

# Sustaining Kingdom Advance: Discovering the Role of Church Movements

by *T. S. John*

**I**t was the end of my senior year and like so many other seniors I needed to figure out what I was going to do after college. Two years earlier I had dedicated my life to Christ and changed my major from Business Administration to Bible—not a degree that offers much hope for finding a job among the Want Ads. But I didn’t want just any job. I wanted to do something to change the world!

Since coming to Christ I grew to appreciate pillars of the Church like St. Francis and Mother Theresa who had given themselves to help the poor as an expression of their faith. I interpreted the Bible through their stories. Verses like 1 John 3:16-18 inspired me regardless of my poor hermeneutics (like applying “Brothers in need” to the general population of people in need rather than the appropriate context of the church). And when it came to the Great Commission, I preferred to understand it in accordance with the version St. Francis is said to have coined: “Preach the Gospel throughout the world. If necessary, use words.”

I did not see myself applying my Bible degree towards the pursuit of a career as a pastor or church planter. Frankly, nothing turned me off more than the idea of being a church pastor, for no other reason than I thought such a role lacked the profundity and significance I was seeking in life. With that ethos guiding my final two years in college, I got involved as a student volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, first through the college chapter of Evangelicals for Social Action and then as co-founder of the campus chapter of Habitat. I loved it and believed involvement with them was that significant career to which I could give my life.

## *Habitat for Humanity in India*

So as I considered what I should do after college, I applied for Habitat’s volunteer program that helps build houses for the poor overseas. I was accepted and saw this as God’s direction to join. The following Fall I flew down to Habitat’s headquarters in Americus, GA, for training and was introduced to a community of a couple hundred staff and volunteers who, like me, wanted to witness

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to Christ by helping the poor. Habitat's founder, Millard Fuller was the organization's inspirational leader and head cheerleader who could energize a crowd to support his cause better than anyone I had ever seen.

Under Millard's enthusiastic leadership Habitat won national acclaim in 15 short years and was on a trajectory for tremendous growth fueled by millions in contributions and the high status involvement of a multitude of celebrities. One of Habitat's most famous volunteers was former US President, Jimmy Carter. I met President Carter and frequently heard him teach Sunday school at Maranatha Baptist Church in nearby

tions with no form of rehabilitative services to help them. After a few visits to their homes in the villages I felt I could not ignore their horrible plight. I began visiting them on a weekly basis along with other local volunteers in order to provide some meager assistance and plan for more significant interventions in the future.

But, after 18 months in Nagar, Habitat transferred me to their project in Barrangar. There I had the opportunity to live in a slum for over a year, worked side by side with nine poor families to radically improve their housing conditions and helped establish the local office of Habitat. After all

now become a vision of mine and my new wife. Our first step was to follow Habitat's model of developing a local board of directors to act as the local platform on which the ministry would be built. But we were careful to recruit born again Christians with respected reputations in the community. Staff members were also required to be born again Christians and the Board held them accountable to high, biblical standards of accountability and ethics. This allowed us to avoid many of the internal organizational pitfalls that Habitat had fallen victim to in South Asia. Additionally, I had become more evangelical in my outlook, believing that changed hearts and minds were as important as changed physical circumstances. Hence, we integrated a more proactive evangelistic outreach to our ministry.

Over the next ten years the ministry grew to over 30 staff serving 2,000 people annually who were affected by disabilities, eventually including people affected by leprosy and HIV/AIDS. In 2004 we made national waves by hosting the largest conference on "Disability and the Church" that South Asia had ever witnessed. The keynote speaker was our close friend Joni Earikson Tada and over 600 Christian leaders from across the nation attended. Finally, in 2007, we dedicated a half million dollar, fully equipped rehabilitation center that culminated a vision born 15 years earlier.

### *A Growing Dissonance*

At this point, one would think I would be content with the direction of the ministry I helped found. After all, our vision of a rehabilitation center had come to fruition, thousands of needy people were being helped, seeds of the Gospel had been successfully planted among them and dozens of disciples were being made in a region of South Asia that was traditionally known as the grave yard of missions. I had always compared our growth with that of Habitat's growth in the US, and

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Plains, GA. To be in the middle of all this growing enthusiasm and recognition for Habitat was a very heady experience and created for me a paradigm of ministry to which I readily acceded. After all, how could anyone question the strategy of generating enthusiastic support for a grass-roots, ministry that resulted in millions of dollars being sent all over the world in the name of Jesus to help the poor help themselves?

