# Is Indigenous the Goal?
## Church Planting as a Response to the Great Commission

Paul Salem

In a mountainous region of Taiwan called Pingtung, there is a "European-style indigenous church." The Church of Our Lady of Fatima is a Catholic church building with a majestic cathedral style but filled with symbols corresponding to Taiwan's indigenous peoples.[1] It is a grand edifice with two columns of ancestral souls of chieftains and pews carved with faces of indigenous people. In Protestant missions circles when someone says they want to plant indigenous churches, this is likely the furthest thing from their minds.

In the last 150 years, missionaries have been striving to plant "indigenous churches."[2] This sounds good on the surface, but the problem is the way *indigenous* is meant does not match the definitions of *indigenous* used in different disciplines, such as horticulture, anthropology, political science, and missiology. In missions, an indigenous church has traditionally meant a church that is self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing, some-

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[1] *Indigenous Catholic Church in Mountainous Pingtung Touted as Tourist Site,* 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-4pgty0v1E.

[2] Jonathan Lewis, *World Mission: An Analysis of the World Christian Movement,* Vol 2 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1994), 6-23.

times referred to as a three-self church.[3] However, this is not what many people think of when they hear the word *indigenous*. This conflict in connotations has led to confusion in church planting circles. Indigeneity is a complicated and somewhat unhelpful term when we consider church planting. Rather than trying to plant indigenous churches, we should plant local, culturally attuned churches.

This article will walk through the development of the indigenous church principle and what it has come to mean. We will then examine how the word *indigenous* is used currently. This will lead us to analyze the principle and think through a more helpful way to consider church planting that takes context seriously while working towards healthy, thriving, reproducing churches that are not dependent on outside resources.

## The Development of the Indigenous Church Principle

In the mid-nineteenth century, Western missionaries developed tendencies towards paternalism.[4] The funding for church planting was foreign, and pastoral leadership was mostly foreign. This was during the height of the colonial era. There were a few prescient missionaries who began to see the problems with planting churches in ways that made the new churches dependent on missionary resources and leadership. Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson separately concluded that missionaries need to strive for an approach to church planting that introduced independence as early as possible.[5] Although it may have seemed inventive during their time period,

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[3] John Mark Terry, "Indigenous Churches," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

[4] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 282.

[5] Wilbert R. Shenk, "Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn: A Special Relationship?," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 5, no. 4 (October 1981): 168–72.

Christopher Little notes that Paul and others in church history practiced this approach.[6]

Missionaries in Korea and China began to implement church planting that was self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting at the beginning of the 20th century.  In Korea, there was a revival that led to masses converting to Christ. Following the lead of John Nevius, the churches were planted in a simple, reproducible manner with Korean leaders.[7]  Similar events in China led to a church that was organized and led by Chinese leaders. Roland Allen, who served in China, illustrates the immediate impact of this paradigm shift in church planting: "the moment converts were made in any place, ministers were appointed from among themselves, presbyter bishops, or bishops, who in turn could organize and bring into the unity of the visible Church any new group of Christians in their neighbourhood [sic]."[8]

After World War II a new cadre of missiologists with training in cultural anthropology came along and critiqued the three-self churches as being culturally Western. It was possible to plant a three-self church in a culture, but it still felt foreign. Prominent among these voices calling for truly indigenous churches were Alan Tippett, Eugene Nida, Donald McGavran, Charles Kraft, and Marvin Mayers.[9]  Missionary vocabulary began to include terms like "worldview," "functional equivalents," "functional substitutes," and "contextualization."[10] In other words, for Christianity to take root in a new culture,

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[6]  Christopher R. Little, "Mission in the Way of Paul: With Special Reference to Twenty-First Century Christian Mission" (PhD diss., Pasadena, CA, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Intercultural Studies, 2003), 75.

[7]  John Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches,* Reprint of the 4th ed. (Nutley, N.J: P & R Pub., 1973).

[8]  Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes That Hinder It,* Reprint (Portland, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), 7.

[9]  Terry, "Indigenous Churches," 484.

