Strategizing for Church Planting Movements in the Muslim World

Informal Reviews of Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity* and David Garrison's *Church Planting Movements*

by Rebecca Lewis

Rebecca Lewis grew up in Guatemala. After receiving a BS in History from the California Institute of Technology in 1977, she and her husband Tim helped found Frontiers and led a team of 40 adults to reach Berbers of North Africa.

During their field years she also helped develop a home-schooling program for field workers called Sonlight Curriculum. *She is currently working on a one-year integrated college program called INSIGHT (Intensive Study of Integrated Global History). See www.uscwm.org/ insight for more details.*

(Note: In this article, "church planting movements" does not refer to the propagation of Western-style churches complete with pastors, buildings and offerings. It refers to self-propagating small clusters or communities of believers, with indigenous leadership, self-determined indigenous worship forms, and on-site leadership training patterns).

During our many years working among the Berbers of North Africa, it was easy to become discouraged. We wondered if the church could ever be planted and thrive in a country where the police regularly beat up anyone thought to believe in Christ (or any faith other Sunni Islam). As a result, I have become increasingly intrigued by the way belief in Christ spreads in hostile cultures.

Two very different books now shed light on this subject: *Church Planting Movements*, by David Garrison of the International Mission Board (Southern Baptists), and *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, by sociologist Rodney Stark.

In his book, Garrison reports situations where house-churches are rapidly planting new house-churches, resulting in uncontrolled multiplication. These contemporary church planting movements (CPMs) have much in common with the spread of the early church throughout the Roman Empire, the subject Stark addresses. Of special interest is what common factors exist in these rapidly expanding movements, and how to foster such movements in Muslim countries, which are similar in many ways to the "state religion" era of the Roman Empire.

In *The Rise of Christianity,* Stark analyzes factors, apart from the supernatural, which contributed to the rapid growth of the Christian movement in a hostile environment. He estimates that Christianity grew by an average rate of 3.42% per year or 40% per decade going from an estimated 1000 Christians (.0017 % of the population) in the year 40AD, to 217,800 in the year 200AD (or .36 % of the population), to 6.3 million by 300AD (10.5 % of the population), to possibly 33.9 million (56%) of the population by 350AD, at which time the growth-rate decreased significantly.

Stark attributes the ability of the Christian movement to grow so quickly for such a long period of time, despite opposition, to several key factors. Some of these factors can be applied in the modern Muslim context, which will also be compared with modern CPMs from Garrison's book. Here are some of the main points in Stark's book, with my comments:

1. Community: Stark points out that in the Roman Empire, Christianity created a strong community out of the believers, bringing converts into a network of intimate personal relationships and security during insecure times. Faiths where priests or religious leaders merely service clientele, which was true of the Roman temples, do not have the capacity to create a strong sense of belonging. Animistic religions tend to follow the "clientele" model of religious organization. Islam, particularly in its folk forms, frequently follows a similar pattern.
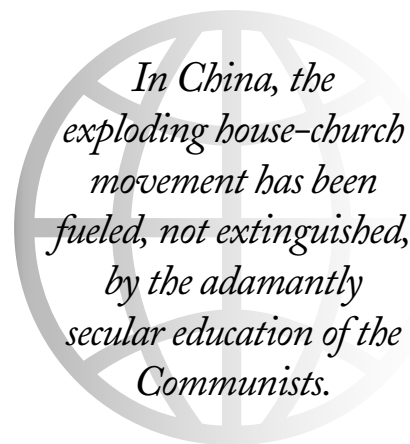
In Muslim (as well as Hindu and Buddhist) cultures, the locus of community tends to be in the family, not the mosque (or temples). Worship and religious duties are frequently performed individually. For example, men will pray individual prayers at the same time at the mosque, while women are excluded, praying alone in their homes.

Once during a discussion with the leader of a mosque, the imam said proudly that a Muslim can worship anywhere, praying toward Mecca…any rug or piece of cloth can become a mosque. Christians, he said, need a special building in order to have a church. The Christian students I had brought to the mosque protested, pointing out that Christians met in homes for centuries before they were able to build public church buildings. The imam then asked, "So what is it that makes a church a church?" He seemed startled by the students' answer, "There has to be a group of people, at least 2 or 3." The idea that community was the basic unit of a church surprised him.

