

Towards Developing Effective Short-term Strategies for SCP

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by John D. Wilson

Disclaimer

Three dozen journal articles, a couple half-read books, one ream of paper, five cups of coffee and a headache later, only one word comes to mind: Uncle. I've done my due diligence, reading through stacks of essays addressing various issues related to church planting in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), searching for a captivating thought or some needed inspiration to write a decent academic paper that would intelligently stimulate and contribute to the ongoing discussion about facilitating Saturation Church Planting (SCP). Alas, that inspiration never came, and my monitor is still as filled with as much white as when I began the whole process.

Therefore, I've given up; I'm abandoning the plan to write an academic paper. As the newest and most junior participant at the discussion table, perhaps I thought that a *real* paper would garner more credibility for my thoughts; that somehow more footnotes would cast a veneer over my own inexperience actually doing this stuff. However, I doubt more footnotes would have made much of a difference. The truth is, my thoughts are just that; thoughts without any real credibility or seasoned experience to temper/inform them. Therefore, instead of presenting you with a well-researched academic essay, this paper will function more like a blog post—whereby I relinquish any claim to factual accurateness and instead adopt a standard of 'truthiness.'¹ Besides, academic discussions are increasingly moving to the blogosphere anyway...

Facilitation?

Since the theme of this conference is *facilitation* in general, CEE in particular, I would like to briefly clarify what I understand the term "facilitation" to mean. Facilitation is a noun, derived from the Latin *facilis*, generally used to designate the action by which a task or process is made easy or easier. However, herein lies the challenge when we use this term to describe the activity we seek to undertake with respect to SCP. Facilitation presupposes the existence and occurrence of a given task or process independent of the presence of a facilitator. In other words, the particular task will occur with or without the facilitator; the presence of a facilitator simply makes the execution of the task *easier*. It goes without saying that you cannot make a task that doesn't exist easier.

When applied to SCP, this understanding of facilitation becomes problematic because in CEE, church planting *simpliciter* (CP) appears to be an exception to the rule, as opposed to normative practice. Likewise, the existence and/or occurrence of *multiplicative church planting* (MCP) is scarce, the existence of *exponential church planting* (ECP) is doubtful, and

¹ Truthiness, a term coined by Stephen Colbert, host of the comedic yet satiric *Colbert Report*, describes "things that a person claims to know intuitively, instinctively, or 'from the gut' without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or actual facts." Truthiness. Wikipedia.com. *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness> (accessed: April 11, 2007). For the curious, The Colbert Report episode where this word was introduced can be viewed here: http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_colbert_report/videos/the_word/index.jhtml?playVideo=24039

one would be hard pressed to present a credible case for the existence of SCP movement(s) in CEE. In which case, it seems more accurate to describe our work as catalyzing, initiating, mobilizing, or perhaps some other verb besides facilitating.

The above discussion might seem like senseless hair-splitting, but this seemingly insignificant distinction entails an important recognition. Whereas the methodology of *facilitating* church planting was set in contrast to previous models of *pioneering* church planting (missionaries as facilitators of church planting, not the ones actually planting the churches), “facilitating” SCP is merely *a second-order form of pioneering*. SCP movements do not currently exist in CEE, and expatriate missionaries are primarily the ones waving the SCP banner and attempting to bring them into existence. This isn’t necessarily bad; it simply calls us to recognize that we aren’t that different from expatriate pioneer church planters, and ultimately find ourselves exposed to many of the same criticisms we have leveled against historical models of church planting.²

Church Planting?

I doubt there are many Christians who would disagree that having a vibrant, disciple-making church within reach of every person on the planet is at least part of the “Z” of the Christian missiological vision. There will undoubtedly be debate over what constitutes “churches” and how these churches should “look,” but SCP in its broadest terms seems to be fairly aphorismic. Yet, despite excelling in identifying a compelling missiological “Z,” this long-term strategy seems to struggle with articulating the complementary short-term strategies that are needed to effectuate the conditions necessary for the middle part of the alphabet, the M’s and N’s if you will, that in turn are essential in establishing the kind of environment conducive to churches planting churches in an exponential fashion. In other words, it doesn’t seem like we have come up with a suitable answer to the Sicilian Defense yet. Great end-game strategy, but we are fumbling with the opening.

Beyond the ‘conditions on the ground’ in CEE, such as post-socialist fallout, secularism and spiritual disinterest, Western gravity and the rise of consumerism/materialism, lack of gifted, charismatic leaders, declining church attendance, etc., there seems to be three other notable obstacles to getting from A to Z. First, as several participants at the previous SCPN gathering pointed out, many national pastors and/or church leaders who otherwise might agree with and embrace the principles of SCP, simply find the scope of the SCP vision “overwhelming.” Confronted with the difficulties of pastoring their existing church, even the goal of merely planting one other church is often seen as unobtainable, let alone multiple other church plants. Consequently, though potentially being in substantial agreement with SCP strategy (at least in theory), in practice our national colleagues tend to default to status quo methodologies without considerable modification to their modus operandi. Other national colleagues, though perhaps being willing to acknowledge the theological/missiological validity of SCP strategy, view this vision as having no immediate applicability to the current state of affairs in CEE, and therefore simply dismiss the strategy altogether.

