2½ Percent -
Church planting movements from the periphery to the center

By Frank Preston

2½ percent – anomalies in social research

The US Census Bureau average height for American adult male is 5'9" with the normal range being 5'2" to 6'4" for males. Statistically, most people are grouped around the average (mean) with the population tapering up and tapering down from the average to create a bell curve in height. Yet if someone from a European country happened to go to a professional basketball game and met the players, and the players were his only exposure to Americans, he could naturally conclude that Americans are very tall people, since *his sample* of nine people all exceed the normal range of 6'4." He could report to his friends and family back home that though he had heard that Americans were not much different in height than his fellow Europeans, this information must be incorrect since *everyone* he met was incredibly tall. In reality, our friend had measured an anomaly in society (basketball players) who happened to be gathered in one central location.

In research, anomalies make up 5 percent of a population, and in this case, including 2½ percent excessively tall people and 2½ percent excessively small people, both outside the range of 5'2" to 6'4". Anomalies tend to cluster together for various reasons. Harnessing the power of anomalies could become a gateway to spreading the gospel in a new area.

Characteristics of aberrant groups

Armed with an understanding of anomalies, both statistical theory and social research observe that at least 2 ½ percent of any society are open for religious change, no matter how resistant they are (Marasculio & Serlin, 1988). In fact, John Wesley capitalized on the fact that resistant peoples experience times of openness to the gospel, noting that their openness was fleeting like the blooms on a flower, and the evangelist needed to capitalize on this while the openness existed (Hunter, 1987, pp. 72-77).

Westerners often consider evangelism to be individualistic, but in fact much research demonstrates that in many societies, "aberrant" individuals, those willing to go against the prevailing local religion- collect into small "aberrant" groups (Hesselgrave, 1991, pp. 193-285). Researchers of radical Islam call these small pockets "a bunch of guys" who collectively develop a radical ideology and even take steps toward becoming a terrorist cell (Sageman, 2004, p. 157).   Often these small group discuss the dissatisfaction with their prevailing religion (Fiske & Goodwin, 1994).

Characteristics of aberrant group members: innovators, opinion leaders, mavens, connectors, and salesmen.

From two different perspectives, Rogers (1995) and Gladwell (2000) identify certain roles within these social groups. Rogers is concerned with social movements and the adoption of an innovation, and Gladwell is concerned with the spread of an adoption of a product or idea by using theories from epidemics. Rogers concentrates on two roles within those who first adopt an innovation, which he identifies as innovators and opinion leaders. Gladwell concentrates on the concepts of mavens, connectors, and salesmen.

Innovators are gregarious individuals who have more social participation and hence greater connect points with outsiders who are social change agents, are highly connected into interpersonal networks, and have greater exposure to media channels (Rogers, 1995, pp. 262-264). Like the men of Athens who gathered at the Areopagus (cf Acts 17:16-34), innovators are interested in "what's new, what's cool." It is not uncommon to find them to be multi-lingual and to be more western minded than their contemporaries. Rogers points out that innovators will more readily adopt a new innovation, but the down side is that they are more often seen as "deviates" (i.e. anomalies) of the social norms and have low credibility (trust) with other members of their social group (Rogers 1995, 26). They are interesting individuals who pursue all sorts of new things, but "normal" members of society take what they say with a grain of salt.

Opinion leaders are individuals who are considered leaders within a large or small social group. Since they are leaders, they often look to innovators for current ideas – "what is new, what is cool"- yet are more reserved in adoption. Adopting an innovation too early or too late could be politically detrimental to their leadership role, so they are both observant and cautious. For this reason, opinion leaders, compared to innovators, have higher credibility with the social group, and are seen as being in the center of interpersonal communication networks in a social system (Rogers 1995, 27). In the Areopagus example above, those who brought Paul to the Areopagus were innovators, whereas many opinion leaders graced the audience.

Gladwell notes that mavens are collectors of information. For different reasons than opinion leaders, mavens connect with innovators. They are media savvy yet choose

media that is information driven, including content driven Internet sites. Maven-ness often will have a specialty focus, and if mavens do not know the answer, they generally know where to get one. Innovators and opinion leaders look to mavens to validate the introduction of an innovation into their small group.