In fact, community is one of the most key and unique components of Christianity—and one of the most attractive. In times of upheaval, the committed community (formed in small house churches, which are often composed of a few close family networks) provides stability, fellowship, and security. One of my Muslim friends decided to become a follower of Jesus. When we asked her why she had made this difficult decision, she said, "I want to be a part of your community."

Garrison emphasizes that by avoiding church buildings (and rapidly establishing many family-based house churches instead), modern CPMs have been able to keep a strong community character complete with accountability and help for poorer members. They also maximize participation of all lay

> *In China, the exploding house-church movement has been fueled, not extinguished, by the adamantly secular education of the Communists.*

members in the ministry functions of a church fellowship. In addition, these law-abiding small communities are able to flourish even under repressive regimes, like that in China, because they do not seem as much of a threat as institutional forms of Christianity. They play a crucial role in providing security during uncertain times.

2. Secular education: In the Roman Empire, Christianity grew fastest among a large number of religiously inactive or discontented people, who were educated and aware of other systems and ways of life. Stark argues persuasively that religious skepticism is most prevalent among the educated, privileged and middle classes, and that these people are the most likely to seek new religious answers.

In many Muslim countries, secular education from the West dominates the secondary schools and universities. As education becomes increasingly widespread and secularized, large numbers of Muslim young people are exposed to opposing ideas and become more skeptical about Islam. In China, the exploding house-church movement has been fueled, not extinguished, by the adamantly secular education of the Communists. Secularization can also harden hearts to the gospel, as can be seen in Western Europe, but if Stark's thesis is true, even there it should make people more skeptical of their roots, and as a result more open to change. Another result of secular education worth noting is its tendency to fuel revolutions by exposing students to alternative worldviews, including Marxism. One example is Osama Bin Laden, who is said to have modeled his Islamic radical cell groups on ideas garnered from Marxism.

While Garrison does not talk specifically about the role of education in CPMs, there can be little doubt that the literacy level of a people group, along with having Bibles in their own language, are key factors. He does discuss the importance of worship in the vernacular, a factor common with the rapid spread of the early church. In Muslim areas, vernacular translations of the Bible for literate populations will enable those who are seeking to have access to holy books, even if they cannot read the classical Arabic of the "untranslatable" Koran.

3. Supernaturalism: According to Stark, the existing religious systems in the Roman Empire were becoming increasingly devoid of supernaturalism, and hence were not satisfactory, while Christianity restored power in the supernatural realm. Islam and Christianity both have discovered that converts will still resort to animistic practices, producing "folk" Islam or Christianity, if the supernatural realm is disregarded. In the last century, Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity have exploded worldwide, and Philip Jenkins, in his book *The Next Christendom,* predicts they will reach one billion adherents by 2050. David Garrison points out that power in the spirit realm is a consistent factor in the success of CPMs today. He quotes one missionary as saying "All the Church Planting Movements I have seen in China are full of heal-

ings, miracles, and even resurrections." (pg. 233)

The Charismatic movement has helped de-secularize the Western church and return us all to a more biblical balance on the supernatural power of the gospel. In Muslim areas, the Holy Spirit has been moving through dreams, healings, and other supernatural means. Those being trained to go into Muslim areas need specific training in spiritual warfare and gifts that Christ could use to show that His power is greater than that of Muslim healers. Christianity must demonstrate that it has supernatural power and is not merely another philosophical construct.

4. Open Networks: In the early church, Christianity spread along pre-existing social networks, especially the diaspora Jewish movement; however, as networks of *non-believers,* they kept believers in contact with non-Christians for many generations. In CPMs today, Garrison stresses the importance of new believers immediately winning their non-Christian friends in other villages or parts of the city and starting new cell churches in the new locations, instead of drawing these more distant believers back to their own group. This rapid spread is important, because once believers become established enough to be rejected by the surrounding community, social networks with non-believers begin to shut down. Just as the early church spread through the Jewish diaspora, spilling over into the surrounding gentile communities, in the Muslim world it is important to work through existing Islamic networks, either ethnic or sects, etc. It is interesting to watch the spread of Islamic terrorist groups, which in some ways are a religious/identity revival movement. They demonstrate a desire on the part of Islamic young people for meaning in their lives, committed community, and international identity networks. They also operate covertly in Muslim countries, where they, like groups of believers, can be perceived as a political threat to the Islamic regime.