[10] Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 15.

there was a need to adapt language, forms, symbols, and expressions that made sense in the receiving culture. Ultimately, says Paul Hiebert, these missiologists and others began to call for self-theologizing.[11] Self-theologizing eventually led to ethnotheologies.[12]

There is much about the emphasis on indigeneity to be praised. One of the providential byproducts of this emphasis resulted in churches all over China being empowered to continue without formal leadership even when the harshest persecution was brought on by Mao Zedong. Christianity not only survived during these dark decades, but thrived, emerging in the 1980s numbering in the millions.[13] And, around the world, missionaries committed to indigenous church planting were also committed to Bible translations in the vernacular languages of the world, leading to the development of local language lexicons and grammars and other Christian resources. These were critical in preserving languages and often the cultural identities of hundreds of ethnic groups.[14] Furthermore, one African theologian attributed the rise of newly developed nation states in West Africa to the three-self approach to planting churches.[15]

Over the years, some missiologists have seen this three-self formula as inadequate or even misguided. In a conclusion pertinent to this study on the indigenous principle, Christopher Little points out these three selfs are not necessarily indigenous: "the formula fails to take into consideration that it is possible to establish a three-self church and remain culturally irrelevant as a

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[11] Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 195.

[12] Harvie M. Conn, "Ethnotheologies," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

[13] Carl Lawrence, *The Church in China: How It Survives and Prospers Under Communism* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 31ff.

[14] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 164–67.

[15] Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 188.

consequence of adopting imported theology, structures, leadership patterns, and worship styles."[16] In other words, the three selfs brought independence, but not necessarily indigeneity.

A number of missiologists have suggested additional selfs to actually move towards indigeneity. As mentioned earlier, Paul Hiebert suggested self-theologizing. Alan Tippett reworked the list to have six selfs (self-image, self-functioning, self-determining, self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-giving).[17]

## The Many Meanings of *Indigenous*

When a term is used with the frequency that *indigenous* is used, it is worth understanding the origins and use of the term. The word derives from the Latin *indigena*, meaning "a native.."[18]

*Indigenous* has been used in botany and horticulture in identifying plants that were native to a particular region.[19]  A plant that has been growing and perpetuating in a particular place for thousands of years is considered indigenous. The language of church planting uses agricultural language, but the goal is actually attempting to plant something in every kind of soil rather than something that can thrive in only one soil and climate.

*Indigenous* in contemporary use refers to people who have been linked to a particular place for thousands of years. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues describes indigenous peoples as those who

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[16] Little, "Mission in the Way of Paul: With Special Reference to Twenty-First Century Christian Mission," 77.

[17] Alan Richard Tippett, *Verdict Theology in Missionary Theory* (Lincoln Christian College Press, 1969).

[18] "Indigenous," in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=indigenous.

[19] J. Raymond Tallman, *An Introduction to World Missions* (Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co, 1989), 190; Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, and Jeff K. Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014), 215.

have historic continuity to a pre-settler society with their own distinct culture, language, and beliefs.  This same document describes these groups as minorities in their lands.[20] It recognizes that most people on the planet have migrated at one time or another to new lands. Therefore, even though people may have migrated several hundred years ago to a different land, they are not considered indigenous.

Further complicating matters,the field of anthropology has prioritized the study of "bona fide indigenous culture."[21] Secular anthropologists have viewed Christianity as a pollutant to truly indigenous cultures and, thus, have neglected any study of Christianized segments of a particular ethnic group.

In missiology, indigenous is used in two different ways. For Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, an indigenous church exhibited signs of independence and self-sustainability.  It had little to do with the culture of a particular people and more to do with encouraging the new church to take care of everything a church does without outside help. This approach encouraged local ownership from the beginning. Indigenous is also used to encourage a process of inculturation, a "process through which existing cultural and social practices can be fused with new Christian meaning."[22] A significant problem, and one reason for this article, is that missiologists will use the term in both ways without clarification.

In seeing the different ways people use the term *indigenous,* it is easy to see how confusing this can be, especially in our modern era. Word definitions change continuously. If someone told the average church member that he

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[20] Oisika Chakrabarti, "Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Voices: Factsheet" (United Nations: Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues), accessed October 1, 2024, https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf.

[21] Harvey Whitehouse, "Appropriated and Monolithic Christianity in Melanesia," in *The Anthropology of Christianity,* ed. Fenella Cannell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 296.

