

## Who says you're not a church planter?

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Real missionaries plant churches—True or False? Now there is a question to promote missiological discussion—or just plain arguments! True—according to many of the mission committees making decisions about who receives financial support from their congregations. False—according to many individuals and organizations involved in an incredible array of activities motivated by their love of Christ and their love of those made in His image. So, how would a missionary teacher with 27 years of experience in a mission known for evangelism answer the question? Most likely with another question! What do we mean when we say “plant churches?”

### What is church planting?

When people use the term “church planting”, they usually have certain kinds of activities in mind including mass evangelism, personal evangelism, personal follow-up, small group formation, and congregational organization. Evangelism is the focus, churches are the product, and the church planter is directly involved in establishing new congregations.

The picture of planting that is assumed is that of a sower scattering seed and then harvesting what grows. Seeds of God’s Word are scattered and then church plants grow. After all, Jesus Himself told the parable of the sower. But the Bible also refers to the church as the bride, body, or building. In these contexts, we need to consider other meanings of the word “plant.”

What might happen in missions if more emphasis was given to “set firmly in position” or “fix firmly in the mind” (American Heritage Dictionary)? Would our response to urgent needs be less frantic and more strategic? It is easy to report enthusiastically about how much seed has been sown without considering how much went on the roads, stony ground or thorny places. We can get all excited about little sprouts even though they never mature. I know that I want results now—whether they are in my life or someone else’s—but the God of eternity often works on a different schedule.

Imagine a country where a third of all children are enrolled in private schools that teach them to relate their faith to all of life. Thousands of small schools provide free education, free lodging and free food to poor children for whom there is no hope within the struggling public system. Well-funded flagship schools provide opportunities to train leaders in their communities and nation. Imagine the difference such a system makes as believers from outside the country commit their resources to help make a difference among needy people. Lives are eternally impacted by teachers who share their understanding of God’s nature and ways.

Could it ever happen? Is it possible in this secularized world to imagine such a powerful system to impact people? It is happening today in the madrasas (religious schools) of Pakistan as a whole generation of children and young people are taught the Koran and the principles of Islam. The Muslim world has been transformed in just over a generation by Islamic schools, while during the very same time Christian missions have been withdrawing from the field of education.

The Roman Catholic Church has demonstrated for centuries the power an educational system has to shape the thinking of whole nations. Their schools are so attractive that Protestant missionaries in many countries use their schools for their own children. How is it that we have left the field of education to others?

However, more important than the examples of others is the command of Christ Himself. He invested His three years of active ministry in a few very unlikely men and His final words to them were to repeat the process (John 20:21). In the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), Jesus tells His disciples to go and make disciples, not converts. We talk a lot about evangelism, but Jesus assumes it, and talks about teaching. We are to teach everything Christ commanded, but this does not include just the red-letter parts of the Gospels. If we believe that Jesus is the Creator of all things (Col. 1:15-16), then His command to be responsible for the whole earth and

everything in it (Genesis 1:28-30) also needs to be taught. I know it was a radical, new thought when I realized that the Bible had something to say about everything. I had been part of a great church, “enjoyed” regular family devotions, and graduated from Bible college. However, I had never been taught what God had to do with the physics, chemistry, and mathematics that I studied.

Unfortunately it is very easy to unintentionally communicate that Jesus is the Saviour and important when dealing with “spiritual” material, but He is irrelevant when dealing with everything that is not directly Biblical. It is then hard for people to conceive of Jesus as Lord because He has nothing to do with most of life, which is lived in a physical world. By giving over the teaching of everything non-Biblical to whoever is available, and abandoning the opportunity to shape a child’s perception of God’s world in the school, dualistic thinking is reinforced. It is no wonder that so many think of the Christian life like a spiritual balloon. It starts small but is inflated by the Holy Spirit using Christian leaders and personal Bible study. It fills more and more of life, but always remains separated from everything else—unless circumstances puncture the balloon. Then the whole thing explodes and the person is left with nothing but a mess. Churches planted among those who have such a sacred/secular perspective are inevitably weaker than when they are established among people who have been taught a more complete, integrated way of thinking. They understand that the Bible needs to permeate everything like oxygen—an essential element that is part of the atmosphere and everything else.

