Session One

Initial Considerations in a Church Planting Strategy and some practical steps

1. Introduction

We are all learners. We need to learn from one another. There are no ready-made solutions. If only the whole body of Christ knew what some of the body of Christ knows, then we would all know a very great deal!

An evangelist is just one beggar showing another beggar where to find food. Remember the story in 2 Kings 7:3-20. Evangelism is helping each other find bread.

Strategy is explaining **why** we do what we do, **what** we are doing and why we don't do what we are not doing.

We must be brutally honest! This is a sacred responsibility. Paul said in Rom. 15:16, ***"…… because of the grace given to me by God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the Gospel of God ……."*** In the Old Testament, a failure to do exactly what was laid down had terrible consequences. Recall Uzziah's pride in trying to do the duty of a priest. The Lord struck him down with leprosy.

So be honest about yourself and your ministry. Is it taking you to where you want to go? Or, if it is not, then perhaps you need to learn something new. We mustn't **just** be pragmatists, doing what we think is best or doing what we want to do because it is familiar. So it is not simply a matter of whatever works. It is not a matter of the end justifying the means.

Following the Ascension and the suicide of Judas, both of which were unique events, Peter cites Scripture (see Acts 1:18-20) as to what should be done in finding a replacement for Judas. He was guided by Scripture. Again, following the event of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and its consequences in the lives of those present, again, an event without precedent, Peter uses **reason** and the **Scriptures** to explain what was happening. We need to check with Scripture all that we are doing and what we are observing.

The tragedy of the Pharisees was that they knew the Old Testament, but they refused to see what God was doing – the Messiah standing right in front of them! Why? Their interpretation of Scripture was framed by history and culture in such a way as to preclude the possibility that someone like Jesus could be the Messiah.

Jesus modelled for us the importance of what we do being aligned with Scripture. John the Baptist had sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Messiah or if they should wait for another (Luke 7:19-22). Jesus said that the evidence of His messiahship was in what He was **doing** and what He was doing was the fulfilment of Scripture – the signs of the Messianic Age. (Isaiah 35:5–6, ***"….. the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap…..and the tongue of the mute sing for joy…."***)

Scripture warmly affirms the Bereans in Acts 17:10-11 for checking with the Scriptures the things that Paul was teaching them.

Our mental map is often determined by what we have experienced. Often the church in England is bound by our traditional way of doing church. As a result, we expect to see reproduced exactly what we have known. But God is doing new things! But we do not see these things that find their correspondence in Scripture, because in our mental map they don't and can't exist.

For example, in the 80s if I talked about e-mail servers and secure or encrypted e-mail you might have wondered about my sanity. We were still using telex and snail mail. E-mail, Skype, Power Point presentations etc. hadn't happened **yet**.

Step 1: Start with the end in mind – end-visioning.

In biosynthesis, in engineering design, if you are going to make/construct something (a model enzyme or a bridge) you picture the final model Z. Often you can construct a computer model of this. Then you work backwards – i.e. if you had Y, then finally making Z would be relatively easy. So now the problem is to make Y. There may be more than one route to Y – say X_1 and X_2. Then you think how you could make both X_1 and X_2. Basically, you work as to the basic raw materials A. Now starting from A you examine each route - A⟶B…….X⟶Y⟶Z.

By now there may be 50 or more different pathways. Research and planning will give you the most probable path to Z. Then you start the process of making Z.

This is the **reverse** of prescriptive strategies or having a formula that applies well to the whole issue of church planting. We live and work in different contexts. Therefore it is probable that many different models and different pathways will exist to church planting and church planting movements.

So "cookie cutter" approaches don't work.

However, two great principles must be true of our models:

- **Our model must be faithful to the Word of God.**
- **Our model must be open to the activity of the Holy Spirit.**

So let us look at what God is doing in the Muslim World. But let us not go off the deep-end and be totally experience-oriented. Sadly, the Holy Spirit is being blamed for all sorts of crazy things – all based on people's experiences. Generally we are weak in our ability to test the spirits.

When we see/hear of what is going on in church planting, let us search the Scriptures to see if this corresponds to what the Bible teaches. But let us examine carefully our **interpretation** of Scripture. We can re-invent Pharisaism!

