

Vital Keys for Working with Asian Buddhists: Fruitful Principles & Practices

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From years of working in Thailand since 1965, I have at times suggested several simple, practical, strategic and useful practices for reaching Buddhists and multiplying churches among them. I am thankful for reports from some who, profiting from my cumulative meager wisdom, have had good fruit as a result. So now in my seventies, I again humbly summarize some of these reflections here. I trust that missionary church planters, not only those working among Buddhists but also among Hindus and Muslims, will find considerable help and encouragement from applying these proven principles and practices to the glory of God.

Relationship and Credibility: In Asia there is no fast track to establishing rapport and trust. Building relationships is fundamental and requires much personal investment in sacrifice and time. To look for short cuts to this is to short circuit the process. Learning the culture and the language are good avenues to begin this journey. The more we sit where our people sit, feel what they feel, and understand what they are thinking, the better servants of Christ we become. Spending time with people and their families builds relationships as well as a vital bi-product – credibility. Without credibility we have no believable message for, as Marshall McLuhan wrote, “The Medium is the Message.” Who we are speaks louder than what we say. Usually it takes a couple of years to gain that coveted credibility, without which we accomplish little eternally. Just before our family left for our first home assignment, one of the elders came to the house to ask a specific question, “Will you be coming back to our province to continue the work next term?” His answer to my asking “Why do you ask?” shocked me. “It takes us Thai a couple of years of observation to know whether or not we can trust and work with the new missionary,” he said. “Just as we begin to trust,” he continued, “he leaves and we have to start the process over again with another new person sent by the mission.” Thankfully, we did return and had the most fruitful term ever.

Giftedness of the Workers: I recognize missionaries have different strengths and varied gifts, whether from the West, the majority world, or the indigenous local mission and national church. Not all missionaries function as pioneer apostles, who usually are multi-gifted, particularly in faith, evangelism, teaching, strategic planning, evaluating and leadership training. However, whatever roles other missionaries with more individual gifts play, each one can work together on small teams sharing their gifts to complement each other. Thereby strong individual gifts exercised according to abilities in evangelism, teaching, administration, medical service and so forth contribute to effective church planting teams. Each worker can find some niche from which to serve in church multiplication. Detailed below are some key principles to follow, whether as the individual apostle or as a member of the smaller team. Note particularly that each fruitful practice has a specific purpose in mind. It is not simply the doing of each separate principle that counts, but the integrative purpose behind each that matters most in progressing towards cumulatively reaching the ultimate objective. That goal is to glorify

God through the Church by completing His Great Commission to make disciples of all peoples, to be faithful followers of Christ by functioning in local expressions of the church, and to be the representatives of Jesus to those in their own communities.

Sensitivity to God's Spirit: Find out where the Holy Spirit is operating and work along side Him. This requires prayer for direction, following the Spirit's promptings and actively moving out by faith into the surrounding community. Be committed to the Spirit and rely constantly upon Him. Because of the intense spiritual activity involved, doing pioneer evangelism and multiplying churches in virgin territory requires our absolute dependence on God and His Holy Spirit. The work truly is the Lord's. We are His helping servants. Except the Lord build a house they labor in vain who build it (Psl. 127:1)

Intercession: Prayer shows our dependence on and expectation from God. Pray regularly for each person and each family member observed to be responsive. It is vital that the local team meets one half day a week to pray in detail for interested individuals and their families. Mobilize prayer in the homelands and around the world. Train the intercessors to pray strategically alongside the team according to the various strategies, plans and developments at each stage of implementation on the field. Report problems and progress to the intercessors regularly, at least monthly. Reading books on the influence of intercessors like Jonathan Goforth, Praying Hyde and Louisa Vaughn, had a strong impact on helping develop prayer in my youth.