Connectors overlap with innovators in the way that they interact *within* the group - they are channels of networking (cf Barabasi, 2002). They are different than innovators who are more connected to the outside world. "Salesmen" are those who often help the small group adopt an innovation through persuasion, moving them from talk to action.

A new look at John 1:35: Jesus inspires an aberrant group.

John chapter 1 provides an example where we can see some of these roles played out. Jesus recruited this "bunch of guys" to become the core of his ministry team.

John 1:37 records how two of John the Baptist's disciples heard John identify Jesus as something new and important: "Behold the Lamb of God." Observe that two of John's disciples (Andrew and John) went from following him to following Jesus – a typical innovator trait. Jesus accommodates their innovativeness and invites them to spend the day with him.

Note that the conversations led Andrew to "first thing" go to Peter, the group opinion leader, and announce that he had located the Messiah. Peter went to Jesus, and Jesus, recognizing him as the group leader, commissioned him as such by giving him the name Cephas. MacArthur (2002) argues that the nicknaming of Simon (his given name) to Cephas (Aramaic) or Peter (Greek) was the distinguishing mark of acknowledgement of Peter's leadership among this "bunch of guys." In this case the innovator connected

the opinion leader to the change agent (Jesus). Observe that Jesus did not embrace the innovator, the more worldly/sophisticated member of the bunch of guys. Peter was the rock of the group. Andrew and John have their places, but not as the glue that holds the team together. Networks and bonds already existed, and Jesus merely commissioned what was already a natural group and its leader.

The text records that the next day Jesus found Philip in Bethsaida. Philip then located Nathanael (a connector activity) and stated: "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law" (vs 45). Who is the "we?" I would argue it is the Andrew, Peter, John, and James gang. Bethsaida was a small fishing village, everyone knew everyone. Note that Nathanael was introduced to Jesus by way of the messianic idea, giving the appearance that a thread of conversation between this "bunch of guys" focused on this topic.

But who was the maven of the group, the collector of information and the thinker? Look at the exchange in verses 1:46-51. But before proceeding, it is important to discuss the concept of the fig tree. Scholars generally agree that persons who spent time meditating on the Torah were described as people who sit under the fig tree (cf Ridderbos, 1997, p. 90). Formal learning often occurred in the temple, but self-taught seekers sought informal methods, retreating under the boughs of the fig tree.

Nathanael's first impression of hearing Philip's news was that of a skeptic: "nothing good can come from Nazareth." But in their meeting Jesus affirms Nathanael with the words that "he was a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false" (v:47). Jesus affirms Nathanael's maven learning style by acknowledging that his "sitting under the fig tree" was an honorable style of learning.

Several observations can be made from this passage. The first is that Jesus' initial contact with the group was through the innovators John and Andrew. These are men who had fluid contact with the outside world. Innovators are quick to jump from group to group, thing to thing but are stable in friendships within their own network. In that friendship network, innovators can direct one to the "rock" of a network, the opinion leader, in this case, Peter. The second observation is that Peter's authority is affirmed within the network. Note that he may not be the "smartest" member of the group (that was Nathanael, the maven's role) nor was he the most outreach oriented (that was John and Andrew as innovators and Philip as a connector), but he had the charisma to be recognized as a leader just the same. A third observation is that Jesus pulled in the whole "bunch of guys." Had Jesus focused on one team member, say Andrew, then the dyadic relationship with the rest of the "guys" would have been broken. Andrew would have experienced persecution because of his new belief, but more importantly he would have been persecuted because the new belief *broke the bonds of fellowship*.

Keeping the group together as a group is key. As persecution comes, the group can collectively thwart the attacks and come out stronger in the end. Social research demonstrates that individual members will become progressively stronger in their beliefs if they are part of a fellowship of like-minded persons (Drury & Reicher, 2000; McCauley & Segal, 1987).