Step 2: Begin to develop a vision of what could be

We need to derive principles that we can learn to put into practice that ought to be of general application and adaptation into a local cultural context. The alternative to this approach is to start with an in-depth study of the Bible and then say we should follow the plan as laid down in Scripture. There are many who have done this [e.g. Hesselgrave in his very good book, **Planting Churches Cross-Culturally**]. The difficulty of this approach is that often our worldview is not entirely Biblical, but a mixture of Biblical and our own cultural presuppositions. This causes us to miss what the Holy Spirit is doing. What we need is the Word of God bearing witness to the work of the Holy Spirit.

So the plan is:

- Begin with a description of what is happening elsewhere in church planting and church planting movements.
- Ensure that it is Biblical.
- Begin to make a plan for action locally – adapting the model under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There is a danger in this approach.

There is a good deal of **'mythiology'** in missions – anecdotal stories – but there is little serious, accurate research (missiology) being done. Be very careful of rumours. Church planting involves a great deal of failure, but we need to **keep** learning – learning and trying again.

An analogy of our situation

Rick Warren, in his book **The Purpose Driven Church**, uses the analogy of surfing on the waves for God working in the world. It takes a lot of time and practice to learn to ride the great surfing waves. Professional surfers are awesome. God is making waves and, in some cases, powerful waves as in Algeria, Iran, West Java etc.

A definition of a spiritual wave:

There is a "buzz" about Jesus and His power – "spiritual gossip" about Jesus and the salvation (body and mind and spirit) that He brings.

Many sense a growing storm of troubles coming to the Muslim World. And the big waves come in storms! Do we have the expectation that God is going to bring great spiritual waves to our part of the Muslim World? We should! Are we ready and experienced in riding these waves?

To change the metaphor/analogy – "the new wine" is going to be poured out in greater measure. Are you going to pour it into old wineskins? If so, the wineskin will break and the potential to maximize what God is doing will be lost.

What is Strategy?

Strategy is the means by which you bring all your resources into alignment with what God is doing (riding the wave) and so accomplish your desired goal or vision. The resources include: the team, the Field structure, the MBBs you know, time, money, skills and abilities and the worldwide relationships of your support constituency.

So your strategy is to align your ministry with what God **is** doing and plans to do. To accomplish this, there needs to be observation and learning. Also absolutely essential is much prayer. God's plans are revealed to us after lengthy times of worship and emptying our minds of our thoughts. A W. Tozer wrote a book on revivals called **Born after Midnight**. Revivals are birthed out of extended times of prayer. So also are God's plans revealed to us in the same way.

Step 3: Planning

Recall the illustration that the Lord Jesus used of building a tower (Luke 14:28-30). The implication of the illustration is **planning**. Do your homework – budget, cash flow, time, suppliers, builders etc. So we have to **plan** in order to achieve the vision that God has put on our hearts.

In reality, in the Muslim World there are many obstacles. The "tower" that we need to build is in a swamp! We find ourselves up to our armpits in it and crocodiles are attacking us!
The crocodiles: government harassment, language, platform construction, keeping the family happy and secure, schooling, sickness etc. As a result, our aim becomes survival from attacks instead of tower building.

Some of the obstacles we face.

- **Platform construction and maintenance**

  This can take an inordinate amount of time and energy and so there is no time for evangelism and discipleship. Part of the solution to this is to keep the platform the same size, but increase the workforce by one or two. An effective platform doesn't answer all your problems.

- **All friendship and no evangelism**

  Relationships in the Muslim World are very time intensive. So invest time into relationships with only a **few** people (four or five). So the key is to find 'seekers' and/or find MBBs with the potential to reproduce. Again, you need the direction of the Holy Spirit and His leading in your friendship making.

Avoid 'carnality' – that is looking at the outward forms (like the ability to speak English) in your search for seekers. It is easy to find people "like me" and ignore the evidence of a quiet work of the Holy Spirit in a person "not like me"! Prayer and asking the Holy Spirit to show us who He is working in is vital.

When is it a good time to change your strategy?

The answer is: When what you are getting is not what you want! God's glory is at issue. ***"By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples."*** (Jn. 15:8). So think about changing when what you are getting is not enough fruit.