Itineration: With a view towards establishing new churches, it is wise to get a broad picture of the situations in the area projected for entry. By traveling around the region visiting each town and village in it, we are able to discern the needs and identify those places where God seems already to be preparing the hearts of families. In implementing the following principles below, consider working simultaneously with several different promising centers or families rather than concentrate on only one center. This may also keep us from becoming depended upon by any emerging congregation in a single location, as the church emerges. Daniel McGilvary, Presbyterian pioneer to North Thailand from 1867, modeled this mobile itineration and saw a strong movement of church multiplication, the fruit of which has remained to this day. In the 21st Century more Christians per capita are in North Thailand than in any other area of the land.

Reconnaissance: Reconnoitering the area assists in noting potentially strategic and sometimes responsive centers. Initially utilize all kinds of evangelistic methods, tools and approaches such as open air evangelism, giving out gospel tracts, visiting from house to house, distributing literature, broadcasting radio programs, or showing films or videos of the life of Christ. However in all this activity always have one clear definite purpose in mind, namely to observe and note the receptive people and locations. While evangelizing broadly, always deliberately look for and identify the responsive families. This is a priority. If this is not done intentionally, much evangelism fails to be conserved effectively.

Receptivity: Once responsive clusters are identified, focus attention particularly on the receptive extended family networks, even if the initial responder is an individual. Relationships and social networks are primary avenues for spreading the good news and for potential acceptance too. Pray regularly and intensely for the receptive family-webs and networks. During my first term I recognized that this family pattern was a vital clue and crucial key to fruitful and stable church planting. That changed what we prayed for and the work strategies we followed as well as the outcomes expected and results we experienced. A change from focus on just individuals to one on open families occurred.

Concentration through Repeated Contact: Maintain repeated contact with those who are interested and with receptive families, *until* they believe. Keep visiting, witnessing, praying and serving them with faith that God will do His work. Where the Holy Spirit is at work, and we are faithfully following up the responsive families, we can anticipate God will accomplish His purpose and produce spiritual fruit. That kind of discipline and dedicated tenacity generates encouraging rewards for church growth.

Strategic Family Focus: Rather than emphasize reaching the individual or only students or children, intentionally aim for influencing the whole family and their extended family networks during evangelism and follow-up. Most Asian families have tighter structures than most in the West. Encourage new converts/families to concentrate deliberately on reaching their own networks of families, friends and acquaintances rather than the individual one by one mode. New enquirers are often the best witnesses to relatives.

Mobility of People: Studiously observe which populations and families are in motion - moving or migrating into or out of the area. Give effort to building relationships with them, and attempt to reach out to them and their networks because they are usually more receptive. Note this is also true for Christians who move, as they are often the key to new church plants. Because there was considerable mobility in and out of the province where I worked, we developed a statistical form that incorporated keeping track of the mobility of believers within the province, and of those coming in and out from other provinces too.

Intensified Evangelism: In centers of growing receptivity, mobilize local Christians and others from nearby areas to do concerted evangelism and witness there. Like a spearhead penetrating the area, concentrate blocks of time over several days at a time to share the good news of Jesus. Where possible have the team of believers stay overnight in the community. This gives them increased valuable contact with the families in that area. Teams comprised of local and nearby followers of Jesus can be most helpful in this. Using appropriate indigenous illustrations and telling relevant cultural stories readily assists with communicating the message. Playing indigenous drama, music, dance and media that portrays the story of Christ also aids the hearers' understanding. Presenting appropriate programs and visiting from family to family add to the concentration of the message. Often several families are open or ready to commit themselves as seekers of God.

Evangelism and Nurture: Never stop evangelism to do consolidation and nurture or to run some program of discipleship. Like the two rails on which the train runs, we must keep doing evangelism and provide for nurture *simultaneously*. If evangelism is stopped in order to do nurture it is most difficult to restart the witnessing outreach or to motivate members afresh to do evangelism again. The momentum is usually lost and the potential for increased church multiplication is frustrated. Even in concentrated evangelism emphases we ran two teams at the same time, one for evangelism, the other for follow up and nurture.

