

# PRACTITIONER REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGIES OF CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS IN THE THAI SETTING

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## Introduction

This article had its beginnings in an invitation from a missions journal wanting a contribution on church planting movements (CPM) in the Buddhist world. The request was to look at CPMs in the Buddhist world along these lines: what do they look like, how do they happen and how can we prepare the ground for them? My first response was that I am the wrong person. I am the poster boy for missionaries working in Buddhist places that have seen little fruit. I have spent my career in the context of a small Thai church organization with all of its warts and complexities. I have read much on CPM, tried things personally, and endeavored to talk with Thai pastors about my discoveries and have gotten virtually no traction at any level. I frankly told the person who made the invitation that I had many more questions than answers. He was kind enough to say that they did not mind questions and encouraged me to proceed. However, at the end of the day, I was unable to make their publication deadline. But the invitation got my mind working and I felt it was a positive exercise to clarify my own thinking on these matters, so I decided to press on and develop the essay.

During the course of gathering materials for writing I picked up a copy of John Massey's theological critique of Church Planting Movement methodology in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* (2012). My article will provide a companion piece to Massey's article because I view from the practitioner angle and raise questions from field experience. In the material that follows I work through the original list of topics suggested to me, interject some of my own areas of interest, and conclude by sketching a vision of how both church planting movements and traditional church organizations or associations can move forward together and benefit each other.

## What do movements look like?

One of the challenges of CPMs is that they are by nature difficult to observe. Traditional associations of churches are easier to verify; you can visit individual churches and get a feel for the "average" kind of church in the association. For example, without ever having visited all 100 Thai Assemblies of God churches I can give a good estimate of the churches in terms of size and vitality by visiting only some of them. Also, through interaction with the leadership structure I can gain an understanding of the scope of the movement in its totality.

In a CPM the rapid multiplication of house church gatherings, you can see nothing bigger than a small group. And after a certain point in the growth, one has to rely on the verbal

reports of others to understand its breadth and depth.

I have come into contact with CPMs in two ways: the first is by reading published reports, and the second is by interviewing people who are involved in the leadership of a CPM. Here are some of my observations.

1. In the Buddhist world of Southeast Asia that I am familiar with, there are at this point not many CPMs.
2. In the ones that I have heard of or come across, some contextually sensitive methods of evangelism are usually developed and transferred to others. This seems to be an important point because in general, positive response to the gospel is slow in the bottleneck of the Buddhist world. And without response there cannot be any “movement” in the sense of rapid multiplication in classic CPM model.
3. One thing that emerged from talking with people was the function of strong central training in some movements. Strong central training functions as a unifying force like a hub with spokes and not a chart of hierarchically arranged boxes connected by linking lines.
4. While cross-cultural workers are often catalysts, another key feature is gifted local people who are able to mobilize and propagate the vision and methods.

### **How do they happen?**

At the heart of a true movement is the work of the Holy Spirit; one cannot force it or make it happen by technique alone. From discussing with people involved in CPMS and from reading literature about CPMs, I see two primary factors in the sparking and sustaining of CPM movements. On the one hand there is observable human activity rooted in values that lead to particular practices. On the other hand there is sovereign working of the Holy Spirit that creates both the environments and the human vessels God uses.

On the human observable side there is the key leader and his commitment to train and release. It is the first step to clear the way for the Spirit to use people rather than making them into static spectators. Traditional church models, while paying lip service to the priesthood of all believers, do not put into practice the mobilization and deployment of lay people into ministry. When an evangelistically vibrant church is producing new converts, a CPM should produce multiplication of house churches rather than just adding disciples to an existing church.

On the divine side, I have repeatedly witnessed how the Holy Spirit raises up someone who becomes the lightning rod for sparking a movement. Sometimes it is through a divine encounter that a person comes to faith and subsequently is used to reach his own people. And sometimes it is the Spirit burdening a Christian believer. In either case, the trail always comes back to a human vessel that the Lord uses greatly in a foundational and initiating role.