Another analogy: riding dead horses

We have had **old and new wineskins** and **surf-riding the waves**. And now another analogy: **riding horses**. In this case the horse takes you to where you want to go – your end-vision. Riding a dead horse is using a failed strategy. The strategy is 'a horse' that is supposed to get you to your goal.

When 'riding a dead horse' you should dismount and find a healthy horse you can ride – i.e. abandon the current strategy. Research a better one and start with that. Sadly, in Christian ministry, it is easy to just keep riding 'our dead horse'. Why? We love our horses dead or alive.

Approaches to riding a dead horse

- We use a bigger whip believing it is not dead, but just needs greater motivation.
- We use a bigger carrot – offering rewards to induce greater motivation
  i.e. we provide more funding to increase performance.
- We appoint a committee to study the dead horse and report back.
- We study how others ride dead horses.
- We appoint a team of "experts" to revive the dead horse.
- We train the rider better – send him on a sabbatical or upgrade his skills by sending him on a course.
- We hire others to ride it for us – i.e. get others to do what did not work for us – a plan often used by us when we hand over to nationals!
- We change the definition of **dead**, so now it's not dead, but just immobile for the moment.
  i.e. we change the performance requirements for a horse so that dead is okay.
- We compare our horse with other dead horses – ones that died a long time ago (smelling really bad) so our dead horses seem better.
- We harness our dead horse with other dead ones to see if there is synergy – i.e. we get all our dead horses together to see if they will go!

The **only** viable strategy is to bury the dead horse and get on and ride a healthy one! The key again is prayer and a consciousness of being led by the Holy Spirit. Here is an example, not perhaps of changing horses, but of a clear recognition that something is wrong.

Acts 16:6, ***"And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they came to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of God did not allow them. So passing by Mysia, they went to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision …."***

Four different paths to strategic advance

There are four diagnostic tools to help you to check your horse. They should help you to improve what you are doing and make progress on your end-vision.

1. Multiple-choice strategy

Using Homer's phrase in the Iliad: *"Launch a thousand ships"*, this is a strategy of trying **everything** and then seeing what works!

An assessment of this approach

What are its strengths?

- Of all the things you try to do, see what produces results. (If anything smokes, pour on the petrol!) The objective is to see what God blesses and then focus on that approach. This approach was used in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the 90s, when many, many organisations moved in – each with its own approach or approaches.

What are its weaknesses?

- This approach is an administrative nightmare. The leadership has too many balls in the air (a thousand!) and the result is usually chaotic.
- Everyone wants to do what they did at home. This is what they are familiar with so there is no contextualisation and no adaptation to the culture.
- One of the weaknesses of an organisation that focuses entirely on mobilising people is that everyone comes wanting to do what they feel comfortable doing. An example: the lead player in a Christian contemporary music band in the UK hears the challenge of the unreached Hazaras in Afghanistan. So his immediate thought is to go to the Hazaras and start-up and train young Hazara believers in Western Christian contemporary music and then form a band. He will be extremely disappointed that this is **not** a viable strategy – a completely dead horse! But it might work in Turkey.
- You can miss "success". Accountability and evaluation is hard with so much going on.
- It is very wasteful of resources as most approaches fail.
- It is not reproducible by locals. In Eastern Europe money often gave quick results. But within a decade the money dried up. Ministry was handed over to the locals. With their meagre financial resources they couldn't maintain the programme and the ministry collapsed.
- Workers become bonded to **failed** plans – keep riding their dead horses!

When should this approach be used?

- Perhaps only at the beginning of a very pioneering situation where there are no precedents and research has not been done. At any other time it is less strategic.
- Occasionally this approach can be used by short-termers (coming for one month or less) with much prayer, but they need to watch carefully to see if there is any smoke. Good evaluation in debriefing sessions is vital.
- If you have a very resistant people and absolutely nothing has worked so far.

When is this approach is less strategic?

- Almost at any time! You need to show new recruits **why** this is usually an ineffective approach. Collect some case studies of past uses of this approach to illustrate some of the causes of this ineffectiveness.

2. Innovation

This is coming up with a **new** plan – a new approach.