I personally know of only two teams in Muslim contexts who are specifically and intentionally targeting

a social network of non-believers through which the faith could spread throughout the country or even neighboring countries. While "open networking" is automatic to some extent when targeting extended families in a small, specific people group, a large people group, such as the Kurds, is often too dispersed or fractured to have the advantage a smaller, tighter group would give.

5. Cultural Continuity: Early Christianity retained cultural continuity with the people's background, enabling converts to continue to form new relationships with non-converts in their society. Stark points out that people do not so much *seek* a new faith, as *encounter* one through ties to others who have accepted the new faith. These encounters depend both on keeping open networks with non-believers, and with maintaining continuity with the culture of the non-believers.

The modern contextualization movement has promoted maintaining cultural continuity by emphasizing the importance of retaining or building on as much of the cultural and religious practices of the people coming to Christ as possible. This sometimes becomes distorted into an artificial process of outsiders trying to make Western Christian forms less foreign by adopting local practices, for example, foreign workers encourage sitting on the floor or singing with local instruments, so that the faith won't seem foreign to non-believers and become an insulated subculture. This is a hit-and-miss process at best. In movements where each house church is rapidly establishing more semi-autonomous house churches, each group is led by a local lay leader, music is introduced by new believers, and, having never seen a foreign church, cultural continuity is natural. No foreigners are present. Lay leaders help insure cultural continuity.

This pattern of lay leadership shows up both in the early church as well as modern CPMs. Garrison points out a significant reason to promote lay, non-professional local leadership:

> Within weeks of becoming a new Christian, far too many believers drift out the back door never to

be seen again. Putting laymen and women to work within the church has proven to be the single most effective means of 'closing the back door'… and insuring a lifetime involvement with the body of Christ. (pg. 190)

In Titus, Paul urges Titus to quickly appoint elders in every city of Crete, and meet him by winter.

In Muslim countries, reversion to Islam is a common and significant problem. If natural leaders are immediately allowed to fulfill leadership roles within the new believing community, bodies of believers could grow along culturally acceptable lines. Without the stigma of foreign involvement, solutions to major problems (like remaining in the Muslim community for marriage, circumcision and death rituals) could be more easily negotiated. Stark points out that for up to two centuries we still find quite a few Christians being buried in Jewish cemeteries, demonstrating continued cultural continuity.

6. Courage of Believers and High Cost of Believing: Both Stark and Garrison underscore the role that courage in the face of crises or persecution plays in the rapid spread of house churches. In the Roman Empire, Christians showed a marked lack of fear of death, enabling them to be the "heros" in times of crisis, particularly two epidemics which killed a large percentage of the population. A far lower percentage of Christians died in these plagues because they cared for their sick and for the sick pagans, too. (They thereby significantly reduced Christian mortality from the plagues and increased conversions due to care, as well as post-plague immunity of the Christian population.)

Believers today who show bold, fearless faith during times of famine, war, persecution and imprisonment have a much greater witness to others. Also, persecution itself seems to weed out casual believers and keep churches vibrant, a factor both Stark and Garrison discuss. In the Muslim world, the high cost of being a believer may actually help any CPMs that get started. Stark argues that the high level of community *combined* with the high cost of being a believer produced

the most attractive kind of faith community. The faith has even more credibility when the religious leaders receive low material rewards, as is the case with unpaid lay pastors, or are subject to suffering and martyrdom for their faith. "Sacrifice and stigma mitigate the free-rider problems faced by religious groups." The high cost induces higher levels of commitment of members generating greater community benefits for members.

While the Muslim converts often show a lot of courage, modern missionaries from the West are often unwilling to suffer significant material hardship, much less danger to their lives. The credibility of our faith would increase significantly if more missionaries would show a willingness to suffer, and stay in dangerous situations to care for the sick or hurt. Garrison specifically points out in his book that the willingness of missionaries to suffer is a key factor in most CPMs. A recent example of this is the suffering of Mrs. Gladys Staines who remained in India to preach the importance of forgiveness after her husband and two sons were burned to death in their car by radical Hindus. Her words now carry almost as much respect as that of Mother Teresa, according Tim Stafford in a recent issue of *Christianity Today*. Many baptisms are resulting from her ministry.

