

Paper to be submitted at the 2007 April SCPN Conference

By Norbert Izsák

This is going to be an interesting paper. The only reason for me to write this paper is this: I want to read those papers that you (will) have submitted. Now, John told me that I can only do that if I write a paper, myself. So, I don't really have much to say, but I want to pick your brains, so here is my pseudo-paper. Don't hate me too much, please! And also, do forgive me, if what I say does not click with your experience or if it does not make the slightest sense. Just ignore it.

Further on, what follows is not grounded in any deep research whatsoever, and it is not intended to be read as a scholarly paper, only as simple thoughts, or just food for further thinking. Many of the statements and conclusions are just my gut feelings, but hey, why do you expect facts from journalist in the first place??!!

(I need to confess something to you. Lately, I have been poisoned by the so called emerging church thing. I believe in it, so, many of my remarks are grounded in that paradigm. Pray for me, please!)

In the past 15 years or so, ever since I first came into contact with the since quietly deceased The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting, I have been hearing about church planting, big time. Those Hungarian churches and guys, who had the power, the resources and the clout, did not really believe in it, they were more interested in maintaining the status quo, or (if this sounds too rude to you) to try to breathe some life into their own dying churches.

Now, on the other hand, those guys, who believed in it, very seldom had the power, the resources and/or the intelligence and the training to go ahead with the “dream”. Some of them, in my opinions were a bit lunatic, or a bit better, dreamers, or in the best possible scenario, good people, who did not have the proper training and/or the necessary mentoring to do a good job. Honestly, those, who believed in church planting, have planted small, weak churches, which entailed the fact that those, who had the power, etc. in the first place, could somewhat legitimately (from their perspective) ignore their efforts.

I don't want to get into those success stories, where no real church planting planning and focus went into the work, and still churches, in some cases megachurches were planted spontaneously. The bulk of these happened in the late 80'ies, in a very special way. The reason, why I don't want to talk about them, because today, many, if not most of these churches only attract believers, and according to a Barna research, only 10 percent of megachurches are growing. The other 90 percent that nobody is talking about, well, they are decreasing in numbers. I believe, this will be the case in Hungary as well in a few years time – if it is not already.

As far as I am concerned, I have not seen too many good, successful church plants in the past 10-12 years. By good, I mean healthy churches that have humble and godly leadership and are successfully reaching out to their community in a healing and encouraging way. Some examples I do know about, are actually from mainline, traditional churches, Catholic and Calvinist, and are all community based, some of

them are using the Alpha course big time, but are struggling how to move on, after they have done the 5th or so Alpha.

So, let me present MY problem:

We have been busy doing the work, exhorting, training and facilitating, moreover, planting, but still, we are far from where we would like to be. Why?

Well, I have a few suggestions:

1. Few of the facilitators have done the job themselves. Most of us (forgive me, if I am wrong) learned about SCP through workshops, books, seminars, etc, but we have NOT done it, we have not planted 2-100 churches, ourselves. We may have been pastors, but it is not the same. We are speaking about something we know very little about – empirically. (Sad, but maybe true: for some missionaries the only difference between the old modus operandi /aka I am doing church in a foreign country, teaching and preaching/ and the new model /SCP facilitation/ is that they are teaching and preaching about something else: not Jesus healing the sick, but Paul going around and planting churches. Perhaps with the extra benefit of having a great reason to lecture the locals. Who, by the way, do deserve every bit of that!)
2. Many of us may have swallowed the somewhat questionable teaching that every church planting is good church planting. I personally have heard at Alliance meetings that God miraculously uses church splits to allow for church planting to happen. Although, there may be some truth in that, I want to challenge that thinking: not every church plant is a good church plant. Not every church planting initiative should happen. There is no time and place for me to expand on that, I will hopefully come back to this later. (see under point 5)
3. SCP, although in a different package, still may sound and look for some local (indigenous? national? primitive?) church leaders as an agenda that the missionary community is pushing. Since there are not big enough local national leadership bodies (cooperation among Hungarian leaders for example is fairly weak), it is difficult for missionaries to connect with the right groups. Even if

they do, when they speak about SCP, it may come down as the newest hype from California.

4. The result from conscious SCP work has not been strong enough.
5. Similar somewhat to the 2nd reason, I believe most church plants have done injustice to Christ's mission command. Churches are reproducing (oh, how we wish they were reproducing!!!) old models of the church that are comfortable to the existing congregation, rather than to new people. We sacrifice the outsiders' comfort for our own. We try to squeeze in the unchurched into our own outdated structure, instead of finding the right structure(s) for the community. Instead of Ecclesia seeking out the agora, we expect the agora to come and conform to the Ecclesia.