## Why my Thai friends are not that excited about CPM

When I first started to notice CPMs through various early publications I tried to share it with my Thai pastor friends. I also had the chance to introduce the idea of CPM to my Bible school students. I tried to compare and contrast CPM with other kinds of church planting strategies and local church structures my students had seen or heard of. In Thai Protestant circles there is familiarity with a number of different models of church structure and church growth. The dominant one is what Sinclair (2006, p. 212-213) calls the “prevalent” model that encompasses a church building, a trained pastor, and a congregation with the bulk of ministry conducted through various church programs. Advocates of other models, such as cell church, house church, and more recently the G12 can also be found. House church is usually seen as a transitional stage on the way to the prevalent model where the aspiration is to eventually own a building, have a trained pastor, and gather a congregation. Although more recently in Thailand a house church network of likeminded pastors has sprung up with the purpose of developing true house churches.

CPMs and Disciple Making Movements within the small group driven model have a lot of commonalities as well as differences. I will focus on areas that have been most challenging for my Thai ministry friends. Some might object to the rationale that Thai pastors of traditional churches connected to broader denominations or associations are not interested in CPM because they are either jealous of the results of CPM or they see it as a threat to their own pastoral role. While both of these scenarios can be found, on the whole I want to suggest that it is too simplistic. In this section I will look at the CPM through the eyes of a pastor and present some new angles in the missiology and practice of the movement.

1. A central difference that Thai pastors see immediately in the CPM is the issue of structure. Whether it is the prevalent model, cell church models, or true house church models, they are all connected in some way to a unit larger than just a single church in a home. This can be in the form of a formal structure, the equivalent of “denomination” or “association of churches” in English and *khana* in Thai. Or it can be around a charismatic leader that exists as an independent movement without denominational connections to churches in the West.

In the movement that I have been a part of for nearly three decades, multiplying small groups has proven to be extremely difficult and only the very strongest leaders are just now beginning to see some advance and continue to wrestle with problems. One of the reasons and primary challenges is training and releasing leaders. Thus the idea that rural house churches are multiplying rapidly with bi-vocational leaders who have relatively minimal training boggles their imagination. Full-time pastors with good training have trouble seeing how a house church leader can teach someone to go to neighbors and share their faith and start a new group when such a thing is so difficult for them.

2. It is hard for my Thai friends to get their minds around the large numbers of people that are coming to faith in CPM reports. The idea of rapid multiplication and movements means that there has to be a positive response to Christ. One cannot train and release converts if one has no converts. My Thai pastor friends work hard in sharing the Gospel personally and in equipping their people to evangelize. They also conduct outreach

events. Yet to get people to “stick” in a local congregation is very challenging. These pastors often feel that they spend a great deal of effort only to reap meager results. So when they hear of vast numbers responding to the gospel, their first reaction is to reason that people obviously are more responsive in that particular culture or area. If they hear reports of great church growth in Thailand they tend to suspect that the “conversions” or baptisms are less than robust, or that the gospel is being truncated in some way in order to appeal to people. My Thai pastor friends are very aware of and can articulate the process of how solid Christians are “made.” They understand from their experience that in order to actually connect with a local fellowship, it takes time and patience, a great deal of personal contact and teaching, as well as converts who can spare the time.

3. Finally, a major objection for the Thai pastors is with the issue of long-term stability. My Thai pastor friends have a lot of trouble believing that a system of training lay people in house churches can result in building long-term cohesive groups. It is hard to convince them when they watch how prevalent models with trained leaders face the challenge of motivating Christians to be faithful and serving. The logic of these Thai pastors is something like moving from the lesser to the greater. Their question is that the associations of traditional churches have mechanisms to ensure continuity of the organizations over time, but if a series of lay-led house churches expand rapidly without any of those mechanisms, how will these groups persist?