Why are so few Christians having an impact on their world? One of the reasons may be that in the places I have visited in North America and Europe, churches often view Christian schools as competitors rather than partners. Too many Christians seem to have adopted the perspective that anyone can teach reading, writing and arithmetic to children as long as Christians get a few minutes a week in Sunday School to teach some Bible stories or parents have regular family devotions. A growing number of parents home school their children, but for many this is either impractical or too radical. In fact, most Christians operate on the assumption that it is the government’s responsibility to provide basic education. They are satisfied if they have a few opportunities to pray in schools outside the classroom, have a youth club in school facilities, or distribute Bibles to students. A religion class a couple of times a week or a Sunday School class is expected to counteract the impact of godless teachers throughout the rest of the school system. Skillful teachers that ignore God are welcomed in national schools for their competence, even though their whole lives communicate that God is unnecessary for success. It is no wonder that so many Christians have God compartmentalized in a very small private part of life and ignore Him the rest of the time.

Christian teachers in the public system are not provided special training or support although they daily spend hours having input into the lives of children and young people. Youth pastors require seminary training so they can maximize the impact of the devotionals they are able to add to the special events used to attract young people, while teachers do not even have a special Bible study to help them cope with the demands of the system in which they work and the needs of their students. Missionaries require advanced degrees and specialized training in cross-cultural communication so that they can effectively share the Gospel. However, Christian teachers in non-Christian schools often have no special training to help them communicate truth. The culture and language of the school are often very different from what they experience in their local church. The environment is at least as difficult as that encountered by most missionaries. Where is the missiology of the classroom taught?

## **Missionary schools for MKs only?**

Missionary teachers and missionary schools are assumed to be teaching *missionary* children, not sharing their gifts, vision, and experience with national teachers or national children. Few missions send out teachers to work with non-MKs unless those teachers are involved in English language teaching. Church planters are not sent to national Christian schools even though that may be the best place to plant the church of tomorrow—if we want to fix firmly in the mind that

nothing can be properly understood or applied unless it is related to Jesus Christ and His purposes which are revealed in the Bible.

Our vision of Christian education is often limited to taking care of those who are already blessed with a Christian heritage—MKs—even though they already have an above average understanding of God’s truth and the impact He intends it to have in their life. Some mission schools have opened their doors to larger numbers of non-MKs, but the motivation seems to be more pragmatic, than strategic. Missionaries creatively seek to develop relationships within the pre-Christian community around them using everything from sports and fine arts to humanitarian aid, but educational opportunities are often only pursued when the focus of the study is the Bible itself. Is it not possible that professional Christian teachers could contribute much to the thinking and practice of other teachers as well as their students?

Perhaps the “Jerusalem” of the missionary school is the international school organization to which it belongs, national Christian educators and schools, or even the national education system of the host country. Could participation, even as an observer, not give insight into the thinking of others grappling with the challenges of preparing children and young people for a rapidly changing, increasingly global world? All over the world, people are trying to reform their school systems. What an opportunity to contribute by demonstrating the difference that knowing the Lord of creation makes when we study creation and teach those made in His image! What an impact it could make if we shared the rich resources in people and materials God has given! Adding salt and light to the needy schools of the world by taking the initiative and sharing our teachers could be a powerful way to demonstrate that Christ really does have the answers to important social questions.

What would happen if church-planting teams included teachers? What if they worked with national believers to establish a local Christian school instead of sending their children to an MK school elsewhere? When we have a successful church plant, who is teaching the children of the church? Many of the children of the church planters go to MK schools. But what about the friends they leave behind? What does it communicate to them? Do they wonder why Christian education is important for MKs, but not for them? Are MKs the only ones God wants to use in ministry?

MKs have special needs because they are not completely “at home” in their host country and many will be required to return to an English-speaking environment in North America where academic skills are important for success. But are they so different from national children? Certainly, the MK needs to know English, but he wants to know the local language also. The local children need to know their language, but want to know English. National children may not have many curricular options, while the MK is blessed with many, however, in a shrinking world, not only the MK needs to be prepared to think and act internationally. The church everywhere needs leaders who are prepared to be part of reaching the whole world.

## Schools as mission strategy

The Irish missionary movement could be a possible model for 21<sup>st</sup> century missions.