[22] Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 346.

wanted to plant an indigenous church, it is likely the hearer would assume he intends to plant a church among minority indigenous peoples.[23] After all, what is an indigenous church in New York City or London? There is not a clear original culture in either of these cities, making it hard to know the focus of an indigenous church plant. Although the emphasis on indigenous church planting was useful for a period, the term is no longer helpful.

## Consequences of an Indigenous Focus in Church Planting

In order to make a stronger case for a new way to think about church planting that reaches all nations, it is important to think about the consequences of an indigenous focus in church planting. What does an indigenous church look like? Often the assumption is that it will be ethnically homogenous. But is this type of church likely to achieve what we hope it will achieve? The following five statements highlight some issues that surface when indigeneity, and the frequently resulting ethnic homogeneity, is the priority.

*An indigenous focus fosters an inward orientation for the church*. Due to our sinful world, the human default is to divide from others and group with those perceived to be like us. This stands in contrast to the New Testament churches who were intended to welcome all who follow Christ and were encouraged to send co-laborers to be on mission as well as serve other churches.[24] John Carter lists one drawback of the indigenous principle is that it only gets to the initial establishment of indigenous churches, but not

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[23] As an example of the missiological use of indigenous to refer specifically to aboriginal peoples, Tan Kang San in describing the church in Malaysia says: Christianity draws its adherences mostly from Chinese, Indians, and indigenous peoples." In this case, Chinese and Indians are not considered indigenous. Kang San Tan, "Evangelical Missiology from an East Asian Perspective: A Study on Christian Encounter with People of Other Faiths," in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue,* ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 298.

[24] There is no indication of the early church segregating based on ethnicity. In Paul's letters to Romans and Ephesians unity between Jews and gentiles in the church clearly stressed.

the ongoing work of welcoming and sending across cultures, which is core to the mission of the church.[25]

When my wife and I were involved in international student ministry a number of years ago, we partnered with a fellow seminary student from Japan. He was particularly focused on reaching Japanese students with the goal of integrating them into the Japanese church in our city.  That was the goal until the pastor of the Japanese church made it abundantly clear that he did not want Japanese students in the church. They had developed a comfortable culture of Japanese Americans and were not interested in newer, younger Japanese joining them. What my friend realized, grievously, was this church had become less of a church and more of a culture club. In this case, both groups are Japanese, but the prioritized focus on a single culture made the church unprepared for welcoming a new generation of Japanese. In other words, an indigenous church focus can lead to viewing the church as a culturally bounded set.[26]

***An indigenous focus assumes cultures are both static and siloed***. Often attempts at indigenization have to adopt a caricature of a culture in order to make it appear indigenous. One can observe this tendency by looking at the entrance to Chinatown in San Francisco. It is an exaggerated expression of culture for the sake of tourists' superficial understanding of the culture. This same tendency to build off of a superficial understanding of culture can happen with church planting. The church planter assumes a cultural profile that is no longer accurate. Phil Zarns warns that "[m]yopically honoring a past synchronic indigeneity may become an obstacle to approaching people

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[25] John F. Carter, "The Indigenous Principle Revisited: Toward a Coactive Model of Missionary Ministry," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1, no. 1 (1998): 73–82.

[26] Mark Baker describes a bounded church as one that "creates a list of essential characteristics that determine whether a person belongs to that group.... [and] have a sense of exclusion of those who do not meet the requirements." Mark D. Baker, *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community without Judgmentalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 21, 24; Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 107–36.

in the present locality with their 'symbolic meanings' of forms that 'change with time.'"[27] Cultures never stop changing. This is due, in part, to ongoing cross-cultural interactions. Many missiologists and missionaries are stuck in an old paradigm of anthropology that viewed culture as unchanging and wholly distinct from other cultures.[28] Brian Howell and Jenell Williams Paris argue: "This is flat out wrong, all cultures have changed and continue to change."[29] To observe these changes, one needs only to look at the adoption of coffee culture around the world or Swedish inspired home design due to Ikea. Globalization and urbanization (Glurbanization) have been accelerants for increased cultural interactions. If cultural indigeneity is prioritized, it is a moving target that is ultimately a misguided one.[30]

***An indigenous focus encourages ethnic identity over identity in Christ***. Sherwood Lingenfelter sees an overemphasis on cultural identity as problematic: "Indigenization may lead to dead churches in the third and fourth generation of believers."[31] When indigeneity becomes the priority, cultural concerns begin to subvert the calling to identify in Christ alone. A church's

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[27] Phil Zarns, "Self-Localizing: The Indigenous Church in Context," *Journal of the Evangelical Missiological Society* 4, no. 1 (2024): 35.