In Thai Protestant Christianity, the dynamic edge is already in the initiative with local Christians bringing people to faith and meeting in homes. But there is in the vast majority the seeking of a covering relationship with an existing church or church network to help bring stability, connections, training, and support. It strains the Thai pastors’ credulity how lay-led groups could maintain their momentum independently without some kind of central “glue” provided by a mother church or church organization is something that strains the credulity of many Thai pastors.

### **Areas needing further work and clarification**

Over the years, my interactions with Thai pastor friends, my reading of published accounts, and my effort to interview people involved in CPM and people who have been close enough to see CPM in action have caused me to accumulate a number of questions regarding CPM. In this section I examine six areas where I feel there is the need for further clarification or refinement. I hope by doing so, it will benefit leaders who are contemplating the CPM strategy and churches that are in the middle of the movement.

#### **1. Moving from description to prescription**

It is difficult to report on *what* is happening without conveying the idea that it *should* be happening. The first reports of CPMs were an endeavor to describe what was happening on the ground. However, it was not long before the description came to be seen as a desirable future and the methods as something that should be followed. Without anyone ever coming out and saying it, the reporting has led to the assumption that the principles of CPM are universally applicable.

This presents problems for on-the-ground workers. People who read the material and who

receive training from it begin to apply the CPM model in their settings. When it does not work, they are at a loss as to why and wonder what to do next, for they believe that if it is done right, the methodology will produce growth. But the fact is that there are no tools for assessing the variables in each particular context, and the CPM model does not provide instructions on how to handle that.

It feels to me that due to the way CPMs have moved from being described to being prescribed, we should be very wary of moving towards the assumption of universal application across settings. First, methods that are embedded in a particular social environment may not be exportable everywhere. To extract a principle from a methodology that worked well in a specific context is to remove it from the set of conditions that made it work in the first place. For instance, in the Buddhist world, David Martin (1990) in *Tongues of Fire* shows how the post-Korean war conditions in South Korea created a huge openness to the West and the Christian faith. To apply the Korean methodology to Thailand will be working outside of that set of conditions and to set up for failure. When I was visiting churches in the mid 1980's to raise fund to come to Thailand, it was not uncommon to have a pastor say to me that if we just followed what the Koreans did we would have the same kind of breakthrough. Many Korean missionaries can now attest to the fact that this is just not the case.

Second, the descriptions we receive on CPMs are often one-sided. We never hear about attempts on CPMs that fail, we only hear success stories. If people only report success stories and dismiss all failed accounts, it is indeed easy to get the impression that the method has universal applicability when in reality that is not true.

## 2. The issue of durability

One thing that has struck me in reading the testimonial literature about CPMs is that the stories in and of themselves do not support the significant claims that CPMs are making. The crux of the issue is the CPM claim that people are not only coming to faith (this is the content of the testimonials), but that lay Christians are also forming self-replicating groups that are rapidly multiplying. The unstated and critical implication from these stories is that those groups and the broader movements are enduring. The testimonial evidence of people coming to faith should not be the only yardstick for what actually happened in CPMs. A whole different set of measures is needed.

Looking back at my own experiences, the missionary teams I work with and the local churches we were involved in both experienced the same kind of testimonial stories of people coming to faith, of miracles, and even of multiplication of groups. The breakdown is in the structures that endure over time. In our experiences, groups started and they dissolved, some new churches opened and others closed, people joined the group, and people moved away, or even left the faith. What we can say with great confidence, from abundant empirical evidence, is that indigenous local churches and movements that have a leadership structure, an associational glue that gives them identity, and an ongoing leadership training function last over time.

## 3. The issue of unexplained structure.

This is an issue that emerged from interviewing people who are involved in or who have been close to CPMs. If one just reads the literature of CPMs, the impression one gets is a very simple structure of lay-led house churches rapidly multiplying. These house churches are inter connected by the person who trained their leader and the person they are training. But on the ground I discovered CPMs end up having a more complex structure than meets the eye. Some of these churches look remarkably like cell-based mega churches with a strong charismatic leader. The difference is that in the CPM, instead of a pastor, the central figure is the founder/chief trainer. I have also run into donors who give to CPMs in order to fund full-time trainers who are developing the house church leadership. Outside funding and a strong central leader hierarchy are common features found in traditional church planting methods and structures. However, these features are absent from the CPMs literature. It would be helpful if CPM research studies include these elements among conditions under which a movement started.