7. Women: Stark makes a strong case that the poor treatment of women under Roman law and culture significantly increased the number of women who became believers. There were five men to every three women in Greek and Roman areas during the early Christian centuries, due to the regular practice of infanticide of female children. Nevertheless, the ratio was reversed in the early churches, with female believers significantly outnumbering male believers. The women helped to spread the gospel through marriage, childbearing and service. Apparently many of these women married non-Christian men (since Christian men were in short supply), believing "an unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife" (I Cor. 7:13-14). Stark quotes Peter Brown as saying

the Christian women were the "gate-way" into unbelieving families by becoming "wives, servants and nurses of unbelievers." Christian women were also unlikely to leave their infants to die, greatly increasing their fertility rate. The vast majority of the children of these marriages became believers, some becoming important Christian leaders.

It has been widely quoted that in both Korea and China, 19 out of 20 house church leaders or small group leaders are women. The disproportionate number of women missionaries in China were able to train many women in the Bible, while only a few of the

Those who remained believers almost always had a believing mother standing behind them.
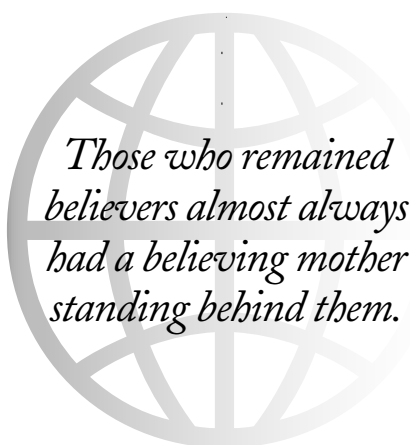
male converts were selected to go to a formal Bible training institute, significantly increasing the ratio of Bible-trained women to men. These women in turn trained others, becoming the Bible women of China, using a pattern similar to the Bible Study Fellowship movement in the West. During the cultural revolution, male pastors were put into prison, while their wives and the many other female leaders in the house churches were often overlooked. The women were able to flee west into less oppressive areas, carrying the gospel with them. Though Garrison does not mention this common thread, there is no doubt that women have been highly significant in spreading house-church movements, especially in areas experiencing government opposition and persecution. Women with strange ideas are not as threatening to governments as men. This amazing fact should not be

overlooked when discussing strategies for the Muslim world.

When we were in Morocco, I noticed an interesting phenomena. While many men who had become believers reverted to Islam at the time of marriage, those who remained believers almost always had a believing mother standing behind them. In the more oppressive Muslim societies, the women seek power and security through their sons, who serve both as protection and as support once their husbands die. It follows that believing wives, while not necessarily able to win their husbands to the Lord, will have power to win their sons, even if secretly.

Like in ancient Rome, the women in many Islamic countries feel tremendous insecurities due to easy divorce, the husband's control over the children of divorce, and infidelity. Some would argue this makes them more likely to hide their faith, which is true. But it also makes them people searching for the kind of relationship with God, and the power and joy it brings, that only Isa al Masih (Jesus the Messiah) can give them. They and their children can become the foundation of tomorrow's house-church movement within Islam. However, unlike the Roman period, we discourage these believing women from continuing to marry into the non-believing community, greatly hampering the spread of the gospel to the next generation. Many of our believing Muslim women are childless and lack influence because they've failed to marry.

The women of Islam could very well be the gateway of the gospel into Islamic networks, as was true in Roman society. Perhaps we should encourage believing women in Muslim cultures to fulfill their evangelistic potential through strategic marriages and service. Throughout history, women have played very significant roles in introducing Christianity into new areas, even when taken against their will. Winning the discontented women could be our greatest entree into Muslim society. For this to happen, women missionaries and mission

societies need to value and make a top priority reaching the women of Islam. With 50% of the population in many Muslim countries under the age of 15, the remaining 25% that are adult females have become even more strategic, because of their influence over the children.