Examples of innovation in missions

- Short-term missions – birthed in the early 60s
- The "Jesus film" shown to all people everywhere in their own language

- Christian satellite broadcasting in various languages
- The use of the Internet in evangelism and discipleship
- Orality in chronological Bible storying
- 'Print on demand' in Christian publishing

An assessment of this approach

What are its strengths?

- Many new opportunities open up for ministry.
- It's new! So the pioneers of this approach are full of enthusiasm and hope and are highly motivated.
- It is relatively easy to raise money for a new approach.

What are the weaknesses?

- The new approach is usually very expensive. Budgeting is hard because there is no precedent. It is not only financially costly, but also costly in time and personnel.
- Most innovations fail.
- Always ask yourself why has this not been tried before? Do your research thoroughly.
- Usually innovations succeed because they are based on advances in technology. Examples:
    - Short-term missions came because, with the arrival of the Boeing 707, fares dropped dramatically – before this workers travelled by boat.
    - Satellite TV, Internet etc. are all based on technological advances.
- If you put all your eggs in one basket and it fails, then you are in trouble.

When should you use the innovation approach?

- When you have a genuine innovator on your team – usually with experience in some relevant area of high technology
- Don't put all your eggs in this basket
- When current strategies are not working
- The key is ruthless evaluation – regularly done every six months

When is this approach less strategic?

When current projects and programmes **are** working but need improvement. If you cancel an innovator's plan or project that they really believe will **finally** work given another year's work, they will probably be very angry with you – disappointed – even bitter and will probably leave the team.

3. Tweaking the Strategy/Morphing

This approach involves making steady improvement to what you are currently doing.

Examples include:

- In our Ships – the transition from Logos to Doulos and Logos II to Logos Hope in size and ministry effectiveness
- We found, in the Arab World, far more Christian literature could be sold using secular distribution channels than going door-to-door.

So this approach involves making regular incremental improvements.

Assessment of this approach

What are the strengths of this approach?

- You are working with what is already happening. Evaluation indicates that relatively small changes can be made that will probably improve effectiveness. You are not starting from scratch, as in the two previous approaches.
- This is a well-tried approach – most scientific and technological advances are made this way.

What are the weaknesses of this approach?

There is a spectrum. In horses this goes from strong, fast, healthy horses that have been well trained to the ordinary horse, to the sick horse and ultimately to the dead horse.

So, a key issue is to discern the health of your horse. If it is sick, is it recoverable or is it dying? And secondly, do you know how to turn sick horses into healthy ones?

You need some good diagnostic tools for your strategic plan – the equivalent of measuring:

- heartbeats
- blood sugar
- kidney and liver function etc.

In development work these are called performance markers. These should be identified before the strategic plan is put into action. This helps a great deal in regular evaluation of the ministry.

Two areas are vital:

Production: are you getting your prayed for results?

Production capacity: this is the health of your team – spiritually, mentally and physically

When should you use this approach?

- Most of the time!
- When a project/ministry is working but **could do better**
- It applies in:
    - Language learning and cultural adaptation training
    - Evangelism and discipleship
    - Platform construction
    - Member Care
    - Church planting

The focus is on **quality** as well as quantity if there is going to be sustained growth. So don't be satisfied with just growth in quantity – more team members, more people coming to faith etc. Seek to measure **quality** – especially in team life and in the lives of the MBBs.

A question is often asked when, in the context of the Muslim World, there exists a Christian minority background church (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, Iraq, Iran etc.). Should these churches be counted as 'dead horses' in terms of planting contextualised-to-Muslim background believers churches? A similar question is asked of expatriate churches in Muslim countries. Often an assumption is made that **no amount** of morphing can be made in order to make them effective. Is this valid?

I believe it is **really worthwhile** to morph these people in these churches by training some of them in Muslim evangelism and in discipling MBBs. Pastors are not usually innovators, but you

might well find, within the body of the church, those who could be encouraged. Pastors are usually reliable, solid, dependable, predictable people who preach the Word of God and shepherd their flock. These churches are not focused on Muslims. Don't try and change the whole church! But some **individuals** in the church may be called by God to reach out to Muslims. **Identify them and equip them** and incorporate them into your strategy.

When would this approach be less strategic?