Possible solutions, well, food for thought.

1. Missionaries should be more involved in some church planting efforts, giving a helping hand to the local leadership. It will give them more credibility and more opportunity to speak into situations.
3. Maybe, some of us need to use another lingo, like CRM, Church Renewal Programs. In other words "repackage" the same message so that it becomes more attractive to more conservative, existing churches. Instead of church planting we could talk about starting new programs, small groups, etc. Reaching out to a new target group in the society and adapting somewhat to that new group. Other than that, I don't have a clue. God needs networkers!!!
4. ??? Strong churches need to be planted... ☺
5. As some SCP materials suggest it, we need paradigm shifts. We need to be taught and we need to teach about form and function. About the use of music. Prayer. Preaching. Fasting. Why are we doing the things we are doing as missionaries and as churches? Do the English speaking churches in Hungary model what the missionary community is talking about? Do we consciously seek the opportunity to bring in SCP into Bible Colleges and Seminaries? What do our church services look like? Why? Instead of doing seeker sensitive services, do we meet the needs of the seekers? Not the felt needs, but the real

needs? If somebody does not have the time to go to church at the weekends, can the church be flexible enough to go to the people? How can the church embody Christ in a relevant way? Is doing home group Bible studies the best tool under heaven to do that? If not, how are we to change? Maybe the results so far have been weak, because we don't want to give up our comfort and meet people where they are. We are thinking about renting facilities (oh, how we think we are cutting edge by not having our church building first, but we are willing to rent school halls!), and "forcing" people to share thoughts about a foreign book, when they might be so willing to share a few prayer requests and complaints over a beer. One reason, why mainline churches are sometimes more successful than evangelicals is that they are – in my experience at least – more willing to bless the community without strings attached. Since a Catholic parish priest thinks that he has got 20,000 souls to shepherd in his parish, he may be willing to organize events that are relevant for the particular community, p. ex. Marriage weekends. At that weekend there may not be any singing, praying, etc. only presentations by professionals (counsellors, psychologists) and small group or pair work, but the main focus will be on the needs of the people, how come. They may not be expected to show up at church on Sunday, or that expectation will not be communicated aggressively. (I do understand the advantage mainline churches have in Hungary: they are credible, and if you are a nominal Catholic, you will trust them more than some strange sects... But, with the inclusion of secular professionals or church professionals, you can shoot for a different credibility) Many evangelical churches on the other hand do not understand what it means to give without expecting. When we go out and do "pre-evangelism", etc, we often do it on our terms. We do a special meeting – we still sing, pray and alienate the unchurched. I don't really like the word seeker sensitive meeting – what we need is to put the spiritual and emotional needs of the target group central and go from there. We need to forget how we came to the Lord and pray, how others can find Jesus. How Jesus wants to find them. And we need to bless without strings attached, because in my opinion, there is nothing more powerful on Earth than the power

of sacrifice. God's utter and ultimate sacrifice shows me His love for me – that attracts me, not the worship band, the funny sermons etc. If we can truly demonstrate that – willing Christians, who are willing to think radically differently about their favourite pet church, then we have made one step forward. We need to be the aroma of Christ: how can get rid of the smell of tradition, irrelevance and selfishness in our churches? If you remember the book Bruchko: I think there is almost as wide a gap between today's church culture and secular culture; how can we bridge that gap? How can we become Bruchkos in our world, not lecturing the unchurched about how to act, but finding the God-element among them and encourage and motivate that and eventually helping them create their own church for them. Pastors having been trained by professionals might not be willing to make the extra mile. Who and how is going to help them and challenge them to go out to the agora and meet the people, where they are? Who is going to show them what meeting real needs of real people mean?

I told you, this is not going to be a real paper. It is superficial, was written in an hour or so (I have two theses and two papers to complete in the next 10 days). But I believe we are doing harm to our own Body and the world for that matter, if we neglect the Saviour, who became like one of us, to show us, what putting down our life for others mean. If we keep our churches the way they are, happy-clappy with the right theology, music and stuff, so blind to the real needs of people (both spiritual, emotional, communal, etc), may God be merciful to all of us!

(reading it for a second time: my Jesus, this sounds and reads like a poor sermon!

Forgive me, once again. But I just want to read your papers so much!!!!)