[28] Michael D. Crane, "To the Ends of the Earth through Strategic Urban Centers: Reexamining the Missions Mandate in Light of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *Advancing Models of Mission: Evaluating the Past and Looking to the Future*, ed. Kenneth Nehrbass, Aminta Arrington, and Narry Santos, Evangelical Missiological Society Series, No 29 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2021), 100; Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 77–78; Peter T. Lee and James Sung-Hwan Park, "Beyond People Group Thinking: A Critical Reevaluation of Unreached People Groups," *Missiology: An International Review* 46, no. 3 (July 2018): 212–25.

[29] Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 37.

[30] One of the problems with the term indigenous is it can limit our understanding of culture. When missionaries began to apply anthropology to the work, they selectively began incorporating ethnographies. However, cultural anthropology is a broader and more complex field that William Smalley called the "science of culture." William A. Smalley, "Anthropological Study and Missionary Scholarship," *Practical Anthropology* 7, no. 3 (1960): 114.

[31] Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture*, 16.

primary identity should be in Christ. We should have more in common with a sister or brother in Christ from the other side of the world than with someone who shares the same cultural heritage.[32] A church should express the truths of Christ in the culture(s) of the context. Culture is merely a vehicle for gospel proclamation, however. An indigenous focus can shift the focus away from Christ.

*An indigenous focus does not set the church up well for our urbanized and globalized present and future*. The rapid growth of cities and increasing globalization has meant less and less homogeneity. When someone works in a diverse context and wants to invite a coworker from a different ethnic background to church, a truly indigenous church will feel unwelcoming to the coworker. Increasingly, people are learning to navigate a variety of cultures and, in places where different cultures come together, a hybrid culture becomes the norm. Even in homogeneous cultures, global youth culture is changing generations in such a way that indigenous would not be the appropriate term to use.[33] Cheong and Ro make a compelling case for contextualization that is mindful of globalization in their forthcoming book: *Emplacing Globalization: Contextualizing Global Mission among People, Places, and Processes*. They argue that the world is far more globalized than we think, and it has many implications for church and mission.[34] On a pragmatic level, when a church is not so deeply immersed in one culture, it is more ready to welcome other cultures as well as send out those who will take the gospel to places lacking in gospel witness.

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[32] Hesselgrave notes that pure autonomy is not actually a healthy posture for Christ's church. David Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 366.

[33] Dannie Kjeldgaard and Søren Askegaard, "The Glocalization of Youth Culture: The Global Youth Segment as Structures of Common Difference," *Journal of Consumer Research* 33 (2006): 231–47.

[34] John Cheong and Jonathan Ro, *Emplacing Globalization: Contextualizing Global Mission among People, Places, and Processes* (Oxford: Regnum Press, 2024).

***An indigenous focus is not what we see in the New Testament***. We have the most data about Paul's church planting efforts that span from Jerusalem around to Illyricum (Rom 15:19). It appears that Paul was more intent on planting churches in urban centers. The churches he helped start were inclusive of all the ethnic groups represented. The church in Antioch that sent Paul and Barnabas out was clearly multicultural (see Acts 13:1). The emphasis on bringing different ethnic groups together is an expression of the gospel breaking down barriers between different cultures (Eph 2:14). The church is to be "one new humanity" (Eph 2:15) which becomes a witness of God's work of reconciliation in Christ.[35] This also means that our central gathering principle is our unity in Christ, not our cultural identities. If this new humanity is going to succeed, members will need to find cultural common ground to express worship, teaching, and the many other ways in which culture plays a role in the gathering of the church. This means particular cultures take a back seat to a shared culture.[36]

## The Need for Local Expressions of the Church

Those who began to emphasize indigeneity were on to something vital to the process of establishing churches in new places. When the church remained tied to foreign support and leadership, the tie to support was an obstacle for the church to reach into the community. Lamin Sanneh has built a strong

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[35] David E. Stevens, *God's New Humanity: A Biblical Theology of Multiethnicity for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012).

