



## **Indigenous Mission Partnership (An Overview and Attempt of Analysis)**

*by Revd Daniel Trusiewicz*

I have been given the topic '**Analysis of missionary situation in Europe**'. However this topic is much broader than my practical perspective and I should be *realistic* rather than presumptuous... Therefore I can speak basically from the experience of ministry I have been doing which is the indigenous church planting in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. I would like to present an overview of Indigenous Mission Partnership, share some representative examples from this corner of mission field and try to draw some conclusions.

The **European Baptist Federation** has developed a mission project – **Indigenous Mission Partnership (IMP)** to facilitate evangelism and the planting of new Baptist congregations in Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. The IMP provides funding for suitably gifted people to work as evangelists and church planters in their own countries. It is difficult to imagine an implementation of the Great Commission (Math 28:18-20) without the church planting.

### **Indigenous Mission Partnership**

In 2012 the EBF celebrates 10 years of the IMP. The project was started in 2002 with only 6 church planters and gradually grew reaching the annual number of 60 in 25 countries. The indigenous church planters are supported by EBF for 5 years of their initial work and the support is gradually decreasing in the second half of that period. This is in order to provide local initiative towards ownership and avoid dependency from abroad.

Until now (July 2012) the IMP has helped during the last decade about 150 church planters. Thanks to their work between 6 to 7 thousand people have become members of new planted congregations. In addition to that many more thousands of others have been positively influenced by the Gospel.

The national church planters serve in various, both urban and rural localizations. Some of them work in the colds of Russian Siberia above the Polar Circle and others are a part of fast growing Baptist Unions in the mountainous Caucasus region. Some toil in spite of legal obstacles in Belarus, while others represent exceptionally mission-minded Baptist Union of Moldova. Still others take their opportunities in discovering new freedoms in Baltic countries accepted to the European Union, as well as the Baptist Union of Ukraine, one of the largest in Europe in respect to numbers.

**Why indigenous?** Global statistics show that in 1900 more than 80% of the world's Christianity was located in Europe and North America. The basic model of doing mission was to send the missionaries from Europe and North America to the rest of

the so called 'heathen' world with the task of evangelizing and planting new churches.

A similar research was done in 2000 and revealed that at least 60% of all Christians lived in the 2/3 of the world – Africa, Asia and Latin America. In 2000 most of the missionary calls – about 60% were from 2/3 of the world and only 11% were from Europe/North America. When taking the costs into account the traditional mission is too expensive.

The model of church planting has significantly changed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the appreciation of *indigenous mission* seems to be the reasonable conclusion. It is beyond any doubt that indigenous church planters are the most effective because they know local languages, understand cultures and have natural contacts. They are also the cheapest.

**Why Eastern Europe?** Dynamics of spiritual movement in the East Europe – new churches being planted naturally by nationals.

BU of Ukraine: 2011 – 130 000 members (1990: 96 000)

BU of Romania: 2011 – 120 000 members

BU of Moldova: 2011 – 21 000 members (1990: 11 000)

BU of Armenia: 2011 – 5 500 members (1990: 350)

Thousands of new churches have been planted since the long desired independence achieved in 1991 by the nations which had been covered under the specific political umbrella of former Soviet Union. The role of IMP is to facilitate some of their efforts, especially the church planting (not one time events), in the economically deprived but spiritually potential nations. Let me illustrate this with some examples.

**Baptists in Armenia** registered *an unprecedented growth*. This small union experienced a phenomenal growth from less than 400 in 1991 to almost 6 000 in 2011. Over 100 new congregations have been started during the last 20 years. A church planting department was opened in the Baptist Seminary of Yerevan.

New churches have been planted by young and spiritually pioneering indigenous leaders. Indigenous leader **Galust** has planted successfully a sizeable Baptist church in a town of 100 000 inhabitants.

In Armenia only 2 years is enough to gather a significant group but the real test is after 5 to 7 years from the beginning. A lot of church planting with excellent results is possible thanks to the dedicated native evangelists and good leadership of Asatur, the general secretary of Baptist union.

