

CPM Study for Publication

A Historic Turning to Jesus by Muslims in Jedidistan

*“HEY BROTHER, DO YOU WANT TO GET UP
IN THIS RICKSHAW AND RIDE WITH ME?”*

I. Introduction—A Church Planting Movement

As early as September of 2000, formal reports reached International Mission Board, SBC leadership from at least three sources affirming that a significant number of Muslims were embracing Christianity in various parts of Jedidistan¹. The reports included news of the movement crossing the border into the countryside of a neighboring country.

At the time of the church planting movement (CPM) assessment, the CPM was occurring in different geographic locations of the people group. The initial and largest segment revolved around Sharif, a local businessman and former Muslim. Another more recent and thus smaller growth segment centered on a career IMB Strategy Coordinator (SC) and his small team. The IMB SC had entered with the knowledge and encouragement of Sharif. By the time of the assessment was conducted, the movements had grown to the point that they were overlapping.

After on-site interviews were conducted by the CPM assessment team in March 2002, a detailed confidential report was written to document the existence of a CPM. It was found that there were 50 district-level evangelists operating in the districts covered by both segments of the work among Muslims. The team also concluded that there were 395 local evangelists, 2,439 pastors, 3,138 churches, and 93,453 members. In 2001, the movement produced 25,274 baptisms.

II. Background and History—Baptist Growth Leading to a CPM Assessment

The population of Jedidistan, a very densely populated country in Asia, is well beyond 100 million. The primary people group is Islamic. There are other ethnic peoples in the country, but they are in the minority. It is in this context that a church planting movement began, as have others, with a providential meeting.

On a hot day in 1983, a Baptist missionary, who had spent his life working with a non-Muslim people group in Jedidistan, was traveling by rickshaw across town to his home. Looking ahead on the dusty road, he saw a young man, a teenager, from another more distant village walking along the road with a bag in hand heading for a bus stand. Unknown to the missionary, this young man had been severely punished and threatened by his family—a cloud of death hung heavily over him as he walked.

¹ Fictitious Name

What crime could be so serious that one's own family would so severely punish one of their own? Local Islamic teachers from the madrasa² had punished the boy for asking too many questions. For this, they expelled him from the school. Upon arriving home, the young boy faced more extensive punishment from his family. The young boy's name was Sharif.

As he walked along the hot and dusty road, he remembered that only a night or two before, after more than a year of confinement in isolation and punishment in his own family's home, he was released by his mother to run for his life. She had come to him just before dawn to warn him of his impending death at the hands of his father. The family had decided that Sharif must die because he was not progressing as expected for a young Islamic boy. His mother had released him at great risk to her own life.

As he walked along, he felt tired, hungry, dejected and alone. Suddenly Sharif was startled when a white-skinned missionary stopped his rickshaw and spoke to him. The man's name was Thomas. In Sharif's dialect, Thomas asked, "Hey brother, do you want to get up in this rickshaw and ride with me?" Sharif, without hesitation jumped into the rickshaw and went home with the missionary.³

The Baptist missionary took the young teenager home with him that day; that was the turning point in Sharif's life. Later, in the interest of providing a safer refuge for the boy, the missionary took Sharif to the home of a Baptist leader and pastor in the largest city in the country who received him as a son. It was in that home and the church pastored by the Baptist leader that Sharif came to Christ, was baptized and was extensively disciplined. Sharif attended a national school, and he continued his education earning a university degree in business, for it was found that he had significant business and leadership insight.

After this, Sharif decided that God wanted him to return to his hometown and share Christ's gospel with his family, friends and countrymen. He returned to his hometown where he became a successful businessman, Christian witness and organizer-encourager of new Islamic converts, whom he taught to go out as evangelists into the towns and countryside witnessing and planting local churches. His decision to return to his hometown resulted in the evangelization of his town and the emergence of a Church Planting Movement. As the assessment team met many who had come to Christ through the influence of Sharif and his leaders, the team realized that we were looking at the largest turning to Christ by Muslims since the founding of Islam. For more details related to Sharif's story see *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World*, by David Garrison.