Expectation: By faith and prayer, church members and workers can expect results for families to either become followers of Jesus or start taking definite steps towards Christ. Even if only some members or individuals respond, expect other family members to follow. Where at least a couple of families are willing to launch them, home fellowships can be initiated. The gift of faith and the hope of expectancy are invaluable to multiplying house churches.

Establish Beachheads of Home Fellowships: Give serious time and effort to discipling new converts and their families in practical ways, especially in simple obedience to God, praying for each other, and sharing their fresh experiences of faith with others. Training should also be given in the home on how to function as Christ's church in their locality, not only as a worshipping body, but also as a caring community. Consider baptizing whole family groups where ready or groups of individuals and families in the beginning stages. Sometimes it might be wise to wait for the family to be ready to be baptized together, rather than to do this as individuals. It is often beneficial to baptize earlier rather than later. Baptism in Asian minds usually marks the starting point of becoming a believer or accepting Christ. Early baptism is preferred for Buddhist seekers rather than doing a longer class of catechism or preparation first. Buddhists normally expect to graduate or arrive at an experience after completing the requirement of a set course of months of study. A Christ follower's commitment to a new life and to evidence of obvious change is better than a sense of having arrived after completing a course of instruction. However, teaching in practical obedience, in biblical foundations and in discipleship training *should follow on* for all those who are baptized.

Conceptualization of Churches: It is important to comprehend what the church may look like and what constitutes a functioning body of believers. Consider even two or three families of followers as sufficient for the embryonic church to begin. Within a couple of families the Holy Spirit provides all the resident gifts necessary for the full functioning of the church in worship, in caring and nurture of each other believer, and in witnessing outreach to their social networks and the community. As other believers are added their spiritual gifts may supplement those of the existing fellowship. Multiply new house fellowships rather than build one large one.

Church Planting Movements (CPMs): Start local house churches immediately from the earliest converts and their families. Trust these to develop, expand and multiply under the Holy Spirit. Encourage them to do so, especially in following up their extended family networks. Stimulate and encourage native "insider movements." Instilling a vision for

outreach and for planting new house churches in family groups, villages and towns is critical. Do not wait until these new believers have years of church experience before embarking on training for multiplying daughter churches everywhere they take the gospel. The earlier the vision for multiplication becomes activated in outreach with a view to starting new fellowships, the stronger the movement will become.

Mobilize Locally: Train all adherents and members, new and old, to take part in witness activities to their families - particularly to close relatives, extended families and friends' networks. This can be done both individually and as small groups. Help the believers to plant new churches among those who respond. Trust them to the Holy Spirit rather than smother or control them. Excited new believers are often the best adult avenues for energetically spreading the good news in word and deed. Their enthusiasm is infectious.

Local Leadership: Discover local leadership from among the harvest of new converts. Develop and mobilize those who are respected, responsible family heads, resourceful in their own culture and communities. Leveling leadership utilizes local, unpaid, lay-followers, not depending on imported, outside trained professionals. The laity is the clergy! Let local unpaid leaders and lay-pastors function in the embryonic churches from the beginning. Mostly they will be supported by their own work such as farming or shop-keepers, Training is done locally for these workers and volunteer leaders, **not** in formal courses at some distant Bible Schools. Keep the initial curriculum for the first few years local, simple, relevant, practical and appropriate to the stage of development of outreach, nurture and church growth. Our lay pastor training program ran for more than three years, with the unpaid participants giving two days every three weeks for the training. Primarily the main curriculum covered Bible and theology, evangelism and church growth, multiplying new fellowships, nurturing and counseling, pastoral care and administrative oversight of practical church matters.

Multiplication: Establish the vision and practice for multiplying churches early. Stimulate producing new outreaches both nearby and in other distant districts and provinces, without the help of outside funds. Encourage lay believers to pioneer new church plants. Replicate the embryonic church speedily in social web-movements and throughout the society. Entrust the new churches to the Holy Spirit for growth and outreach rather than control them. Encourage maximum multiplication throughout family, tribal, clan and people group networks as well as across cultures.