**Baptists of Georgia** made an extraordinary attempt to *contextualize* the Gospel. Georgia is predominantly Orthodox and some Baptist churches developed a form of worship which is similar to the Orthodox liturgy. The idea was that the Gospel should be preached in the Orthodox-like form of liturgy which would be culturally user-friendly. This innovatory change has brought a practical result but not saved obstacles. In fact some more conflicts have been added to the typical for Georgia struggles between the Baptists and the Orthodox.

**Moldova** is known to be the poorest country in Europe. The people have been *economically deprived* but at the same time they are *spiritually potential*. Moldova represents the best result in Europe when the number of Baptists is compared with the density of population. This totally rural nation has manifested a lot of missionary potential and numerous churches have been planted there.

Example of the missionary church of '**Jesus the Savior**' in Chisinau is very encouraging. The congregation had been started from the scratch and has grown to over 15 hundred members in 15 years... The Baptist Union of Moldova has doubled during the 15 years after independence. Many Moldavians have gone for missions to other Russian speaking countries and Central Asia. However it can't be overlooked that about ¼ of the nation has emigrated abroad being motivated by sheer economic incentives.

The Baptists in **Romania** are *quite numerous and influential*. The Baptist Union is the third largest in EBF Family. Dr. Otniel Bunaciu, the union's president has the vision of planting a Baptist church in every town and village. There are numerous mega churches, especially in the western part of country which developed ambitious programs of evangelism and church planting. The Baptist presence in the established and well respected universities in Oradea and Bucharest makes excellent entries in the Romanian society.

Indigenous leader **George** has successfully planted new congregation in a town of Pantelimon near to Bucharest. The church was started in a garage and has grown very well developing a multifaceted approach which includes music, choir, learning, social work among the Roma/Gypsy – building bridges of reconciliation. One of the newest ministries is prayer for politicians and George attends prayer meetings in the parliament.

**Ukraine** has the *numerically second largest* Baptist union in Europe – 130 thousand who worship in ca. 3 thousand congregations. Mission minded vision, good growth during the last 20 years and the goal to double the number of churches and Baptists has been distinctive. Those recently planted congregations often meet in rented halls or even tents.

**Volodia** has been particularly successful in Kiev. He has planted a booming Baptist congregation during the last 10 years which has 250 members who have developed numerous ministries as well as two other church plants representing the second generation reproduction.

Ukraine faces the hurting problem of migration as 8 to 9 million people has left the nation during the last 10 years which is nearly 20% of population. The question is: will the migrant Ukrainians ever return home?

**Albania** enjoys *freedom* and the Gospel is advancing even though this country had been declared an atheist state in 1967. The ruthless persecution against Christians rolled over the nation, large number of religious leaders were imprisoned or executed and all remaining 2 thousand religious buildings were closed. In 1991 Albania regained independence and opened its doors to many Christian missionaries. Currently there are about 160 evangelical churches in the country. The spiritual

opening of Albania is a result of the persevering prayers and steadfast spirit of God's people. The serious challenge arises when the foreign missionaries leave and there is no indigenous leadership for congregations which they had planted.

Typical for **Russia** are huge distances which become *natural hindrance* in mission work. There are hundreds of ethnic groups living on its territory. It is a serious challenge to keep the unity among Baptists. The Baptist union has increased the number of churches by ca. 40% since the fall of Soviet Union but the number of Baptists has stayed more or less the same.

The indigenous church planter **Taras** has developed interesting model by helping to a group of Nyentse people in Siberia, above the Polar Circle. The people who had lived from reindeers breeding and fishing suddenly found themselves totally lost when big business arrived in their neighborhood since oil and gas had been discovered in the Jamal Peninsula. Taras helped these people to find their place in new situation and solved hurting social problems. He later shared the gospel which was gladly accepted. Church planting in Siberia is relatively easy as soon as a missionary ... gets there across pathless areas.