In retrospect, long before Sharif emerged as an inquisitive Muslim boy in the madrasa, missionaries and nationals in the country had worked with great success primarily among non-Muslim people groups. Both nationals and

² Islamic school

³ (When later asked about that event, Sharif says: "I was totally amazed because not many people were allowed, or even wanted, to talk with me because I was considered by family and community to be a rebel by Islam and the Madrasa school leadership. Because of that, I was shunned and seen as a Muslim sinner boy.")

missionaries credit Dr. Donald McGavran, who led a conference in the country in 1974, and Dr. Cal Guy, who Dr. McGavran suggested follow him with on-site visits and consultations in 1975, as being significant influences on the Baptist missionaries and nationals in the country. Both urged missionaries and nationals to increase their focus on all the people groups, not just the non-Muslim people groups. Beginning in the mid-1990s, work with Muslims began to emerge and to the amazement of many, Muslims were turning to Christ.

III. Occasion

The news of a turning to Christ by hundreds and thousands of Muslims, where the Islamic population had been unresponsive previously, was met with much skepticism by Christian leaders within the country and around the world. Such news of Islamic conversions to Christianity is so rare that numerous Christian leaders with a history of ministry among these people, including some global missiologists who heard the same news, could not conceive of such a movement taking place. They commented that such reports were sure to be exaggerated. Some believers and missionaries with Muslim backgrounds in the Middle East could not fathom such was happening and labeled the news as a rumor. Each of these sources suggested that a formal survey be conducted of the supposed movement.

One particular source of skepticism came from individuals related to a study conducted in the early 1990s that was funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, a United States based foundation, which funds both secular and religious research projects. It was said that there were a small number of Muslims who were turning to Christ in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This particular study, designed by a U.S. Center for World Evangelization scholar and specialist concerning Islam, led to interview of from 70-75 respondents among supposed Muslim converts in the country. The aim of this study, according to the initiator's letter explaining the commissioned study, was to conduct the research within the settings where C-5 evangelism⁴ had been conducted over the previous ten years.

⁴ The C5 Model for contextualization promotes Christ-centered communities of "Messianic Muslims" who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. Believers remain legally and socially within Islamic community. Aspects of Islam incompatible with the Bible are rejected or if possible, reinterpreted. Believers may remain active in the mosque. Unsaved Muslims may view C5 believers as deviant and may expel them from the Islamic community. Christian organizations may view C5 as a model which leads to syncretized church plants. One survey found that of members in C5 churches:

- 50% continue to attend mosque on Friday.
- 31% attend mosque more than once per day, uttering standard Islamic prayers affirming Muhammad as God's prophet.
- 96% say there are 4 heavenly books (standard Muslim belief).
- 66% say the Koran is the greatest of the 4 heavenly books.
- 45% do not affirm God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- 45% feel peace or close to Allah when listening to the reading of the Koran (even though they do not know Arabic).

If sufficient numbers permit, the C5 model promotes that a "Messianic mosque" may be established. While conservative evangelical organizations appreciate and often utilize anthropological insights, the C5 model was seen by the assessment team as too open to syncretism, and it was rare to find any informant who when interviewed attended mosque on Friday, uttered Islamic prayers attesting to Muhammad as God's prophet,

These interviews were spaced over a period of time and were conducted on-site or close to the place where each of the respondents lived. And, this research did not find a large number of Islamic converts in the areas covered by that study. Looking ahead, one should keep in mind that this research was conducted at least five years prior to the emergence of the current movement that the assessment team studied. Based upon the IMB assessment in 2002, at least 80% the respondents interviewed by the IMB team were practicing Muslims, with no commitment at all to Christ, when the Pew sponsored study was conducted. The Pew-backed study was conducted in four overlapping districts of the country.

As a result of the attitudes to the conversion reports and the previous study, IMB leadership at the regional level asked the Global Research Department of the IMB to assess the CPM. The team traveled to the country and area of the CPM in mid-2002 and conducted on-site interviews of leaders in the movement and believers in churches. The team concluded that an extensive CPM is underway.