The second challenge to SCP strategy in the short-term is substantially different definitions of what the word “church” means between North American missionaries (NAMs)

² For example, questions regarding contextualization vs. external, potentially inappropriate methodologies, leadership transitions from expatriate missionary to national pastor/leader, and reproducibility of models (outside funding for SCP leaders, literature, conferences, etc.) are a few of the challenges we face as well.

and their European counterparts.³ Bracketing the diversity of views and particular nuances found within both sets of people, and sidelining a critically important deeper investigation and discussion of this enormous topic for another time, here I simply desire to call attention to one facet of this divergence in views. Generally speaking, a typical NAM connected with CP (or SCP for that matter), either due to theological conviction or the subtle pressures of reporting back statistical success to supporting churches, has little trouble identifying a pastor with a group of ten followers a church. Perhaps even one pastor plus five additional people qualifies as a church. Then again, maybe you don't even need a pastor in the classical sense; you just need a group of Christians who gather together regularly. In any event, you definitely don't need a building; in fact, church buildings are more of a hindrance than help. Meeting together for worship in homes, movie theaters, coffee-shops, pubs, parks and even discos is completely acceptable, if not preferable.

On the other hand, the typical European, including but not limited to pastors and leaders of the historical churches, views ten people following a religious leader who meet in someone's home as a *cult*; five Christians who meet together without a pastor as a *Bible study*; and 25 young people getting together to disco in a Christian club as simply *emerging ennui*. In each case, they are anything but *church*. Consequently, if SCP strategy assumes, albeit tacitly, that initial church plants will be comprised of 10-20 people, there are three possible paths forward:

1. *"Stay the course."*⁴ Continue "facilitating" with our current SCP methodologies, and argue that: a) it's premature to draw conclusions from the present SCP experiment—we just need more time and perhaps more training to help our national colleagues make the conceptual as well as functional leap from one- or two-hit efforts at conventional CP to SCP; and b) However Europeans might define "church," our (NAM) understanding is more theologically accurate ("more biblical"), and therefore it doesn't really matter what they think about small church plants—there are always people who will still choose to attend them, even if the broader culture construes them as cults. Besides, God is all-powerful and His Will will prevail despite any cultural resistance—the Christian version of *deus ex machina*.
2. *Generate massive mass marketing materials* that are efficacious in rapidly and radically redefining how Europeans understand what a church is. Argue "(Christian) cults are churches and (historical) churches are cults. Sects are okay, but we prefer to call them denominations, and JW and Mormon churches (along with some fringe "Christian" groups) aren't really Christian so they are still cults."
3. *Develop short-term strategies* that specifically address the present challenges to church planting (and later church planting movements), that are in methodological harmony with and instrumental in realizing our "Z" of SCP.

³ I think on a more general scale, the following observations can be said about North Americans in general as well as Europeans in general, irrespective of their religious affiliation (or lack thereof).

⁴ The thought just occurred to me that a paper comparing the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime with the "missionary surge" that took place in Eastern Europe after 1989 would make an interesting read. On first glance, there appear to be quite a few similarities (e.g. initial success, welcoming response, then unexpected (negative) developments that were perhaps the result of a lack of cultural/historical understanding and/or sufficient foresight with respect to long-term strategies, followed by criticism of foreign involvement, ethnic/denominational strife, etc). On the other hand, there are obvious dissimilarities, and the NAM community has come a long way from those early days. My intention here is not to cast stones or offend anyone; I simply want to highlight that just as the American military has had to alter its tactics given the changing realities on the ground, so too, we need to continue making tactical adjustments.

If I had more time, and was perhaps a bit smarter, I might be able to come up with a few more paths forward. Nevertheless, in their absence, I advocate option #3 above. However, instead of boring, or perhaps aggravating you with any more of my ideas, I thought I would present a short case-study with the goal of as a group, wrestling through what some of these short-term strategies might include.

Törökbálint: A Case Study for Short-term SCP Strategy

For the past five months I've been meeting regularly with another NAM and a Hungarian pastor/church-planter, who have a vision to plant a church in one of the more affluent neighborhoods of Törökbálint (essentially a suburb of Budapest).⁵ I am merely a tag-along who occasionally proffers ideas, suggestions, criticisms, and gentle nudges to go out for a breakfast meeting since I didn't yet have time finish mine at home. Both the NAM and the CP'er are affiliated with a relatively new denomination in Hungary that now has a small network of churches. The CP'er is financially supported by several of these churches, and the CP project is an extension of the "mother" church in Budapest. Additionally, there is a building (two-story house) that the denomination owns in this neighborhood, and is using the top floor for their regional offices—leaving an empty and spacious ground floor that could be easily outfitted to serve as an initial church building. Therefore, the three classical challenges for a church plant (building, pastor, funding) have already been vanquished.

There are two other churches in Törökbálint, one Roman Catholic and the other Reformed. The Roman Catholic church is (remarkably) packed-out on Sunday; the Reformed is not so well attended. Both are involved in a joint bible study for youth on Wednesday nights, and both seem to be making (slow) inroads into the lives of the people in Törökbálint. However, there seems to be enough "space" for the town to handle another church without overcrowding, especially on the other side of the "Mason-Dixie" line (see Footnote 6).

Questions for Discussion:

1. What issues need to be addressed before planting this church?
2. How can we minimize the perception of being a cult? Similarly, what characteristics are needed to effectively reach this affluent community?
3. What other challenges might arise in planting this new church? What can be done to overcome those difficulties?
4. What are concrete, short-term steps we can take to begin laying the groundwork for later church plants (i.e. beyond simply vision-casting or encouraging the church leadership to purposefully plan planting churches that will plant other churches in the future)?

⁵ Törökbálint is essentially divided into two parts: the old, more traditional but poorer village and the recently developed community comprised of a new, emerging class of Hungarian yuppies, as well as expatriate executives. Not surprisingly, there is a tangible geographic as well as cultural fault-line that bisects the town into its two constituencies.