[36] The work of finding common ground and negotiating different cultures as one body of Christ is not simple or easy. The following works lay some groundwork in this field. Mark DeYmaz and George A. Yancey, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2020); Mark DeYmaz and Bob Whitesel, *Re:MIX: Transitioning Your Church to Living Color* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016); Michael Crane, "Multicultural Churches in Global Cities," in *The International Pastor Experience*, ed. David L. Packer (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 121–35; Nam-Chen Chan, "The Intercultural Church: Moving Beyond Mere Statistical Expressions of Multiethnicity," *International Journal of Urban Transformation* 2 (April 2017): 83–102; Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

argument for the translatability of Christianity.[37] From the very beginning, Christianity was free to move into new cultures, to be articulated in different languages, and even for worship to take on new forms. When Christianity moves from place to place, it is able to take root there. Sanneh elaborates:

> Christianity sought indigenous coefficients, and, finding them, flourished by them, so that both borrower and borrowed were transformed in a common direction.… Translation thus came to invest Christianity with indigenous solidity. The vernacular became a necessity for the life of the religion, the soil that nurtured the plant until its eminence acquired doctrinal heights.[38]

Once the truths of the gospel are translated into a local language, the gospel moves into more homes and more hearts of people who were once lost. Throughout Christian history, when Christianity is understood in local languages and cultural forms, the church grows in those places.

In order for the church to multiply in a culture, there is a need for local leaders. As Paul and Barnabas established churches throughout the Mediterranean, leaders for the churches were chosen in each place. John Hiigel observes this trend in 1 Corinthians: "The pericope 16:15-18 is key evidence that Paul intended for the church to generate leadership from among its own members, leaders concerned to serve and edify the church."[39] Paul sought to raise up local leaders rather than import them.

## A Reassessment of the Goal of Church Planting

The indigenous principle served the mission community well during a time of more isolated cultures. However, the term has now become confusing

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[37] Sanneh, *Translating the Message.*

[38] Sanneh, *Translating the Message,* 70.

[39] John L. Hiigel, "Leadership in 1 Corinthians : an exegetical study in Paul's ecclesiology" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999), 153.

and misleading. Little concludes: "[I]n view of the fact that the three-self church formula is wrought with undeniable difficulties, one must search for another term to define Paul's churches."[40] To move towards language that better serves our purposes in planting healthy, culturally relevant churches in localities around the world, it is helpful to highlight some key points.

## Planting Churches Rooted in Christ

Throughout the New Testament, our calling is to establish churches that build on Christ as the foundation (Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 3:11; Col 2:20). The missions charges given to Jesus' disciples centered around the witness of Christ (Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-47; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). Paul made it his goal for Christ to be the focus of his ministry (1 Cor 2:2). Culture must play a role in any human endeavor, but it must always be in Christ, through Christ, and for the glory of Christ. Devotion to Christ is not a cultural matter; it is "supercultural."[41] It is through devotion to Christ, as revealed through Scripture, that we make determinations about church teaching and activity. By centering around Christ, the congregation must discern what aspects of culture to embrace and what aspects need to confront or reject.

## Planting Churches that are Local in Culture and Geography

It was stated earlier that Paul was more focused on planting churches based on geography than planting ethnic-based churches.[42] Geography is the only sure way of reaching everyone with the gospel. The people group approach

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[40] Little, "Mission in the Way of Paul: With Special Reference to Twenty-First Century Christian Mission," 79.

[41] William A. Smalley, "What Are Indigenous Churches Like?," *Practical Anthropology* 6, no. 3 (June 1959): 137.

[42] For a more thorough discussion of this point, see: Michael D. Crane, "Urbanization and the Great Commission: Hitting the Refresh Button on Missiology," in *The City Not Forsaken: Biblical Theories and Mission Practice*, ed. Michael D. Crane and Yong Yuan Teh (Kuala Lumpur: Greenhouse Publishing, 2023), 68–74.

does not adequately reach everyone. In cities, especially, people groups have become mixed, and cultures have blended. This means cities are filled with people who do not fit into an overly simplistic list of people groups.

This does not mean culture is discounted entirely. Culture plays a vital role in planting local churches. Simply put, people cannot be cultureless. Language, music, seating arrangement, style of teaching, expressions of worship and theology, leadership styles, and fellowship are all clothed in culture. It only makes sense to draw from culture the aspects that make the most sense in a particular locality.