Following three months of training at the Habitat headquarters my co-worker and I arrived by train in Nagar, South Asia, to start our three-year assignment. It was a very disappointing first 18 months at Nagar in terms of ministry with Habitat. We spent most of our time uncovering corruption among the local Habitat committee, which I discovered was a pervasive problem affecting many foreign-funded charitable and ministry initiatives in South Asia. However, I found an outlet for my frustration by volunteering for a fledgling ministry to disabled children in the rural areas surrounding Nagar. These children were in such desperate situa-

the disappointments in Nagar, my experience in Barrangar gave me hope that the Habitat model of para-church ministry could work if it was more carefully implemented.

### *Expanding Disability Ministry*

While I was away in Barrangar I remained in touch with that fledgling ministry among the disabled children back in Nagar, and I would return occasionally to guide and assist in better establishing that outreach. As my three-year commitment to Habitat wound down I sensed a call to return to Nagar someday to help shore up the disability ministry and grow it so that it could make a significant impact. As I departed South Asia I dreamed of someday returning to establish a rehabilitation center that would provide much needed services to all those neglected, dirt-poor disabled children.

After three years in the US an opportunity miraculously presented itself to return to South Asia to establish a disability ministry that had

I believed we were on track to grow significantly in the future and make a similar name for ourselves.

But I wasn't content. There were certain aspects of the ministry I began to question. Dissonance slowly grew to disillusionment. Initially I attributed this disillusionment to burnout, mainly because I ate, drank and slept disability ministry 24/7 for 10 years. This actually paved the way for me to readily accept the idea that I needed to hand over the reins of leadership to our national leadership team, which is a good thing. Any foreign missionary worth his/her salt recognizes that leadership must transition into the hands of national leadership as soon as possible. But as I reflect on it now, this rationale probably had as much to do with my inability to reconcile conflicts and inconsistencies in our ministry paradigm as it did with feeling burnout or following good missions practice.

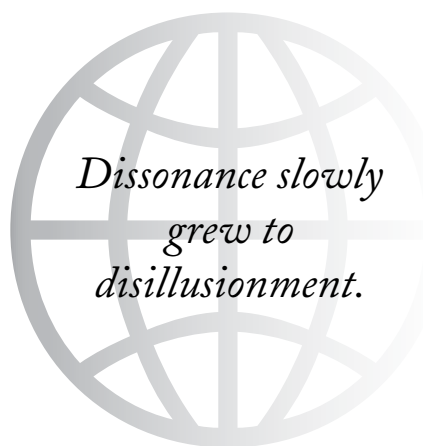
For example, if we were going to do more to help the millions in poverty we had to become bigger. This meant we had to increase our capacity to raise funds and manage the outreach. In order to do this I believed we needed to establish multiple donor development offices in donor countries around the world and establish outreach offices in different parts of the country. After all, isn't this what all significant, international ministries to the poor were doing?

But the thought of pursuing growth to make our ministry more "significant" made my head swim. I had started this journey 15 years earlier living in the slums and working alongside the poor. Now it appeared that if I was to lead this work towards regional or even national significance, I would need to return to a life of business suits and board meetings—the empty, corporate vision of myself that I had given up in college—just to prop up all the good we wanted to achieve.

Actually, what made that vision empty was not the business suits and board

meetings, but all the questionable things those symbols entailed in the business-like paradigm of parachurch ministry: using slick marketing campaigns to attract donors as we compete with other ministries for scarce resources; blowing our own horn through attractive communication pieces; the transactional nature of our services both to the poor and the donor; the business-like manner in which we handled our staff. It all was beginning to turn me off, regardless of the amount of good it was doing.

And the amount of good it was doing was questionable. To be sure, thousands



of children and youth with disabilities had been equipped "for a life of independence and advancement" (our slogan) But to what end? Except for the 100 or so who had been baptized, the rest had not experienced spiritual transformation in Christ. Consequently, not only was their eternal fate left in question but their life on this earth would continue to perpetuate the ideologies of selfishness that prop up the "web of lies" that keep the poor embedded in poverty.