**Lebanon** provides a *relative freedom for Christians* who comprise about 15% of total population, however the number of Christians has been decreasing. Lebanon unlike other countries of Middle East affords freedom of changing religion from Islam to Christianity. The **Arab Baptist Theological Seminary** is the sole Baptist theological seminary that serves the surrounding Arab people to equip leaders in the Arab speaking nations: Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Sudan and others.

Baptists in **Lebanon and Syria** do mission work among the Bedouins who comprise up to 20% of society. The Bedouins are the poorest, homeless, illiterate, families with numerous children who don't have permanent work.

Mousa started new congregation in **Zarqa, Jordan** about 5 years ago. There are ca. 50 members now and about 5 times more in home groups that meet during the week. The congregation meets in a rented building. The church is very joyful. The majority are couples with children.

**Tajikistan** is a typical country of Central Asia where the Muslims are in majority. Over 90% of the Tajik land are mountains and over 90% of population is Muslim. *Appalling poverty* forces most men to work abroad. There are only 7 Baptist churches that depend largely on the Dushanbe central church which is Russian speaking. Serious challenge is to plant a Tajik speaking church mainly because of the Muslim apprehension against Christians. Therefore the evangelism requires unconventional methods.

The whole Bible was translated into the Tajik language only at the end of the 20th century for the first time in history. Now the Word of God can be distributed and local leaders believe that this will result in the planting of new churches. Indigenous church planter **Mirshakar** has found a way of successful evangelistic work among the predominantly Muslim populated people. He has good deal of authority and shares the Gospel with his extended family and neighbors. He has established a Baptist fellowship and also has positive influence on several hundred people.

### **Gospel in spite of obstacles**

**Belarus** represents the last dictatorship in Europe. The government introduced a *suppressive religious law* which makes a Christian meeting for a Bible study or worship in a home virtually illegal. Baptist leaders pay high price for their faithful witness in Belarus.

The obstacles don't stop spreading of the Gospel however the number of young people and children has dropped in Baptist churches of Belarus by ca. 30% during the decade 2000-2010. Indigenous church planter **Pavel** paid a sacrificial price that new planted congregation in Senno can have a required house of prayer. He took a private loan and invested the money in the construction of new church building in order for the congregation to be legalized.

**Azerbaijan** in theory provides *religious freedom* but in practice it is resisted and *violated* by the state authorities. A story of an Azeri pastor Zare Merzoyev is impressive. He had been imprisoned because of his tremendous success. The secret service filmed and showed his image on the national TV introducing him as a public enemy. Another pastor was imprisoned being falsely accused and was released only after the intervention of BWA/EBF visit and involvement of Jimmy Carter, former US president. Imprisonments of Baptist leaders in Azerbaijan seem to be a practical method used by authorities in order to suppress the gospel.

**Turkey** is the large Muslim nation with a tiny Christian minority. Pastor **Orhan** has to *face danger every day* because he preaches Christ in the Muslim dominated nation. He even was kidnapped by some Muslim radicals and many times death threats were pronounced against him. Now he has a police protection and continues the work of sharing the Good News and church planting. Similar situation is in Izmir (biblical Smyrna) where pastor Ertan works.

There are spiritual opportunities in **Iraq** even in spite of the political and economic instability caused by the war. The irony of situation is that the distribution of Bible is now possible better than ever and new groups formed. In Baghdad there are about 3 thousand evangelical believers in 12 churches. In addition there are also 5 new church plants in the mountainous north of the country, mainly among the Kurdish people. The terrorists and their bombs attack even Christian churches. There is a significant migration caused by insecurity and anxiety. The huge majority of migrants from Iraq are Christians.

Some churches seem to grow in spite or even ... because of obstacles?!

**Changes in Europe** after the Berlin Wall fell down and the Soviet Union collapsed provided some *historic opportunities for the gospel* for nations that had been hidden and suppressed for many years but are now independent and free.

Baptists and in general Evangelicals comprise a small *minority* in Europe but it is not an obstacle to God. The Lord Jesus told the parable of a little seed which can grow and become a large tree - **Mk. 4:30-32**. From the little beginning there can be a great fruit when there is vision and faithfulness in implementing it, even in spite of

impediments. Similarly, with only a *handful of resources* the EBF can impact thousands and *witness transformation* of societies.