IV. Verification Methodology

Three IMB staff members with at least 50 years of field service between them, conducted the assessment. Much of the three's service had been within Islamic settings, one of whom had lived in the country and could still understand the language of the people group being researched.

An interview instrument, as modified from instruments used in three previous assessments, was designed for use by the team. The interview plan was threefold:

- A. Make as many on-site visits as possible.
- B. Secure random interviews from believers and leaders who by their random selection would be representative of the breadth and depth of the movement.
- C. Make last minute impromptu visits to randomly selected sites to corroborate interview data and other reports of the CPM that had been received.

This methodology was conducted according to plan in most places during the time the team was in-country and onsite. However, ongoing persecution of those within the movement hindered the interview plan. At least two on-site interview arrangements were thwarted, diverted, or cut short by on-going persecution. In one instance interviews were prevented by a local mob, incited by Islamic teachers, who caused a riot. This tragedy led to the death of one leader who was detained by the police and killed by them in his jail cell.⁵ As the assessment team neared this location, local believers warned the team not to enter the town.

etc. All of those interviewed maintained Jesus Christ as God's son and the Bible as God's authoritative word. When asked if believers in Jesus could continue to practice as Muslims, believers consistently answered 'no.' (Our appreciation to Xenos Christian Fellowship www.xenos.org and The Crossroads Project <http://www.xenos.org/ministries/crossroads/OnlineJournal/issue1/contextu.htm#Ref8> for their online help regarding issues in contextualization.)

⁵ Many countries boast that they allow freedom of religion in their country. They often point to their laws in doing this. In these same countries, human rights violations are common, and little is done by the government to assure that their laws are enforced. Corruption is often fueled by outside funding. Police and authorities hold people in jail cells for bribes. They may beat one person severely in hostage situations so that they may receive money faster for the release of the "prisoners." Outsiders sometimes provide

V. Results of the Interviews and Assessment of the CPM

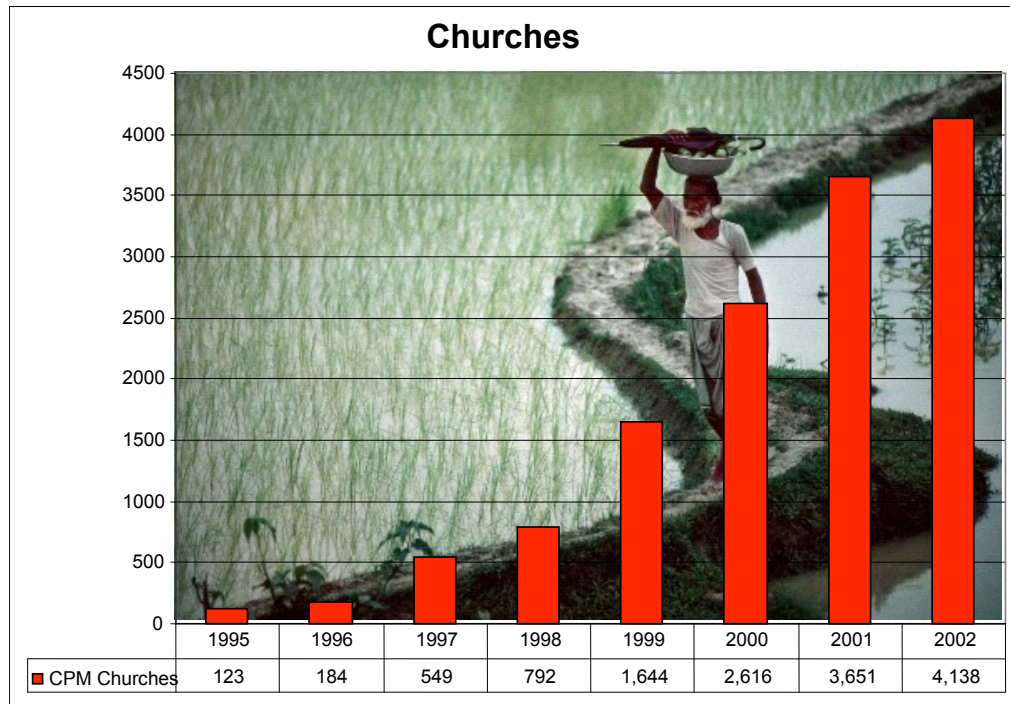
An analysis of data received in personal interviews revealed that by spring 2002, there were:

- 50 District Evangelists operating in the districts covered by two segments—Sharif's segment and the IMB SC's segment.
- 395 local evangelists.
- 2,439 Imams ministering among 3,138 churches.
- 93,453 members were within the 3,178 churches with 25,274 baptisms among them in 2001.
- 37,773 professions of faith were made in the churches during 2001.
- 3.3 new churches, on average, were started by each church during the year.

The central guideline that is used to determine if a Church Planting Movement exists is: *“a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment.”* For specific survey construction purposes this definition was enlarged to say: *“a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous New Testament churches planting other churches within a given people group or population segment who can and are evangelizing their people without significant outside assistance.”*

money to represent these people in court in order to gain their release, but it is this money, offered by such groups as Amnesty International, that encourages local authorities to capture more hostages. Their mistreatment, once in captivity, solicits more sympathy, prompt payments, and generous rewards for their terror. What is the reasoning of these groups? “The more we capture, the richer we get!”

The following chart presents the picture of the CPM as it developed year by year. By the end of February 2002, the following growth had been documented by interviews conducted by the CPM assessment team.



2002 figures were for only 2 months of 2002

A number of findings are important to notice in light of the background of the movement and of the movement itself.

- There has been a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within this people group since 1995.
- The CPM is characterized by local churches, mostly new ones, starting other new churches.
- No outside evangelists or church planters are involved in the evangelism and church planting.
- Lay leaders are emerging out of the new believers in the old and new churches to become the pastors of the new churches.
- Resources for extending the movement are coming from within the country.
- Modeling and assisting are evident.
- Evangelistic methodology involves starting with the teachings and stories of the Q'uran then bridging to the Pentateuch, Psalms and finally the Injil⁶. A high number of conversions come through this methodology which presents the Bible to Muslims as “the rest of the story” that is not told in the Q'uran.

⁶ In Islam, the “Injil” refers to the revelations that were sent down during the time of Prophet Isa (Jesus). It is referred to as the New Testament. Many Muslims are surprised to hear that the Injil still exists. Muslim teachers try to discount the modern New Testament saying that it is corrupt. Christian teachers counter with, “Then why did Muhammad refer to it in the Q'uran.”

- Leaders in the churches tended to be semi-literate, averaging a ninth grade education while the bulk of believers tend to be illiterate oral communicators.
- *Other than the literate evangelistic methodology, as described above, there seems to be no adequate system in place for teaching or training illiterates. The lack of training, particularly for illiterates, is the greatest need for the CPM and will jeopardize the CPM unless believers themselves can understand what the Bible says about Christ and share Christ through non-literate means. Many of those interviewed said that training was their greatest need. The potential for storying is great and supported by the fact that those in the people group use memory and collective memory rather than paper for remembering events and details. Many of those interviewed had memorized extensive passages of the Q'uran by memory.*⁷

VI. Profile of the Typical Believer Interviewed

- Male
- Married with two children
- 29 years old
- Semi-literate, ninth grade education
- Active, practicing, Mosque attending Muslim prior to accepting Christ
- Believer less than four years
- Baptized within a year after accepting Christ as Lord and Savior
- Baptized by his or her local pastor soon after conversion
- Left Islam and Mosque worship about the time of baptism
- Has had some very general training during a district meeting
- Experiencing persecution primarily provoked by Islamic madrasa teachers & neighbors
- Knows heart language and Arabic
- Has had initial discipleship within the church
- Has had some training but not as much as desired or needed to serve well
- Has participated in a Lord's Supper led by a local pastor⁸

VII. Profile of the Typical Church of Believers Interviewed

- Less than four years old
- Has 30 members
- Saw 12 Muslims profess faith in 2001
- Baptized 8 new believers in 2001
- Is starting 3.3 new churches per year

⁷ Italics added for emphasis.