- When your horse is dying and there is no hope of recovery
- When the trend is to be less and less effective. Typical examples of this are institutions started in the past as an effective platform – schools, hospitals and orphanages etc. But as the decades have gone on effectiveness has ceased.

4. Bench marking with "best practice" and adapting it to your situation

I don't particularly like the term "best practice" for it is a constantly changing term – like shooting at a moving target. For what is "best" today may well be improved tomorrow and then be "second-best". But I do like the process of "bench marking".

This process of strategic planning requires much spiritual discernment, for it is susceptible to carnality – looking just at the outward appearance.

One of the difficulties of this approach in restricted access countries where security is tight, is that it is very difficult to find out what is really happening. Mythiology can easily deceive.

This approach seeks to find out:

- What is the most effective way to learn the language?
- What is the most effective way to construct a platform?
- What approaches are most effective in Muslim evangelism?
- What are vital and Biblical truths to teach a new believer?
- etc.

The key to this approach is research. You have to try and find out **all you can** about these issues. Take every opportunity to learn and then adapt it to your situation.

In this approach you and your team need to be knowledge-hungry. You want to find out in detail:

- What is the **best** that is going on in my field in my company?
- What is the **best** that is going on in other companies in my Field?
- What is the **best** going on in **other related Fields** in our company?
- What is the **best** going on in the Muslim World in general?
- What is the **best** going on in development or in business that I can adapt to improving my platform?

This approach requires taking every opportunity to learn. Our company needs to make many opportunities to learn.

This approach depends on your ability to measure what is "best". You need to develop criteria to measure what is "best". This is a very healthy exercise and it is essential in this method. Again, it needs lots of prayer and examining "best practice" in the light of Scripture. We are given both good and poor models of church planting in Scripture.

An assessment of this approach

What are its strengths?

- **Adaptation** is essential (never adopt). In this way, it can be made to conform to the local situation. This needs prayer to discern how to adapt. It also needs a good understanding of the local culture – both the forms and the understood content of these forms.

Think carefully of all the possibility of Biblically acceptable functional substitutes for some of these forms. Again, this needs much discussion wider than your local team – probably in a national context.

What are its weaknesses?

- It requires a lot of time, money and effort in cross-fertilisation in order to find out about "benchmarks".
- It requires good assessment tools – i.e. an ability to measure what is "best". These assessment tools are not readily available.

When should you use it?

- Whenever you can – everywhere you can – i.e. not only in church planting, but in team building, in development, in business transformation etc.
- "We should not only use our own brains, but all that we can borrow!"
- Reading, research, asking questions and cross-fertilisation are essential.

When would it be less strategic?

- Possibly, never! The key is humility! You have to want to learn in order to be effective (admitting that you don't know everything).
- If you are in difficulty, your team is struggling and is really discouraged, then focus on sorting out the internal team issues. The danger of this is that Satan will try to deceive you that your team is never going to succeed and you should leave. So analyse the internal problems and begin to work with the team on correcting them. But this is also the time to start researching how the team could be more effective.

Developing a comprehensive strategy to improve effectiveness

- **Pray and seek God's answers:** Don't ever give up seeking greater effectiveness! People are going to hell!
- **Develop a balanced portfolio:** Which of these four strategies are you currently pursuing? Examine what is working and what is not. Also study church history – especially expansion into areas that have not yet been reached – i.e. pioneer efforts. (How did Celtic missionaries from Ireland – always outside the Roman Empire – evangelise northern Europe?) Start with Acts and the whole of the New Testament.

Strategy	**Current %**	**Aimed for %**	**Ideal %**
1. Multiple choice			Less than 5%
2. Innovation			10%
3. Morphing			45%
4. Bench marking/ "best practice"			40%

- Soak everything you do in prayer and concentrate on hearing God's voice.
- Work on assessing your own situation. What is the ratio of strategies that your team is currently using? Put this in terms of a percentage. What are you going to do in the light of the strengths and weaknesses of that approach? I have given an “ideal” – i.e. a major focus on morphing and “bench marking”.

Life is too short for you not to evaluate what you are doing. If what you are doing is exactly the same as 20 years ago, how can you live with yourself unless you are seeing miraculously great results?