#### 4. Issues related to counting and reporting.

My friend Len Bartlotti looks at CPM reports as calling for “rejoicing in zones of ambiguity.” When we hear of large movements among the unreached we want to rejoice, yet at the same time some of the ambiguities in the reporting leave many people wanting more information before they start the shouting.

Anyone who has ever had to count something for research purposes knows how fraught with difficulty the exercise can be. There are issues of definition, the politics of counting, who is countable, what counts, who gets to count, and more. Traditional church movements and their fellowships, even if house-based, are observable and measurable over time and come with self-correcting mechanisms. CPM reports by contrast are reified snapshots of baptisms and groups in meetings. I have yet to see a report covering a retracted CPM, or reassessing group sizes based on updated statistics, or presenting data on groups being added as well groups closed. For those of us who have worked in traditional church movements, closures are as much a part of life as new beginnings. People working with cell groups in church settings often admit that they have closed as many groups as they have opened them. So it is hard to imagine that once groups are started, they remain **static**.

#### 5. The issue of speed — the notion of “wrinkling time”

What really distinguishes CPMs from more traditional forms of church planting or aggregating churches is the notion of speed. Denominational churches and associations have discussed various forms of small groups, cells, and house churches in an attempt to mitigate some of the bottlenecks that arise from the prevalent church models and to bring more evangelistic dynamism. However, CPM tackles these problems by bringing the notion of speed into the entire process.

From the very beginning of my first encounters with the CPM ideology in the writing of David Garrison, I have found the notion of speed most challenging. Although releasing people for ministry in multiplying lay-led house groups is central to CPM, it is not as unique as other models advocating the same thing. After living for years among a

Buddhist people where response to the gospel is slow, the idea of speed challenges everything because it means that one must have people respond to the gospel in order to train and participate in ministry. Thus speed in evangelism immediately raises questions about not so much the applicability of many CPM core principles, but rather the possibility of seeing similar results. The question is especially acute for those working with people groups that have traditionally seen slow response to the gospel.

The definition of “rapid multiplication” in CPM literature and thinking (Garrison 2004, p. 21) is based on the observed problem of linear sequentialism in church planting where one step follows another. The CPM solution to this problem is to speed up the process by “wrinkling together” the various steps. Massey (2006) observes:

at the implementation level the value of rapidity redefines every aspect of missiology from the nature of the missionary task, the role of the missionary, evangelistic method, discipleship, church formation, church leadership, leadership development, to missionary preparation and recruitment. (p. 107).

This notion of wrinkling time across these domains of activity is central to many of the issues that on-the-ground workers raise, especially about the applicability of CPM in various contexts. I want to zero in on one of these contexts with some personal observations concerning evangelistic method.

The danger I find, in my part of the world, as well as from other circles, is that the ideas of speed, rapidity, and velocity can affect a warping of values as it relates to sharing the gospel. The logic runs something like this: a). If speed is the key value, then the key question in a slow response place becomes, “why are people not responding to the message?” b). The answer then becomes, find the barrier and remove it. As a result, if speed is a core value, then there is great pressure to succumb to the temptation to “lower the bar” in order to get better response.

On the ground it looks something like this: if a major barrier for Buddhists to accept the gospel is the question “Do I have to change my religion?” The answer becomes a variation of “No, go ahead and stay in your religion and follow Jesus.” Thus rather than looking at evangelism and conversion through theological lenses, it is viewed through the lenses of the sociological solutions.

