work together to fulfill the task at hand. Evangelism without discipleship is incomplete according to the commands in Scripture. God’s heart for the redemption of His people, His urgency, is why we run to the ends of the earth to proclaim His Good News. At the same time, His love and care for His bride is why we desire to present the body to Him as whole and healthy.

However, trying to do both well is hard unless you walk in the giftings given to the church. The “sent-out ones” run with urgency to those who do not know Him. “Shepherds” oversee the church as she continues to bear fruit and grow in the knowledge of God and His Word. This is not to say that sent-out ones don’t care for the bride; the call of the lost just rings louder

when they prioritize their time. Therefore, it is imperative to build teams (both cross-cultural workers and local believers) to ensure that the on-going task of “meat” discipleship isn’t left undone. The different giftings the HS grants to the body of Christ (Eph 4:11–12, Rom 12:3–8, 1 Cor 12:4–11) enable missionary teams and local churches to work together to evangelize with urgency and plant healthy churches.

CL: If these tasks/goals are complementary (even though difficult to accomplish), what are you doing in your affinity to hold these two tasks together?

ASAP: From the beginning, new believers are taught simple methods to learn from God’s Word. One example is the SWORD method which trains believers to ask five questions about the passage they read: What do we learn about God? What do we learn about mankind? Are there sins that we should repent of? Are there any commands to obey? Are there any examples to follow? Tools like this one are how we introduce hermeneutical training for new (and existing) believers to lay a foundation for discipleship through knowledge and obedience to the Scriptures.

We also help national networks identify those who are “sent-out ones” and those who may become local elders/overseers/pastors as they study the characteristics of healthy churches in God’s Word. The nationals then work together to have “sent-out ones” pushing for lostness while also having churches equipped with healthy elders/overseers/pastors.

We further work with church planting networks to identify Movement Strengthening Strategists (MSS), whose responsibility is to help keep the pastoral and theological needs (depth) of the network before the leadership team. This MSS is also responsible for the on-going development of the pastors and the development of resources that will help combat specific weaknesses within the network. The MSS typically has a pastor/elder/teacher gifting while also recognizing the urgency of the task.

Two training resources we have developed are “Foundations for Teaching the Bible” (a training that is distinct from the overall Foundations document of the IMB) and “Confessions.” Both strategies were developed over a decade ago as affinity leaders saw multiplying church planting networks and began to ask the question, “How do we keep the gospel and church planting multiplying while at the same time not leaving the bride behind?” We wanted to address the need for these churches to grow into maturity and health.

“Foundations for Teaching the Bible” is a tool developed to teach indigenous pastors how to preach the Word in the context of the entire biblical narrative. Over months of time, these leaders work to create almost a year’s worth of sermons. They work together in small groups, leaning into the collective worldview, while continuing to refine and practice their hermeneutic. After carefully crafting their sermon, they practice delivering it in front of the entire group.

Through this indigenous hermeneutical community, these pastors learn to be faithful to Scripture as they preach the Word. Working together helps them to learn from each other and helps to protect the group from errant readings of scripture. All this practice takes place under the supervision of seasoned workers.

The second resource, “Confessions,” is a tool to help existing church networks (both elders and sent-out ones) learn theology as they study issues and doctrines most relevant to core beliefs and issues they are facing in their communities. Through this training, the indigenous leaders of a network of churches work together to create doctrinal statements on ten core doctrines (in many cases to the point of published confessions of faith).

For the initial 8–10 doctrines, we provide the biblical texts from the respective articles in the Baptist Faith & Message 2000 and facilitate a multistep process with the leaders to develop a doctrinal statement for each doctrine based on those texts. We want network leaders to learn and become comfortable with the process so that after the course, they do this work on their own. We give them these verses as a place to start, but we also encourage

them to add others that they find helpful. These tools and processes aid the indigenous network to always go to the Word for correction and application for subsequent doctrines, to combat false teaching when it arises, and to engage their own worldview from a biblical perspective.

Finally, the “School of Church and Mission” is a program we have created for local partners to continue their leadership development towards taking ownership for the Great Commission in their own country. This “school” is an initiative rather than an institution, and each “semester” of the program focuses on doctrinal training, New Testament missiology, and strategic planning.

CL: It sounds like you are doing much to keep evangelistic urgency and healthy church planting in your work. In what areas do you think you could still improve in this work?

ASAP: We need more Movement Strengthening Strategist co-workers who have the Shepherd/Teacher gifting but a heart steeped in urgency to come alongside and join our teams to build upon the methods, tools, and foundation church planters and trainers have laid. These co-workers need to be willing to be servants who mentor and coach those with the Holy Spirit-given calling to shepherd the flock (rather than assuming the Western-style “lead from the front” style).

CL: Thank you for your responses amid all the work you have to do to reach South Asia. What else would you want to include for our readers?

ASAP: We are thankful for the opportunity to share all that God is doing across South Asia. We are building off the foundation of many years of faithful co-workers and national partners. Today one can find many expressions of local ownership of the Great Commission; South Asian churches and leaders are taking responsibility for Unengaged People Groups and geographic

areas. Pray that more laborers will come from the vast harvest field of South Asia to join the work.

In addition, a coalition of South Asian Movement Strengthening Strategists continues to grow. These are national brothers who were trained and mentored by IMB units. In various fields they are now taking local ownership of this pastoral training process while the cross-cultural workers are in the background in a coaching role. Pray that in the days to come they will be unified around the vision, have opportunities to train other pastoral networks, and begin to disseminate their own pastoral training materials to help the churches grow in health and maturity.