Certainly we could define what we were doing as "pre-evangelism" and escape any sort of accountability for our rehabilitation program's effectiveness in making disciples. But where was this sort of extended, never-ending "pre-evangelism" in the New Testament? It would appear that people in the New Testament made a choice to either become a disciple or reject dis-

cipleship fairly early in their encounter with Christ-followers. Those who accepted Christ were welcomed into the community of believers, those who rejected Christ remained outside the community of faith and missed out on blessings that accrued to the members of the community. I wasn't finding any precedent in the New Testament to extend the continued provision of benefits from the community of faith to those who refused to join them. In other words, the early church seemed to recognize that participating fully in the community of faith was essential to the holistic transformation of people. And that's what the early church seemed interested in: holistic transformation...not just improving people's economic or social condition.

Then there was the questionable nature of being dependent on foreign funding. All my training on sustainability and community empowerment said that resources and leadership must eventually come from the local community. Yet we were an evangelical Christian organization in a country of less than 3% Christians. In almost all the villages we worked there were no Christians. Militant expressions of local religions were on the rise. If we expected these villages to take ownership of our initiatives we would most certainly have to eliminate Christ's Great Commission mandate from our work. Not only was that counter to our calling, but I believed it was a form of capitulation to the unjust and oppressive forces within these communities. And we knew of several Christian organizations that had capitulated and no longer carried a significant Christian witness in their work.

Furthermore, to expect a village community to eventually own our initiatives was based on the assumption that their leadership adhered to values and beliefs conducive to the welfare of the initiative. In our experience, nothing was further from the case. We found corruption rampant in the villages,

so to expect unregenerate people to selflessly lead our initiatives seemed hopelessly naive.

### *The Scalability of Church Planting Movements*

Finally, there was the inescapable fact that our foreign-funded model lacked that scalability necessary to reach the teeming millions who remained untouched by any sort of rehabilitative services. To be frank, our work among the poor was a drop in the bucket, a sobering reality which confronted even the largest foreign-funded relief and development ministries working in the country. To be sure, hundreds of thousands, maybe even a few million were being helped by the combined efforts of this multitude of parachurch ministries. But the need was in the hundreds of millions and there was no way all the combined efforts of Christian relief and development agencies could ever achieve the scale required to assist all those in need.

Our only option was to ignore our model's weaknesses, turn our backs on the hundreds of millions who remained in poverty as a result of those weaknesses, and console ourselves with the thought that at least we were impacting the lives of a few thousand people every year. But that rationalizing didn't quell my feelings of dissonance. I didn't know how to resolve this dissonance with the paradigm of parachurch ministry under which I had been trained.

As providence would have it, the stateside organization entered the picture at this time and asked me to consider returning to the US to take on the role of US Director. Simultaneously they were seeking a new International Director and had their eyes on Kent Parks, a global leader in the field of reaching unreached peoples. Kent's passion was "church planting movements" (CPM), a paradigm I was not only unfamiliar with but found it unappealing based on the title alone. But after sitting through some

initial interviews between Kent, the Board and key constituents, I realized CPM may offer some answers to my questions and concerns about the parachurch charitable ministry paradigm.

Eventually I agreed to accept the position and, fortunately for me, Kent did as well. Over time I learned more about CPM and realized it answered my questions and concern better than other paradigms of ministry I had encountered. For one thing, CPM was not the formulation of certain mission strategists in the sterile offices of a Western mission agency looking to herald the next best approach to missions. Rather,



these movements sprung up from the grass roots of the unreached world, in hard-to-reach regions throughout Asia. "Church Planting Movements" was simply the name given to the observations missionaries were gradually accumulating as they witnessed huge movements to Christ among unreached people groups.

Some key observations of these movements immediately caught my attention. The first was that the "resources are in the harvest." Local laws and circumstances prevented overt foreign participation in the religious initiatives taking place in the regions where these movements were springing up. This had the positive effect of preventing unhealthy dependence on outside resources and instead forced the movements to sustain themselves through resources

from within. It taught members within the movement to take the financial and moral responsibility for fulfilling the commands of Christ rather than depend on foreign resources to do the job. It meant this model had the potential for financial scalability.