## Planting Churches that are Global

William Smalley wrote much about the indigenous church principle. As far back as 1959, Smalley already noticed an "inevitable" cultural shift due to connections to a global economy.[43] The process of decolonialization meant the global economy expanded and globalized, with each newly independent nation entering the global economy. Smalley could not have foreseen the ways technology has further connected the world.  In the same way, the church has always been a global network and is at its best when it is able to draw from the church around the world for the sake of its mission. One of the things that has hurt our global mission effort has been the lack of cooperation between churches.[44]  The New Testament portrays the early churches as quick to help one another as well as take joint ownership of carrying the gospel forth to new places.[45]

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[43] Smalley, "What Are Indigenous Churches Like?," 161.

[44] John Gilchrist, *The Christian Witness to the Muslim* (Benoni: Jesus to the Muslims, 1988), 392.

[45] The church in Philipi gave financially to help Paul (Phil 4:14-18). Other churches helped the church in Jerusalem during famine (Rom. 15:25-27; 1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor 8:20-21). Paul went back to Antioch to report of his church planting efforts (Acts 14:27). Peter O'Brien makes the case that Ephesians calls for a unity that is broader than a local church and extends to the wider church. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 25–26.

## Terminology That Helps Us Going Forward

The notion of an indigenous church is problematic on a number of levels. The term has been used to intend such different goals, resulting at the least in considerable confusion. If one applies the more contemporary use of *indigenous* to the work of church planting, it places a disproportionate focus on a particular homogenous culture. If a church is so indigenous that it cannot or will not engage with other cultures, it is not really the church of Jesus. The church will inevitably take on cultural forms wherever it is planted, but when those cultural forms become the source of pride or are guarded to the point that mission is restricted, then it is a problem.

No matter what terms are chosen, there will be an insufficiency in communicating all that the term should convey. This author suggests the term *local* is preferred over *indigenous* because it captures the geographical aspect. *Local* does not get bogged down by a focus on a particular culture. Although Zarns maintains the use of the term *indigenous* because he defines it as *local*: "By such a framework, anyone can participate in a locality, relating in differing ways to the world and their immediate neighbors."[46] If that is the case, then local is the directly understood term.

In any particular locality, there is a need to plant different churches based on language and other contextual needs. For example, if a city in Europe has a large Vietnamese population, it is good to plant a church that prioritizes the Vietnamese population in terms of language and accessibility. This church would not be an indigenous church, but it would be a local church. *Local* is inclusive of everyone, whether they have been in a place long-term or have just arrived. For this church to be healthy, they would be seeking to share the gospel to others in the city. This means this church is not merely for the Vietnamese in the city, this church is outpost of the gospel for all who come.

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[46] Zarns, "Self-Localizing: The Indigenous Church in Context," 34.

The emphasis on *local* rather than *indigenous* aids in a shift of mindset that prioritizes all the people in a geographical area, rather than those that fit a particular cultural expression of a particular ethnic group. If we aim for culturally homogenous churches, we will never be able to plant enough churches to include everyone. There are too many cultures and subcultures. The New Testament paradigm was to plant churches in a place that draws on local cultural expression, while continuing to welcome all cultures in a place. Culture is important, even necessary, but should not eclipse the role of the church as welcoming to people of all nations.

An emphasis on planting local churches does not negate a connection to the wider Body of Christ. There is an element of interdependence among churches.[47] While a local congregation has the resources to be the church fully in a place, it is not healthy to be cut off from other churches. As noted previously, the language of indigenous and self-sustainability can give the false assumption that each local church is to be isolated. The posture of planting *local* rather than *indigenous* churches helps a new church maintain a vision for reaching a whole locality.

Church planting in the twenty-first century requires updated terminology that can foster church planting that is biblical as well as aware of a world that has become more urban, more locally diverse, and more globally connected. Our prayer is we plant churches that are set up to welcome the nations and readily send witnesses to the nations. This is the church's work.

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[47] Proponents of indigenous church planting recognize the importance for churches to relate to one another for mutual encouragement and help. But the drive towards true indigeneity can cause a church to pull away from others. Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, 150–51; Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 35.

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*Paul Salem (PhD) serves in urban Southeast Asia with his family. He teaches in a local seminary, serves as an elder in his church, and trains church planters. Paul has written a number of books and articles.*