The rich missionary inspiration comes from the Bible and from history which becomes great Baptist heritage. “Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God”. **William Carey** - the father of modern missions is a real model for the contemporary missionaries and church planters.

### **IMP strengths and weaknesses - concluding remarks**

It's indeed encouraging that there are many indigenous workers who are highly motivated and eagerly implement contemporary methods of evangelism, using Bible study guides, tracts, Christian concerts, Jesus film, English language courses, summer camps, sport activities, etc. They utilize present opportunities skillfully, teach biblical doctrines diligently, and form new groups effectively.

The experience of IMP shows that 2 years may be enough to find people for a church plant but the process of discipling them is much longer and takes minimum 5-7 years. It is reckoned that bringing someone to faith takes only about 20% of the total effort, but the follow-up requires the remaining 80%.

The indigenous leaders effectively use contemporary opportunities for evangelism and church planting. They endorse a personal approach in evangelism and try to avoid the 'church jargon'. They demonstrate a pioneering spirit and make conscientious efforts. The Baptist Unions' leaders are greatly appreciative because the IMP helps to maintain the quality and regularity of their evangelistic work.

The church planting work is not easy as there are numerous hindrances. There may be outside obstacles, like repressive law in Belarus requiring churches to reregister and prohibiting the Christians from worshipping in their homes. In Russia numerous ethnic groups and great distances between inhabited areas of this vast territory are a natural hindrance to mission work. Prevailing poverty and high unemployment hamper evangelistic activities in all post-soviet nations. Occult and secularism play the disturbing role to some extent too. Nationalisms and even terrorist attacks seem to be very extremist but unfortunately not rare deterrents of this work.

There are also inner impediments, like resistance to change and a 'ghetto' syndrome that prevails in many traditional churches. Divisions that are created by sheer forms of worship or clashes of personalities are much more frequent than those caused by controversial theological ideas. Church buildings are not used sufficiently – only two or three times a week. Younger people would like to use traditional church buildings not only for prayer but also for other meetings which often creates tensions.

Most of the IMP church plants in Eastern Europe and the Middle East represent the model which may be called 'cloning'. The mother churches would like to replicate their own models in the new planted congregations. The so called 'new expression' congregations are very few and rare, however they are also present.

It has to be noted that the pace of evangelism and church planting has been slowing down radically in comparison to 10 years ago. Some new planted churches go

through crisis and some even dismiss due to the migration of pastors or lack of proper leadership. The unions have to do a work of revitalization in order to keep the ministry going. The migration seems to be one of the most worrying problems which is stemming from social poverty and underdevelopment.

The costs of living is rising and this fact creates additional challenge. The local support for church planters is often symbolic or none and church planters can't sustain their families after 5 years when the EBF withdraws according to earlier agreed principles. Such workers have to often become either bi-vocational or voluntary. It is good though that they still continue ministry after the termination of EBF funding.

Some indigenous leaders are being involved and assigned the ministry of church planting without a proper training and they are not able to produce expected from them results unless they will have improved thoroughly. It seems that typical for most indigenous leaders passion can't make up for the lack of skill. Some church planters are given additional and secondary tasks by their mother churches which may limit their prior involvement in church planting. Therefore there is a need to be critical and improve as well as learn from the past mistakes...

All in all, the final evaluation should be very positive! Indigenous leaders are mobilized, motivated and passionately involved in the ministry. They usually try to bring valuable and up to date initiatives to the local societies. They also witness the transformation of societies that used to be under strong atheistic indoctrination for more than 70 years and now are free from the communist oppression. Baptists have created significant people movements in most of the Eastern European societies.

There are a couple of crucial questions though... Will the Baptists of Eastern Europe be able to keep up the previous pace? Will they manage to accommodate methods of their work to the current situation? Will they continue to have significant impact in the constantly and rapidly changing world?

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