An Emerging Urban Network

A common thread among leaders was their participation in the State Church and dissatisfaction with its inability to reach the younger generation.

From April 28 - May 1, 2006 an on-site assessment of emerging CPM activity was undertaken in one of Asia's smaller cities.[1] While a few of the house churches are in outlying districts, this work is primarily within the city's urban districts. Eighteen informants were interviewed, ranging in age from 23 to 52. Most were in their thirties. Only three had been believers for more than 5 years and half had been believers for three years or less. All but one was currently leading a house church group.

Overview of the Network Origin and Growth

This emerging CPM traces its origins to a house church started by a couple who came to faith in the mid 90s. While attending the local State Church they started a meeting in their home to address deeper spiritual concerns that weren't being met. In 2001 a Trailblazer came to the city and began nurturing their spiritual growth and promoting evangelism, particularly among young adults. They started two more house groups but struggled to keep the three groups going. They baptized as many as 100-120 people a year during that time with the main group growing to 40-50 people. The size of the group drew the attention of police but due to their continued involvement with the State Church they were able to avoid trouble.[2] This experience reinforced a growing conviction that the church in Asia needed to be small group oriented.

The Strategy Coordinator arrived in the fall of 2003, was introduced to key leaders by the Trailblazer and immediately began casting vision for rapid multiplication of small groups. Six core leaders were identified and T4T training began. At that point there was only one house church. By the end of the first quarter of 2004 there were five groups. During 2004 further T4T training was provided[3] and by the end of 2004 there were nine house churches. During 2005 assessment by an outside trainer helped them identify issues they were struggling with and the kinds of training they needed. By the end of 2005 the number of groups had multiplied from 9 to 42, but providing sufficient training for so many new leaders was proving difficult.

Since January of 2006 they have brought in outside trainers three times to address their expanding training needs.[4] They have gone through several transitions from using a pure T4T approach to experimenting with Models for Ministry. Recently they have returned to a T4T approach. They've experimented with different approaches for delivering "just in time" training to their group leaders. In the SC's words, "we feel like we've started over three times." At the time of this assessment the six core leaders were beginning to implement a modified leadership structure in response to training needs resulting from their rapid growth. After one bad experience with an outside trainer from another organization, the core leaders determined to accept training only from people approved by the strategy coordinator.

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[1] Smaller city refers to a city with a residential population less than 1 million.
[2] One key leader of this group continues to serve as a high ranking official within the local State Church.
[3] The T4T training was provided by company personnel brought in from another part of the region.
[4] The assessment interviews were conducting during a four-day Mid-level Training event.

The Strategy Coordinator meets weekly with the six core leaders, focusing on a variety of issues including: bible study, problem solving, long-range strategy planning and training needs.[5] Each of the six core leaders is responsible for one stream or *thread* of groups.[6] He meets weekly with the six second-level group leaders (*shepherds*) under him to train, encourage and support.[7] Those leaders in turn meet weekly with the group leaders in their streams, passing along the training they have received and shepherding these group leaders, many of whom are new believers. With this model, in addition to the house church he or she leads, each shepherd has one up-line meeting each week (with the person shepherding him or her) and one down-line meeting each week (with the 1-6 group leaders he or she is shepherding). Training provided to level-one leaders is passed down the line to level-two and so forth. A few of the groups have seen fourth generation reproduction, some of it coming in just the last few weeks.

The assessment team observed that the group leaders have a good grasp of the church planting component and are intentionally identifying, training and sending out leaders to start new groups. Evangelism is being done widely by all group members. Baptism by immersion is practiced with most people being baptized within a matter of weeks after coming to faith. They are clear that the Lord's Supper follows baptism and in the first-level groups—led by the six core leaders—they are observing the Lord's Supper. They are weaker in the area of discipleship. Core leadership recognizes this weakness and is struggling to address it. They are aware that some new believers are not being incorporated into house groups and are being lost to the movement.

General Observations – Factors Contributing to Growth

Vision is owned by leadership throughout the movement. A common thread among leaders was their participation in the State Church and dissatisfaction with its inability to reach the younger generation. That fed their desire to see the whole city reached. Leaders at various levels articulated a vision for sharing the gospel with every person in their city within the next three years, breaking that task down into yearly, weekly and daily goals, and holding people within the groups accountable to the task.

They are utilizing a simple, reproducible model of evangelism. Key leaders latched onto the 3-minute testimony and learned to effectively "draw the net." They also are quick to invite new contacts—believers and non-believers—to participate in outreach activities where they evangelize and baptize. After baptism, new believers are quickly included in shared leadership of the weekly meetings.

Timing was a significant factor in several stages. Key people came together at a time when the founding group was started. The Trailblazer arrived at a time when this group was struggling to reach out and grow. The Strategy Coordinator arrived at a time when the group was primed for a larger vision of multiplication. Appropriate training was provided in the early stages of development. Additional assessment and training has been provided at critical junctures of their growth.

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[5] Two of these six core leaders are viewed by the SC as local strategy coordinators.

[6] The term most often heard in the interviews was thread (*xiàn* 线)

[7] The six core leaders are all male but the network overall has slightly more female than male believers. The term "shepherd" (*mùyáng* 牧羊) was heard frequently and seems to include both pastoring and training. Six people is considered the maximum number that one person can adequately shepherd.

They are willing to quickly include new believers in leadership. A few of the informants measured their time as believers in months rather than years, yet not only were they leading groups, in some cases they were shepherding other group leaders under them. While this creates some stresses—notably related to lack of experience in dealing with crisis issues—they voiced a concept that maturity in Christ comes through living out your faith. While the movement is experiencing growth pains as new believers quickly move into leadership, there is excitement and passion among these new believers that continually energizes the movement.

General Observations – Challenges Threatening Continued Growth

Leadership training appears to be the biggest challenge. In some streams training is flowing down to the lowest level of leaders but in other streams training does not seem to be moving down the line as well. Leadership needs to assess the situation with each stream to insure that adequate training is provided to group leaders, particularly the newest leaders. The linear concept of training flowing down may be problematic. If targeted training is provided for different levels of leadership some of the needs might be met in a more timely way. Long term sustenance of this movement may depend on finding a way to develop local trainers who can continually address expanding leadership training needs.

Related to leadership training is an apparent weakness in self-feeding and reliance on scripture among the newer believers. Overdependence on leadership to solve problems creates stresses at multiple levels of the work. They are providing Life Application Study Bibles for leaders and are beginning to introduce the inductive bible study method but it is too early to tell if this will adequately address these concerns.

Relationship with the State Church is an ongoing concern. State Church leaders who initially opposed house church activity are now affirming participation in house groups and welcoming house church believers to take communion at the State Church. While the more established groups are observing the Lord's Supper in their house groups, many of the new groups are taking the Lord's Supper at the State Church. Dependence on the State Church for this ordinance opens these new house churches to influences that could disrupt their vision of multiplication.

Transferable Concepts from this Assessment

You can find and activate dormant resources. The original group was a resource the SC catalyzed to get to where they are today.

A big vision can be simply understood. Whole city = 750,000 people = 250,000 people evangelized every year for three years = 5,000 people evangelized every week = every person sharing with x number of people every day.

A simple evangelistic model can be widely implemented. Changed lives + a simple 3-minute testimony + inviting a response = a large harvest.

God's timing is the key to an emerging movement. Things were in place so that core leadership could meet the SC, trust the SC and immediately embrace the SC's vision for multiplication.