Pioneer Missionary Roles: Church planters initiating new outreaches should always maintain an outside stance, an apostolic role. It is best not to view oneself as an insider or accept a role as pastor or minister of the local church. A missionary to pioneer areas may have to do evangelism, pastoral care, counseling, and so forth like a pastor, but following Paul, he/she should always keep his/her role apostolic. Being mobile, dispensable and ever concerned to raise up indigenous churches and local native leaders is both the initial and ultimate goal. Jacob Loewen's suggestions on various missionary roles to consider in developing new churches overseas were most helpful in my early years as an intercultural missionary. (See especially *Practical Anthropology and Culture and Human Values*).

Role Changes: Knowing when to change roles from time to time requires discernment. An apostle may be working with several developing churches, each at different stages of growth, each requiring a different emphasis of the apostle on occasions, such as the need for evangelism, starting a new embryonic church, nurturing, teaching or training leaders. Deciding when and how to change roles with each situation at the appropriate time contributes to mature development of indigenous churches that do not become dependent on the overseas missionary or the native church planter.

Contextual Matters: Start indigenous, contextual, local fellowships in homes as soon as possible from the beginning. Keep the local churches as simple and indigenous in form, function and structure as possible. Encourage the local leaders, under guidance of the Holy Spirit, to make their own decisions regarding things like funerals, weddings, ancestor veneration, house-warming, baby naming ceremonies and so forth. Suggest they consider keeping the forms similar to the indigenous culture, while also evaluating and adapting the processes following the study of biblical wisdom from inspired Scripture. Maximize insider input, minimize outsider, foreign suggestions. Be a catalyst for insider movements. From the start maintain financial self sufficiency, not depending on foreign outside monies. Use local resources. Also employ appropriate methods and tools in evangelism and disciple making, that are easily reproducible, not expensive, complex, outside, foreign ones.

Evaluation and Review: Each phase of strategy and every stage of implementation need to be evaluated in actual terms of making disciples that contribute to local functioning churches that are multiplying. Statistical checks of progress as well as noting genuine progress towards biblical goals are needed. Key lessons that are learned should be recycled for future growth. Reviewing effective tools for evangelism and teaching may assist replicating efficient tools that are easily reproducible. Evaluating also helps the church planter to understand where changes in role are called for in order to see healthy growth. Evaluation of the indigenous state of the fellowships may also bring to light potential syncretism that needs addressing, or other weaknesses that require attention.

Statistics and Oversight Responsibility: From the beginning the local leaders need to see their responsibility for the “flock of God.” At first this means that the mother church will have the care and oversight of every believer and family related to the Body of Christ in the whole province or state. As more local house churches arise, that responsibility is passed on appropriately to the local congregations. District oversight and care likewise comes under the wing of the closest local fellowships. The strengths of meeting weekly in local gatherings is supplemented by district gatherings once a quarter, provincial or state gatherings each half year, and annual conferences of believers regionally and nationwide. Whereas the few local Christians are often persecuted and feel they are a tiny minority, these larger gatherings encourage them to see that God is at work on a broader scale, and that they are not alone. Keeping records and annual statistics also help to evaluate the level of growth and progress. Remember the shepherd knew how many sheep was under his care. He also knew when even one was lost. May all church workers follow that shepherd’s example faithfully.

Practical Applications: Finally, readers are encouraged to refer to the conclusions at the ends of each of my chapters in the seven or more SEANET volumes published by William Carey Library. These conclusions suggest many practical points for reaching out to Buddhists and multiplying churches among them. Anyone who seriously reads these conclusions and applications thoughtfully, even if they only pick up one or two principles and apply them consistently to their work, are likely to find them considerably helpful. They may enhance their ministry in fruitful productivity and multiplication of local churches into smaller or larger movements.

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