

Three Emerging Streams

The government and indigenous cults are threats to the church here, but self, the 'jiùrén' (旧人) of Romans 6:6, is the greatest threat.

From March 28-April 1, 2006 an on-site assessment of emerging CPM activity was undertaken in an area of Asia with a strong, pre-1949 history of Presbyterian work. Three distinct streams of CP activity were explored: two in rural areas and one in an urban setting. The strategy coordinator initiated work in this area three years ago. Vision casting and T4T training has contributed to the emergence of church planting activity among each of these three networks.

Stream One – An Urban Network Starting a Few Churches

Twelve informants from an urban stream were interviewed. Only one had been a believer for less than 10 years. Most joined house church groups in the mid 1990s. The network leader, a man in his 50s, came to faith during college and moved to the area to do business before giving up his career to pursue full-time ministry. His efforts unified a group of independent meeting places into a network that today encompasses more than a hundred groups. T4T training by the SC contributed to the planting of 14 new churches in 2003, 17 in 2004 and 25 in 2005. The SC also has influenced the network to embrace baptism by immersion.¹ This network is doing consistent evangelism and starting new groups as needed to accommodate new believers.

The assessment team observed that top leadership has a strong vision for evangelizing the city, but that vision has not filtered down to many of the co-workers. They are using T4T materials and view T4T as a helpful resource for training people to share the gospel. They agree that any new believer can share his or her faith, but disagree with the concept that anyone can lead a new group. In their leadership concept it takes about three years for leaders to mature. They have a shortage of leaders for the groups they are currently starting and it appears that leadership development may be a bottleneck to further growth.

Stream Two – A Rural Network of Churches Planting Churches

Four informants from a rural stream were interviewed. The network leader, a 61 year old farmer, came to faith 20 years ago through the influence of his wife. Four years ago this network was a single house church in a rural village.² Three years ago the SC began T4T training with this rural house church. They added 2 new groups in 2003, 3 new groups in 2004, 4 new groups in 2005, and report 7 new groups already planted through the first quarter of 2006. Currently they baptize either by sprinkling or immersion³ but they noted that a baptistery is being constructed in a village church and they anticipate using this facility to immerse.

The assessment team observed that this group is emphasizing shared leadership and is willing to let new believers lead. They are positive about T4T and intentional

¹ Many of these believers were sprinkled as adults but have been re-baptized by immersion in the last three years.

² Many of the scattered villages have 1,000 or less people and most village residents share the concept that one church per village is enough.

³ Convenience was the reason noted for baptismal mode.

about evangelism and church planting. They did not articulate a large vision but they did convey an openness to learn and a dependence on the SC for training and encouragement. In addition to T4T training the SC is providing they are receiving training from at least two other outside sources.

Stream Three – A Rural Awakening

Stream three is an emerging rural network that traces its birth to events in the spring of 2003. Seven people were interviewed. Four of the seven had been believers for five years or less. The network leader is a 44 year old man who came to faith in 2001 in the State Church. He continued to be loosely involved in that church—though expressing clear dissatisfaction with his experience there—until the spring of 2003 when State churches were ordered closed to check the spread of an acute respiratory virus. He joined the one house church in the area at about the same time that the SC began T4T training with this house group. By the end of 2003 they had started 3 new churches. They added 9 new churches during 2004 and another 9 new churches during 2005. Over one hundred people were baptized by the SC in the summer of 2004. The 21 current groups number around 250 believers. New believers are being baptized solely by immersion, but they continue to depend on outsiders to baptize.

The assessment team observed that this network is also receiving training from at least two other outside groups and that some of the teachings are incompatible with CPM concepts. The SC is candid in admitting that he cannot meet all of their training needs and encourages them to evaluate outside training in light of his CPM teaching. They are using T4T to train and their people are passing this T4T training along to others. Groups are consistently multiplying within six months to one year. Offerings are being used to fund training for group leaders and to fund outreach to new areas.

General Observations from the Three Streams – Factors Contributing to Growth

There is a clear sense of trust between the Strategy Coordinator and network leaders in all three streams that gives the SC significant influence with each network. The Presbyterian history of the State churches in this area promotes a conservative, reformed theology but baptism by sprinkling is the common pattern. The SC is intentionally moving these networks toward the biblical practice of baptism by immersion, but they are not all solidly there yet.

All three streams are doing abundant evangelism with a strong emphasis on personal evangelism. Multiple levels of leadership are in place to provide encouragement to emerging leaders. Flexibility to include newer believers in leadership may be a key to faster multiplication in the two rural streams than in the more established urban stream.

Teachability appears to be a key factor contributing to growth in all three streams. Informants expressed a hunger for training and a longing to know and serve God better. The SC came on the scene at a time when all three groups were looking for help and he immediately began training among all three streams. While their response to the T4T methodology and their understanding of CPM concepts varies significantly—even among individuals within a given stream—they are putting into practice the things they are learning.

Emphasis on prayer and openness to the supernatural are common to these three streams. Prayer was prominently mentioned in relation to leadership development. Informants from two of the streams specifically mentioned prayer meetings where they focused on praying for people's needs and seeking God's direction in making leadership decisions. Numerous stories of miracles, deliverances, healings and dramatic conversions were shared with the assessment team. Openness to and expectation of God's supernatural activity is normative experience for believers in these networks and appears to be a direct contributing factor to their numerical growth.

None of these streams has been seriously impacted by cult activity although one indigenous cult and Seventh Day Adventists were both mentioned as concerns. Where threats have arisen, prior training has proven sufficient to enable believers to respond appropriately and avoid significant disruption to their networks.

General Observations from the Three Streams – Challenges Threatening Growth

Stream one has a leadership model that discourages new believers from quickly moving into leadership. Stream two voiced a similar model but included at least one capable new believer in leadership at an early stage. The concept that it takes two to three years for new believers to mature before they are capable of leading a new group will definitely slow reproduction.

Some of the informants—all of whom are group leaders—clearly view T4T as an outreach method without articulating any concept of T4T as a reproducible model for training leaders. Yet these same people voiced concern that they need more leaders. Within stream one, several people voiced concern over what they described as excessive *pressure to share* in the T4T material. They are already doing evangelism and don't see the accountability aspect as helpful. The SC needs to continue to work with leaders in these streams to help them understand and implement a reproducible model for training leaders.

Dependence on outside leadership for the ordinances is a concern as it unnecessarily delays baptism and results in infrequent observance of the Lord's Supper. Initially the assessment team inferred that *spiritual authority* was the key issue behind the practice. The SC explained that dependence on outsiders is related more to security than to authority.⁴ Explanations aside, dependence on outsiders to lead the ordinances is a point of concern as it inhibits development of healthy churches.

Multiple outside training sources may cloud the vision. When needs are great there is a temptation to accept training from any available sources. Assessing the suitability of training and guiding these streams to find suitable outside sources of training may be critical to sustaining multiplication.

Tradition stands in conflict with biblical practice in some areas. All three streams are moving toward immersion, but sprinkling was still noted by some as more convenient. They seem to agree that immersion is biblical, but reliance on a more convenient mode argues that they do not see baptismal mode as a vital issue.

⁴ Local network leaders are hesitant to baptize because this would identify them as high level leaders in the eyes of local government officials. If they bring in someone from outside it appears that none of the local leaders are sufficiently important for local officials to bother with.