Indigenous Church Planting

One of the most frequently discussed topics today relative to church planting is in regard to “indigenous” church planting. Dr. Ed Stetzer, our new Strategic Networks manager, has been asked to help us better understand the needs and opportunities of church planting throughout North America. One of Ed’s new assignments will be to create awareness in our convention of church planting from a Biblical point of view as to why we must plant churches. The following material is an excellent presentation by Ed in looking at indigenous church planting from a Biblical, historical and contemporary perspective.

Church planters and mission leaders frequently talk today about “indigenous” churches—but what does it really mean? Missiologists borrowed the term “indigenous” from agriculture. Indigenous plants can thrive and grow in a certain area. Indigenous churches are fellowships that are native to their local soil—and able to grow and thrive in that context. In the middle nineteenth century, Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson began to speak of the indigenous church, and they believed that the task of missions was to transplant the gospel into a new community so that the church could become “native” there.

Early in the last century, Roland Allen challenged the church to live out these ideals on the mission field. He wrote Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?, challenging the church to return to biblical principles of indigenous missions. Allen’s main ideas included:

1. All teaching to be permanent must be intelligible and so easily understood that those who receive it can retain it, use it, and pass it on.  
2. All organizations should be set up in a way that national Christians can maintain them.  
3. Church finances should be provided and controlled by the local church members.  
4. Christians should be taught to provide pastoral care for each other.  
5. Missionaries should give national believers the authority to exercise spiritual gifts freely and at once.

Biblical church planting is concerned with establishing local churches that are indigenous—whether that is in Africa, South America, Alberta, or Memphis. As far back as 1938, mission thinkers began to formally express the ideas of the indigenous church:

An indigenous church, young or old, in the East or in the West, is a church which, rooted in obedience to Christ, spontaneously uses forms of thought and modes of action natural and familiar in its own environment. Such a church arises in response to Christ’s own call. The younger churches will not be unmindful of the experiences and teachings which the older churches have recorded in their confessions and liturgy. But every younger church will seek further to bear witness to the same gospel with new tongues...

Allen Tippet updates these ideas further in the 1960s:

When the indigenous people of a community think of the Lord as their own, not a foreign Christ; when they do things as unto the Lord, meeting the cultural needs around them, worshipping in patterns they understand; when their congregations function in participation in a body which is structurally indigenous; then you have an indigenous church.

Reimagine Community in San Francisco is indigenous as its house church pastors reach out to the art community in San Francisco. Grace Baptist Korean Church in Greenwood, Ohio, seeks to live out an indigenous witness in the Korean community near a military base. Faith Baptist, in
the northwest delta area of Mississippi, uses contextualized southern gospel music as its indigenous expression of worship. These churches are indigenous because they have proclaimed the unchanging Christ in their very different settings. They are indigenous because they understand, and to some degree reflect, their context.

Indigenous church plants are not all led by indigenous planters. The key principle in being indigenous is the nature of the church, not necessarily the messenger. Paul, a Hellenistic Jew, planted indigenous Greek congregations as his mission but he was from Tarsus not Rome or Ephesus.

A church planter may be from Chicago, but if the church is dependent on offerings from Alabama, has adopted an Alabama style of worship, and meets at the time that the farmers in Bessemer, Alabama set 100 years ago, the church may not be indigenous for Chicago (though perhaps it would be in Bessemer). The origin of the church planter is not the determining factor of being indigenous. Instead, the nature of the church plant is. A person from Chicago is more likely to lead an indigenous church because he has been raised in that area. However, if education or other influences are non-indigenous in nature, the church planter might start a church that is out of place in the local culture.

Indigeneity is not neat and easy, but without it the gospel becomes distorted. Without indigeneity, the gospel has failed to become incarnate in a new cultural expression. It has not gone to every ethne (people group) as commanded in the Great Commission. To go to the “all peoples” of the Great Commission, we need to plant the unchanging gospel into new cultural soil and let it take root there.