*One of the most dramatic transformations of culture in the history of Western civilization was accomplished by humble, poor, foreign missionary teachers. Irish monks trudged their way across Scotland, England, and the European Continent. And in their wake they left a lasting legacy of faith, of learning, and, indeed, of civilization.*

*Over the centuries between 550 and 1300 AD, scores of Irish monks left their homeland and spread out across Europe, preaching the Gospel to violent, lawless pagans, teaching Scripture, literature and the arts and sciences to kings and peasants alike and establishing monastic communities which served as centers for not only evangelism and discipleship, but for education and culture. Their teaching brought God’s Word and civilization back to a Europe, which had been conquered and ruined by barbarians.*

*These selfless, passionate, learned Irish scholars provide a clear model for dynamic learning and living in the twenty-first century. They exemplify the role and impact*

*Christians with education can have in cross-cultural contexts, or as we might say, when they are serving as academic missionaries—teaching and doing academic work in a culture not their own. Celtic Christianity was deeply flawed and suffered from theological oddities, with imperfect leaders—and followers, and with an inadequate understanding of grace, among many other problems. But the Irish monks provide a prime historical example of how educated Christ’s followers are uniquely suited to be God’s tool for bringing Scripture and truth back to our world. (Daryl McCarthy, Hearts and minds aflame for Christ: Medieval Irish monks—a model for dynamic learning and living, 2002, <http://www.iics.com/irishmonks.htm>)*

Christians have started many schools and universities, but when the institutions drifted from the truth, the vision for education was often abandoned. But churches as well as schools drift! After all, Paul had to address problems in his letters to the New Testament churches he had just founded. However, his investment of two years in the **school** of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9) laid a strong foundation for the Ephesian church. Have we been diverted from one of the most powerful tools God has given us to “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6)?

I believe that the primary reason we have so quickly abandoned our role in education is that we have seen it as a tool, rather than an integral part of Christian missions. We have assumed that completely non-Christian governments can teach students to read and then it is the church’s responsibility to help the children to choose to read the right material—the Bible. This is a far too limiting view of both the practise and potential of education. Schools do not simply provide neutral tools for their students. They are places where teachers and students spend large portions of their lives working together with the specific goal of preparing the students for life. Jesus knew that students do not just acquire skills or knowledge. Jesus said that students become like their teachers (Luke 6:40).

In the past two centuries, Protestant missions were heavily involved in mission schools where no one else was willing or able to teach. However, if the Bible was not integrated in the whole of the curriculum, it was easy to eventually focus only on the Bible and let others teach everything else. Sometimes governments demanded control of the schools, but we can too quickly forget the powerful affect that mission schools once had and adjust to the status quo. Do we want to continue to do only Biblical training, while others hinder children from coming to Christ? Can we passively allow their thinking about the world created by their heavenly Father to be moulded by those who deny or ignore His existence? Has God called us to build lives or only fight fires and repair damage?

I know thousands of missionaries are teaching English. However, even when we get into classrooms, the language teaching is often seen as a way to develop contacts to do "real" ministry during evenings and weekends, instead of a way to influence the thinking of students in the classroom itself. We have to stop thinking of classrooms as the door to ministry. Classrooms are the place of ministry.

What better place to invest our energy than among the huge portion of the population of the world who are most responsive to the Gospel? If up to 80% of Christians in North America and Europe come to Christ before they are 18 years old, it makes sense to focus on children and young people when we seek to plant the church of Christ elsewhere. The moral foundations of a life are largely laid by age eight, but we can easily neglect children when planning church planting. The past 50 years have seen tremendous investment in university and college campus ministries while the strategic importance of K-12 education has received much less emphasis. Campus ministries may well be 12 years too late for many children who never get to college or arrive with godless patterns of thinking and behaviour firmly established. It is true that it is better late than never, but if we are serious about making a difference in our world for Christ, we need to start sooner, rather than later. Why wait to challenge Satan’s lies and the influence of ungodly teachers? Why not plant young lives on a firm foundation by exposing them to the truth as early as possible?

Of course, no one can be taught into the Kingdom of God—you have to be born into it. Nevertheless, the need for teaching does not disappear if a person is born again. Various teachers will shape each child's thinking whether those teachers are his parents, his peers, the media, the community, or teachers in the school, but few adults spend as much time with children as their schoolteachers. Of course, some will not accept Christ even if they are exposed to a loving presentation of their personal need and the relationship between God, God's Word and God's world. But that is true of every single method we use. However, the powerful influence of godly teachers cannot be overestimated. An email from the *Pakistan Christian Voice* (September 24, 2002) speaks eloquently regarding this impact:

*For generations, Christians in Pakistan have been plagued with persecution from Muslim fanatics in the name of Islam. The regime of present President Musharraf has been active in uprooting terrorism towards Pakistani Christians. For the first time in decades, Pakistani Christians are finally finding some relief from the terror of Muslim fundamentalists. We believe it is God Who has raised President Musharraf up for such a time as this to tear down terrorism towards Christians in Pakistan and to fulfill Christ's purposes in our land. President Musharraf was himself educated in a Christian school. Never before in Pakistan's history have Christians enjoyed so much support and interest of the nation's president.*

## Christian schools

Christian schools, all too often, have been a hard sell to the very church where the parents of the children are members. Some see Christian schools as an overly protective environment. Others are concerned that the national schools need salt and light in them. Some are enthusiastic about Christian schools and the powerful impact they have as parents and staff work together to bring up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but perhaps they have forgotten the needs of those who are not yet part of God's family. We try to get as many as possible into our churches and youth groups, but have admission policies for our schools that restrict the number of students coming from non-Christian homes. Is this because we think that 45 minutes of Sunday School or a 15 minute devotional after roller-skating are more effective in introducing children and youth to Jesus, The Truth, than five hours a day in a classroom?

Christian schools have the right and responsibility to limit enrollment to those who are not trying to destroy the school and discredit its message, but why would we want to refuse any family that was seeking to have their children taught by those who know The Truth? Their motivations may be wrong, but are the motivations of those we invite "to church" all pure? Christ deliberately went to the tax collectors and sinners because He knew—and they knew—that *it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick*. (Mark 2:17). It is the ignorant and misinformed who need someone to teach them—that is why God sent Philip into the desert to explain His Word to someone who did not understand it (Acts 8:26-39). We have an obligation to wisely and graciously make the truth available in schools.

I am very aware that "the man," woman, boy or girl, "without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). However, that is true when they are sitting in pews as well as in school desks. We discuss how many non-MKs are too many to maintain the vision of our missionary schools and how many non-Christians it takes to distort the Christian atmosphere of our school, but I have never heard a church discuss limiting the number of non-Christians coming to its services. One preacher can preach to thousands of non-believers. Can one teacher not influence 20-30 children? Pre-Christian education is not the same as Christian education and we have lots to learn about how to do both simultaneously in a classroom, but I am not convinced that it is more difficult than ministering to pre-Christians and Christians simultaneously from a pulpit.

Plenty of examples demonstrate the power of schools that are designed to bring salt and light into their communities, but let me mention just one. Craiova, Romania has a group of Christians who have been working hard for years to make an impact on their community for Christ. They

took the relief material brought in from the West and distributed it. They fed hungry people and created a center to feed the hungry their home-baked bread and nourishing food while breaking down the enmity between Gypsies and other Romanians. However, a few years ago they began a kindergarten for the children of their workers. Soon people from the neighborhood asked if their children could also be included. They gradually renovated their storage barn into a first-class kindergarten, complete with a dormitory for little ones who live too far away to travel every day. As the children got older, an elementary school was the obvious next step, and each year they have added a grade. They now have numerous kindergartens and an elementary school in a converted Swiss post office building. Even though they got started "by accident," Christian education is now the most effective way that they are making a difference in their community. "Everyone" from parents to politicians in Craiova recognizes the changes in the children's lives.

## Great Commission schools

Clearly, there are many potential problems in a school dedicated to fulfilling the great commission. These include possible coercion, cultural insensitivity, and usurpation of parental and personal responsibility, but there is no problem-free way for sinful people to interact in a broken world. Christian teachers in national or Christian schools can misuse the power of size, age, ability, and status, instead of depending on the power of the Holy Spirit. But let us avoid the disciples' mistake and "let the little children come to" Jesus (Matt. 19:14). Only the Holy Spirit can transform lives and make children and youth into the kind of people who will transform their world for Christ, but He needs transformed teachers who can both model and articulate God's perspective about all of life and learning. When Christian teachers are always ready to teach their students how to relate everything to the One who "is before all things, and in" Whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17), the students will become the kind of mature disciples who are the very foundation of a reproducing church.

May God make each one of us the kind of teacher who establishes every member of the church, including its youngest members! May we ensure that the great Creator, Sustainer and Saviour of EVERYTHING, the Head of the church, is central to our lives, our relationships, and our schools. May we not be satisfied until the children and young people of the whole world are given the opportunity to relate all of life and learning to Christ and the Bible—just like their teachers.