CPM advocates and practitioners are not telling people to “speed up” explicitly. It appears to be an unintended consequence of making speed a defining characteristic. From my perspective, at the nexus of evangelistic method and response to the gospel, CPM is not a universally applicable methodology.

## 6. The issue of the prevalent church becoming the enemy

This problem seems to be another unintended consequence of the popularity of CPM in the mission world. If rapidly multiplying house churches are the supreme goal, then the natural comparison is the relatively clunky and slow traditional churches. From there it is not a big jump for many who fully embrace CPM to begin viewing existing traditional

church movements as problematic church planting method and the archenemy of church planting process.

In traditional church teaching, the enemies are spiritual ones, and the forces of Satan array against God's redemptive purposes. But for some who seek to follow CPM practices, the enemies are the existing traditional church and its problems of hierarchy, political wrangling, and carnality. The implied message is that God cannot use the existing church, He uses CPM.

On the ground this sometimes means that workers attempting to do CPM want to avoid the existing church in order to keep their movement "pure." On the one hand they believe that the gospel has power to break satanic strongholds and bring people to faith in Jesus Christ, and on the other hand they see no power in the gospel to keep believers from being corrupted by the "movement killers" of traditional churches. This results in suspicion and distrust on both sides. The traditional relationship between believers and the church is eschewed in favor of the theoretically flatter structures of the house churches. When asked how these groups survive, develop leadership, and endure over time, the answer is that the CPMs are messy. We are told they may go off the rails, and some may be drawn into unbiblical teaching. But those of us on the outside want to ask why the messiness of CPM is tolerated but the messiness of traditional church and associational structures is considered unacceptable?

Although it appears to be unintentional, a forced choice is created between the dynamism of CPM and the stability of denominations and church associations. I do not think that it has to be that way. In the concluding section I share a vision for the future that seeks to bring the best of both worlds together for a greater synergy in planting churches among the unreached.

### **A vision for the future**

In the original request for this article the suggested heading for the final section was to look at how we can prepare the ground for movements in the Buddhist world. I want to broaden the angle here and pursue what I think is an even more crucial questions: "How can CPMs and prevalent model church structures mutually bless one another, build an environment that legitimizes different forms of the Christian faith, and cross-pollinate one another in the areas of dynamism and stability?"

In what follows I will unpack why I think this is a crucial question, explore ideas about ways that missionaries, local Christians, and CPM trainers can pursue this agenda, and finally present suggestions for further research that will help foster mutual learning and provide the groundwork for good practice.

Why are these questions so critical? I believe that the advance of the Christian faith among Buddhist peoples will be best served by creating more conversations and dialogues, not less, between all forms/versions of the church. Traditional churches offer longterm stability, CPMs offer tremendous evangelistic and mobilization dynamism; both need to learn from one another. Another area of dialogue is the work of developing a theological basis for understanding different forms of the Christian faith so that rather than demonizing one another, Christians can cheer each other on in their efforts. Since our ultimate goal is the same, pursuing it together and giving each other encouragement

and blessings will yield more fruitful results. Sharing and collaborating in the field is not only appropriately Christian; but also strategically mission.

This vision of working towards evangelistic and discipleship dynamism, long term stability, endurance, and an understanding of multiple expressions of the faith suggests a trajectory of work by cross-cultural workers, prevalent model church pastors, and CPM trainers and leaders.

Traditional churches need to learn how to implement non-traditional strategies. These include transferable and contextual methods of evangelism, how to mobilize lay people with Great Commission DNA, house meeting structures, discovery Bible study methods, the discipleship for converts, training converts for outreach, training programs such as T4T, and obedience to the commands of Christ. All of these things speak deeply to needs in existing prevalent church models.

