

COVID, CHURCH PLANTING, AND ENDURING PRESENCE

It is a most interesting phenomenon. Here in Saudi Arabia we are seeing more Muslims come to Jesus during the COVID-19 season than at any prior time. This is true in our personal and team experience, and it's true across the entire country. Those who elected to endure, despite limitations, have been inundated with the elect who have chosen to seek the Christ of the cross. Those who elected to endure have been reminded that the purposes and passions of God are irrepressible. God promised that representatives of every nation will be gathered in praise around His throne and that His promises shall stand. From March 2020 to present, we have seen more seekers, salvations, baptisms, and fellowships started than in the time we had full liberty of movement. To Christ be the glory in the Church and in the world and to all ages.

There are many factors to this harvest. Certainly, Saudis had more time to stay home and search the internet. Certainly, missionaries had more time to pray and intercede. Certainly, Saudis wrestled with mortality and the consequences of death. Certainly, the population is younger, the context liberalized, the religious radicals neutralized, and the spirit of fear broken in general. Certainly, there is an element of both mystery and sovereignty at work. In addition to all these and others, I am encouraged to point out three more.

ACQUISITIVE PRESCRIPTION

In an unusual ruling in April 2017,⁽¹⁾ the Canadian Supreme Court agreed with the old adage that possession is nine-tenths of the law stating that it is “acquisitive prescription that grants the right, not the judgment.” Simply put, the court meant that if you park in one place long enough, that parking place becomes yours by the fact of elongated presence, no matter the municipal codes.

I am increasingly convinced that the basic mechanics for church planting among unreached peoples can be simplified down to abiding in Jesus (both personally and corporately), learning language and culture, and faithful long-term presence. God uses so many different people and so many different methods and does so much that in my hubris I disagree with, that I am forced to recognize all over again that the Holy Spirit is indeed the executive of mission and that He speaks through all kinds of donkeys, of whom I am chief. I'm not saying we should act foolishly; neither am I saying that we should do nothing. I am saying that God does the work and gets the glory, but for the work to be done the workers must be in the field and remain there, even when the sun burns hot and the storms blow fierce.

When we are intimate with Jesus and pray believing, when we are fluent in language and culture, when we are present despite the challenges and limitations, we are positioned to be used when and how the Master decides. If COVID taught us anything, it was to hold steady at our station, for the Lord of angel armies is not limited and His winds of revival can blow at any time on anybody through any present representative. Acquisitive prescription, possession as nine-tenths of the law. Missionaries remaining in context, come hell or high water, and heaven comes down and glory fills our souls. We possess the people by possessing the land. We are used because we are present and willing. Not present in our own flimsy strength and foolish wisdom, but present with His mighty power (Acts 1:8) as a consequence of being present in His presence (John 15:5).

COMMANDER'S INTENT

There is a military principle called “Commander’s Intent” that combines both strategy and tactics in fluid harmony. Those on the ground closest to the action must know what the overall vision is (the strategy) and be free to deal with the reality they face when their hands are in the dirt (the tactics). Missionaries tend to be hardheaded, and rightly so. Who else endures in places like Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritania, Libya, Chad, the Comoros, or Pemba when days are long and fruit is scarce! But those with hard heads are not exempt from submission and collaboration, nor are they excused from working in unity with those that differ from them in personality and approach. The integrity of a diverse workforce can only be maintained by adherence to the uniting vision mixed with freedom to pursue that intent uniquely at the ground/field level.

COVID taught us that there are ways to obey the commission and the intent of Jesus that all nations be included in His family that we had not yet explored. In the Saudi context this meant starting an online service that we ran 84 times each week even though we had no parishioners and no permissions. We also launched short Facebook and Instagram videos that were viewed by about 40,000 viewers every five days. We connected to media partnerships. We did what we could from the confines of curfew and were amazed at what God did from His infinite riches in Jesus. When we started using these means to look for seekers, we found a multitude of seekers looking for us. And because we were present and they were ripe, we held out our hands and they fell into our community. We did nothing other than abide in Jesus, use our Arabic and cultural skills (limited as they are), and stay present. Then God did what God does best.

And then ideas began to flow. What can we do using artificial intelligence? How do we access the surge in gaming? What other creative means can God use to accelerate His mission while the rest of the world slams on the brakes? What out-of-the-box methods are timely for this land? Wouldn't it be ironic if women lead the Saudi revival (even as it appears that's the direction it's heading)? How do we align with that surprise? Commander's Intent is received in the briefing room but refined on the battlefield, but in order to take advantage of the breakthrough, you have to remain in the battle. Things are the clearest where the fighting is the fiercest.

SURVIVING THE FIRST ASSAULT

Another military truism is that no battlefield plan survives the first assault. We attend our trainings and conferences, we listen to missions sermons, we kneel at altars in air-conditioned tabernacles and receive our orders. Then we transition to the fields where the enemy is relentless and the setbacks are innumerable, and we face the reality that constant adjustment to the whispering of the Spirit is the only way we can be nimble enough to counterattack and prevail. These insights are purchased with blood and cannot be borrowed or even learned from others. They must be won with wounds and tears. They must be won by remaining in the war, by being shot at, by being face to face on a daily basis with those who are lost.

A few years ago, my wife and I transitioned back to field work after a seven-year period of a leadership role. During that seven years, in our ivory tower, which was mostly an airplane cabin traveling somewhere to coach, teach, train, or visit someone, we didn't lose our vision—we just lost our nuance. I realized one day what I really wanted to do was be with lost people,

work on heart language fluency, make local disciples, and plant indigenous churches. What I didn't want to do was what I was asking all those I lead to do—fill out this report, read this book, go to this training, attend this conference, participate in this phone call, etc. Chastened, I had an epiphany: if I am not face to face on a daily basis with unreached persons, I don't lose my heart; I lose my head. I forget what it actually means to make disciples and plant churches on a daily, non-idealistic basis. I forgot the work isn't complicated; it's just hard.

If we don't endure the first assault by staying in context when the enemy attacks or the situations restrict or the people frustrate, we don't give ourselves enough time to make the necessary field level adjustments that pivot us to victory. In other words, we will be assaulted, but that very assault will reveal how we must respond if we will have the holy stubbornness to endure the attack and the humble sense to adjust our course of action as needed. Remaining on our fields when all is difficult is essential, for it clears our head, trims our excesses, and guides us to where we must focus and attack. We can't attack if we're retreating. We can't attack if we're not present.

COVID is teaching us to attack, and how best we should attack is made clear by being assaulted. What amazing opportunities we miss when we don't stick around to absorb the attacks and then exploit them.

CONCLUSION

Church planting is not complicated; it's just hard. At the end of the day let us abide in Jesus, let us learn language and culture, and let us be present, faithfully enduring no matter the tide. COVID-19 has taught us that on these simple stones, Christ the great Rock will build His Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against us.

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1 “Supreme Court ruling: Possession is 9/10 of law -- even for parking spots.” CTV News. <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/supreme-court-ruling-possession-is-9-10-of-law-even-for-parking-spots-1.3357430> (accessed October 25, 2020).