⁸ The assessment team believes that much more should be done with this ordinance. Many had experienced it only once in their four years of Christian faith.

- Has its own local pastor who is male, not ordained, and not credentialed by an outside body
- Has a pastor who leads in the Lord's Supper and baptism.
- Has a pastor who is 30 years old.
- Has a pastor with an 11th grade education.
- Has a pastor who is married with 2 children.
- Has a pastor who is bivocational and seldom supported totally by the church.
- Meets for worship on Friday
- Baptizes one person for every 3.7 members
- Has few Bible owners
- Exists in an environment where eight out of 10 people cannot read and write
- Takes up an offering during the worship service
- Is open in its worship but careful to hold some closed meetings and services

As a postscript to the two profiles, the profile characteristics, that were developed from the data of all the interviews and was driven significantly by reports from district evangelists for their districts, compared favorably with the averages and standard deviation queries conducted on individual interviews of pastors and believers within the churches.

VIII. Conclusion and Postscript

The major strength of this movement is its origin in the life and ministry of a local, heart language national who is in every sense an insider. The level of on-going persecution is heart-rending, yet a nourisher of the movement that serves both to purify and spread it.

IX. Recommendations

- A. Both segments of this Church Planting Movement have harvested believers who are primarily literate to semi-literate individuals who represent less than 25% of the general population. At least 75% of the population is illiterate or functionally illiterate. The Chronological Bible Storying approach—evangelism, discipleship and pastoral training—as previously introduced, should be extended.
- B. The structure of the CPM is somewhat Western or Presbyterian in polity. As an illustration, some of the District Evangelists are slow to give up their part in the ordinances in local churches. Encourage baptism and Lord's Supper to be administered by local pastors in local churches.
- C. The current focus on lay leadership is commended and should be continued.

- D. Leadership training is hardly present in any form other than occasional seminars, which brings little depth or continuity. Assure that there are ongoing opportunities for pastoral training.
- E. LEAD materials have been used with good results. Modify LEAD materials so that they are “friendlier” to oral communicator within their unique worldview.
- F. The team examined subsidies in both segments of the CPM. The subsidy strategy in the IMB segment is questionable. In this segment evangelists come to the capital city to receive monthly allowances from the IMB business manager for their work. On the other hand, a good deal of Sharif’s subsidy is secured by and channeled through the IMB personnel, but it has been appropriately used, not causing any perceived dependence.⁹ Careful and prayerful study of any subsidy needs, especially in the IMB segment, needs to be done to ensure that dependency does not extend to a deeper level than it now is.¹⁰
- G. The current platform for the IMB team has served to get them into the country and to establish them where they are. However, the current platform needs attention. The existing platform does not project team personnel normally, naturally, habitually and safely into every crook and cranny where the movement exists and needs to go. If persecution increases the current platform may not suffice.
- H. It is fortunate that the entire Bible is now available in the people’s heart language and that it utilizes words and concepts familiar to those from a Muslim background. Though this is good news for the literate population, the bad news is that there is currently no “oral Bible” that is being utilized among oral communicators. A set of Bible stories, that provides for evangelism, discipleship, and church life should be selected and taught in churches.
- I. Baptist faith and practice should be taught and modeled. For example, the assessment team found an emerging tendency for district evangelists to provide the Lord’s Supper and baptism in churches, and this has led to a tendency in some churches to wait until such people are available before the ordinances can be administered. Secondly, testimonies from believers show that there are some who hold a belief in baptism which is disturbingly close to baptismal regeneration. Without leadership training, unbiblical teachings will surely affect the churches and believers.
- J. Encourage believers to find “Men of Peace” so that when the move to a new place, they have a beginning point for starting a church.

⁹ Beneficiaries of subsidy do not know they are getting outside funds because Sharif has established a micro-loan program through the local bank. They receive money from the bank and pay off their loans accordingly.

¹⁰ One respondent in his 30s commented that has survived on subsidies from evangelical organizations by drifting from one subsidized position to the next.