One area that prevalent church models struggle with in the Buddhist world is sensitivity to their context. Often times they are operating on a template bequeathed to them from Western missionaries and the result is that Christianity is regarded as a foreign religion. The book of Acts illustrates very clearly that Paul used different approaches with Jews and God-fearers, Gentile peasants that worshipped idols, sophisticated pagans in Athens, a group of Christian elders from Ephesus, and a hostile Jewish mob (Keller, 2012, p. 112-133). However, for most local Christians and pastors in Southeast Asia it is still a big jump to think of any other way of "doing church" and communicating the Gospel other than the traditional way. Those involved in CPM are often more willing to look at evangelism and discipleship methods that are contextually relevant and to develop house church meetings that do not come across as "foreign" in the way that traditional church do.

Ongoing dialogue will also help those involved in CPM work to grapple with the issues of stability and perseverance. The presence of trained pastoral leadership acts as a glue that helps hold a group of Christians together. While prevalent model churches do close, they are much harder to fold when they are part of a church organization that prepares and trains leaders. Small groups come and go, and there is little to command the loyalty of members to the group in the event that a leader has to move on. A Thai pastor friend who was conducting meetings in the townhouse where he and his family lived told me an interesting observation. He told me that although he hated to admit it, in his experience he could not build strong Christians if he called what he was doing a "house church." But if it were a traditional church, something one commits to, even if it was meeting in a house, people would come and stick. In the culture he is working, it is not the structure so much as the idea of there will be a structure one day that makes the permanence. Thus the terminology "house church" (*kristajak taam baan*) somehow implies a transience which being a "church" (*bot*) does not. (Thai Christians often use the term *bot* which is the structure in a Thai temple complex where the monks perform their chanting. The term is appropriated by Christians to talk about the physical building of a church congregation and not the theological notion of *ekklesia* where they then use the term *kristajak*).

Prevalent church models and associations have mechanisms for helping to train children in the faith. They reach out to youth, and are able to mobilize in collective action to care for the poor and do mission work. As an outsider to CPM I have often wondered how a

group of believers meeting in a house and connected only to their trainer would handle some of these practical issues that are too complicated even for traditional church models to handle in trying to build Christian families. The logic from my Thai pastor friends seems to be arguing from the greater to the lesser: if we who have resources, congregations, church buildings, and programs are having a hard time getting people to stick, building solid Christians across generations, and helping Christian families developed, how are small groups with less resources at all of these levels going to deal with these issues?

Thinking about how church planting movements would handle practical issues such as the ones mentioned above leads naturally to my final point. We need to know a lot more about how CPM works and where it heads if we are going to be able to help people in prevalent church models and church associations benefit from their strengths. This is certainly not a comprehensive list, but here are three things I feel would help church planting workers in the Buddhist world be more open to exploring CPM as a stand-alone option or to integrate core principles into their current work.

1. There is a need for longitudinal study and not just promotional reporting or methodological expositions. For movements that have experienced great growth, it would be helpful to find out if they continue their original structures. If they hold together, look at what percentage ends up assimilating into other existing church associations, see if evangelistic dynamism slows at a certain point, examine if there is a move towards more traditional church structures, and evaluate the level of susceptibility to false teaching and so on.

2. There needs to be more research on the conditions under which CPMs have flourished and failed. The books only talk about successes, but what about places where it did not work, and why? So if CPMs appear to be at times limited to very specific conditions, mapping out those conditions can raise the awareness of workers on when not to use the CPM method.

3. It would be helpful to have more transparency in reporting the numerical size of CPMs. Those of us involved in prevalent church models and denominations are aware of the massive amount of work and commitment it takes to figure out how many churches and attendees/members it has. If informant reporting is the only data source in CPM, who else checks the reliability of the source? Social science interviewing techniques always warns that one should not take at face value what informants tell. Sources are “interested” and have agendas, particularly if they are paid by an organization to produce results.

## **Conclusion**

I am sure that there are published pieces somewhere from CPM practitioners that would provide answers to some of the questions raised in this article. I am a practitioner and am asking practical questions. I hope that those are also questions many missionary workers are asking as they interact with CPMs. I ask not in a spirit of skepticism but out of genuine interest in understanding and furthering all of our abilities to proclaim Christ to the lost.

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