Similar laws and circumstances that prevented overt foreign participation in the movements also prevented overt Christian initiatives and presence. Consequently propagating Christ's transforming power could not occur through highly public initiatives such as we find in the West (e.g. evangelistic crusades, highly publicized service events, Christian broadcasting and media, etc) but had to be done in a low-key, "off the radar" relational manner generally through one's "oikos", or circle of influence. Likewise, gatherings of disciples could not occur in large numbers in stand-alone church buildings. Instead, disciples were forced to gather in small groups often times in their own homes. These seemingly negative circumstances had the positive effect of ensuring that the transformation of individuals occurred not in a setting of isolation (which often characterizes the spiritual experience of Western Christians in their "going to church") but in the context of a small community of Christ followers who provide the support, accountability and discipleship holistic transformation requires.

Additional positive offshoots of the above factors were also observed. Laypeople were disciplined to become layleaders in an "on the job" training process much like the Apostle Paul training Timothy to train others (cf. 2 Timothy 2:2). These layleaders were largely responsible for leading the movements rather than seminary trained, professional clergy. This allowed for a scalable leadership pool that could expand as the movement grew without experiencing the bottlenecks that often occur if seminary credentialing and full-time salaries are imposed as clerical necessities.

With unpaid lay leadership and little if any spending on infrastructure, administration and church buildings, resources are available instead for more strategic transformational, Great Commission initiatives such as helping those in legitimate need, helping sister communities of Christ who are in need, funding small scale training events and sending missionaries to unreached regions to spread the transforming power of the Gospel.

### *Contextualized Community Transformation*

Furthermore, with greater emphasis on local dependence, these movements interpret and apply Scripture in contextualized, community-oriented ways rather than import concepts of spirituality and development that have greater affinity with Western modernity, secular development practices. One major impact of this local hermeneutic is its openness towards signs, wonders and miracles. Hence, “holistic transformation” is not simply about Christ-followers experiencing sustainable spiritual, physical and economic well being in community. They are also experiencing God’s miraculous intervention where man’s interventions have failed, thus deepening their faith in Christ and giving them the boldness to live out His commands in spite of local hostilities.

When I began understanding the implications of these observations, I realized CPM could lay the groundwork for broader community transformation. Because it was a “grass roots” initiative and people were being transformed by Christ with minimal outside resources, it could provide the impetus for poverty alleviation initiatives that are locally sustainable and rapidly multiplying among communities. I envisioned growing numbers of people from one community to the next coming to Christ in ways that mirror the description of the Church in Acts 2 and 4 where “God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among

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them.” (Acts 4:33-34). If that’s what CPM was about, I wanted in! In CPM (or whatever one might call indigenous, rapidly spreading, layperson-led, house church movements, focused on discipling people to disciple others) I found the solution to the problems of the poor and destitute. My dissonance disappeared. I could picture a loving congregation of people within a community willing to embrace others in their poverty, helping them help themselves in the most dignified and holistically transformational way. With the blessings of God upon them and a fervor to see this form of transformation grow, it could spread to other peoples and communities that have not yet experienced the power of Christ. Catalyzing that type of community, that type of church, that type of movement, was what the poor and oppressed of Nagar needed from me.

### *Changing Paradigms*

And now, following the call of God, my family and I have returned to Nagar with this new paradigm of ministry. We are excited to be back, but must admit that 14 years of following one paradigm and then changing to another leaves us feeling inadequate for the task ahead. But we believe it’s truer to Christ’s Great Commission call, with a scalability that holds greater potential for individual and community transformation in our region.

I must admit that my life probably would have followed a different course had I understood the profundity of church planting movements back in college. It’s taught me how easily the social conscientiousness of Western Christians can be wooed into a

questionable hermeneutic when considering Christ’s teachings about the poor. This is especially the case when the pressure to abandon a biblical approach for a more secular humanist approach is pervasive among popular media, social scientists, philanthropists and government aid agencies. We must be vigilant and proceed with a faith that God’s way of transformation is what builds His kingdom.

But more importantly it has taught me that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he released his disciples into the world to carry out the Great Commission. For within that commissioning is the DNA that is the good news for the world’s poor. It is a form of transformation couched in the context of a local community of Christ-followers that offers the embrace of Christ to those in need and multiplies itself exponentially to reach the ends of the earth. In our short time back in South Asia we are realizing that catalyzing such a movement is not easy but has the capacity to profoundly change the world. **IJFM**