8. Urbanization: As Stark points out, the gospel spread quickly in the crowded cities, which disrupted normal social networks and created a great need for solutions to immorality, family disintegration, and isolation. And Christianity provided answers. The same is true today, where an increasing percentage of the population in Muslim and other countries are being dislocated to the outskirts of cities. David Garrison does not comment on whether or not modern CPMs tend to be more rural or more urban in nature. However many of the same reasons why urbanization gave impetus to the early church movement would still be true today. The Islamic world, like most other developing areas, is increasingly urban in nature, giving us one more reason to hope for many CPMs in Muslim areas in the near future.

9. Moral Vision: Stark point out that it was very important that Christianity persistently promulgated a moral vision, bringing " a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty". Though not dealt with directly in Garrison's book, the ability of the church as a believing community to transform the lives of individuals, to free them from their own sins and to disestablish the sins of their society is clearly implied in his emphasis on having a "healthy church." The direct accountability of small groups is a crucial factor in bringing this to pass, along with a deep commitment to seek out answers in scripture and obey them. The early church brought healing to women forced to abandon their daughters; the modern church movements can likewise bring healing to those suffering from abortion of daughters in India (for dowry reasons) and in China (for one-child reasons). The spreading churches will be stronger if they have a moral vision that defends the dignity of humanity and provide answers to moral issues in society.

The "moral vision" of Christianity has unfortunately been significantly damaged by the general perception in the Muslim world that all Westerners are Christians. The church and missionaries need to have the integrity to denounce Western abuses and the degeneration of morals in the West. When the U.S. government sides with despotic regimes, particularly those in the Muslim world, American missionaries need to be Christians first and Americans second, even willing to admit that some of the complaints of Muslim radicals are valid. The church in the West keeps quiet on many moral issues to preserve their popularity and immunity from criticism. However, the fast-growing church of Roman times, compared to the slow growing "state church" post-Constantine, demonstrates that persecution is less of a detriment to the spread of the gospel than moral compromise.

In conclusion, there is a cautionary lesson that can be learned from the rapidly expanding church of the first centuries. When did the quality of the clergy and the moral standards of the laity decline? When did the phenomenal growth rate plateau? It happened when Constantine began funneling the money once used to pay pagan priests and construct pagan temples into providing the same functions within the church. Soon men of small faith were jostling for clerical appointments with guaranteed salaries, some being baptized and ordained in the same week. Even instituting formal training for clerics did not diminish the moral and spiritual slide of paid leadership with status in society. Only in the monastic tradition, which continued to demand a higher cost for believers at least initially, did the clergy continue to speak out against abuses. They also fought the increasing emphasis among church leaders on theology (arising from the long standing emphasis on philosophy as the foundation of education) rather than on discipleship and obedience.

Naïve churches in the wealthy West often try to help CPMs by offering to pay for the salaries of evangelists and pastors, help with the construction of churches, and support of the Western-style seminary training of house-church pastors. Inadvertently playing the damaging role of Constantine, churches that "help" in these ways actually kill the church-planting movement. In Garrison's words, "When foreign funds tie the movement to outside sources, missionaries describe it as 'help that hurts.' When well meaning foreigners provide subsidies to pastors and construct local church buildings, they sap local initiative… it creates dependency and eventually a state of puppets and welfare dependents." (pg. 253)

In the Muslim world all too often one of the few strong believers in the country, instead of being encouraged to plant multiple house-churches, is shipped out to a Christian Arab seminary in the Middle East, or worse yet, an American seminary. He may become an international testimony to the power of Christ in a Muslim's life, but he will never return to start a house-church planting movement in his own country. As Garrison argues, on-the-job leadership training is crucial to these movements, as are other factors, such as low-cost, lack of foreign control, and the ability to pass the training on to the next group. It is even more important than elsewhere to diminish all financial and leadership connections to Western churches, if indigenous fellowships of believers are to flourish in Muslim contexts.

Can we expect rapidly expanding CPMs to develop in the Muslim world? If you look at the above qualifications, not only is the answer a resounding yes, but the Muslim world may actually be one of the best places for this to happen, when correct strategies are applied. The most exciting thing to realize is that there may already be many more such movements going on in the Muslim world than we are aware of. **IJFM**