Case Study: LETMI

LETMI was a media ministry of Pioneers in a Muslim majority country. Initially the group was comprised of an expatiate missionary and a small team of nationals whose

objective was to use media in distributing evangelistic material. Initial projects were geared to "getting the gospel out" using such products as the *Jesus* film, radio programs, and locally produced media of various sorts. But getting mass distribution was expensive, difficult, and response rate was often minimal. As LETMI was researching a small people movement in a strong Muslim area near the LETMI ministry, it became apparent from the data that people were coming to Christ not so much from what they *learned* from the media, but from the fact that media gave a chance for responders to locate a Christian. In essence, the content of the media was less consequential than the offering of an opportunity to respond to the media. This conclusion is supported by research in what has become known as the media "limit effects" model (McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991). From these findings, LETMI shifted its focus from gospel presentation-oriented media to developing follow-up/response systems for media products. In other words media used as pre-evangelism, identifying seekers , was more productive than direct presentations of the gospel *if* a good response mechanism was built into the media strategy.

Not feeling the constraint to be directly evangelistic in media products by providing ways for seekers to contact the organization, gave LETMI more media options that secular national mass media organizations found were acceptable in being aired. LETMI worked with a local television producer to develop several "specials" that highlighted social problems and how the love of God through Isa could help people to overcome those issues. For example, in 2000 LETMI was part of the *Jesus Millennium* film project where the gospel was clearly presented on national television. Yet in a country of over 100 million inhabitants, only a few more than 100 people responded. Applying the new strategy in 2002, LETMI and its partners did a television special about

a woman who was impregnated after a rape and the shame that resulted from this event, and that God through Christ could meet her deepest felt need. The respondents from Muslim backgrounds exceeded 117,000.   LETMI's role was to do the follow-up of the Muslim respondents.

We, not I

After being engaged in correspondence with the group, it became apparent from the content of the respondent's letters that less than 2% of the respondents had theological questions, whereas over 28% just wanted to know that God cared for them, and 24% were people looking for prayer to overcome health or family matters. Clearly LETMI was touching a hurting audience. Also as LETMI reviewed the content of the correspondence they received, roughly half of the letters had questions or statements in which the writer used the word "we" instead of "I."   In the local language, "we" is sometimes used as a polite "I," yet the LETMI leaders were curious – who were the "we?" They sent ministry teams to meet several of the writers who had invited them to hear their stories. LETMI was surprised to find that the writer functioned as the innovator who was bold enough to contact the outside world, and "we" was indeed a small band of respondents. Some were from the same family who watched the program together, and some were an aberrant "bunch of guys" who did not feel Islam was giving them the answers that met their heart's desire. Many groups had at least one member who had experienced a dream or vision (cf Scott, 2008).

After years of tweaking the model, LETMI began to shift its follow-up methods to try to keep groups meeting and discussing Biblical truth and not to be in immediate

contact with a local church planter. Several factors led to this, but the greatest was the fact that they simply did not have the field church planters who were able to go to remote areas. LETMI later added to its methods an identification of the "opinion leader" whom LETMI then invited to meet other group leaders in a secure location. For some of these, this was the first time they had contact with a church planter since they believed in Jesus (Isa al Masih).

Suggestions for Field Leaders

1. **Proper use of media.**

The principle is: "people use media and not media uses people." Significant research has shown that mass media is a poor persuasion tool (Bamberg & Schmidt, 2001; Petty & Priester, 1994; Popkin, 1994). Another way of stating this is that media products that are used among resistant peoples for persuasion will most often fail in converting them to Christ, but media products can be used effectively to identify the 2½ percent who are open for religious change (Rogers, 1995, p. 17).

2. **Innovators will be first responders**

As argued, innovators will be greater media consumers than the population at large, and will be more open to new ideas. They will be attracted to the foreign missionary since the innovator thinks in broader categories than the average person. The innovator can be confused as the "man of peace" since he/she obviously "gets it." Yet many missionaries know well the heart ache that comes as these innovators quickly grow spiritually and then lose focus because they lack roots (Matthew 13:1-23). But innovators

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can be a gateway into a network of "bunch of guys." Spending time with them can be strategic, but mainly for seeing them as a link to the opinion leader.

3. Teach them as a group

As noted earlier, the aberrant group finds their restlessness in the fact that the majority religion does not satisfy their soul. These groups are looking for someone to help them make sense of their restless soul. Helping the *group as a group* keeps the bonds tight and the vision alive. They are more often able to handle persecution as a group and also use their gifts in a natural way to expand the work. The missionary should concentrate on the group "leader" who will then teach others (2 Timothy 2:2).

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