

---

# Church Growth through Group Movements

---

*by John T. Seamands*

Church growth takes place most naturally and most rapidly through group or people movements. The history of missions in the third world proves this very clearly. It is estimated that about 85 percent of the Christian constituency in Africa and Asia is the result of group movements along family, caste, or tribal lines.

To the ordinary western mind the phenomenon of people becoming Christians in large groups is usually an enigma. This is due primarily to our individualistic mindset and lifestyle. Among westerners all the major decisions of life are made by the individual. For example, a young man and a young girl meet and fall in love, and then announce to their parents that they are going to marry. Each individual also makes a personal choice about his or her vocation in life. Or, the individual attends a church service or preaching mission somewhere, responds to the invitation of the preacher, and makes a personal decision to follow Christ. Society places high value on the individual; government promises to protect the individual, his rights and property.

In eastern countries, however, the major decisions of life are usually made as a result of extended group interaction. This is due primarily to a strong sense of group consciousness and group solidarity. In India, if you ask a villager, "Who are you?" he will usually tell you to what group he belongs rather than give you his own name. In all eastern countries marriage is an arrangement between two families; the parents choose the husband or wife. Festivals are always village or tribal affairs. Discipline against an individual is carried out by the entire group. An affront to any individual is considered an offense to the whole group.

The missiological problem arises when a western missionary goes

---

*Dr. John T. Seamands is the John Wesley Beeson Professor of Christian Missions at Asbury Theological Seminary and a former missionary to India.*

to an eastern land and seeks to impose his individualism upon a society controlled by a strong group consciousness. Let's suppose that as a result of his initial evangelistic efforts he is successful in gaining a few, scattered, individual converts. His normal reaction is to rejoice in his success and to encourage these few converts to accept the rite of baptism and declare themselves as "Christians." This public step, the missionary feels, will clinch the faith of the new converts and make an impact upon many others. Usually, however, the results of these hasty, individual baptisms are not beneficial but highly detrimental.

In the first place, the individual convert will more than likely suffer social dislocation. For the first time in his life he has made a major decision — to change his religion — without consulting the members of his family or the group. So the family disowns him and the group ostracizes him. As a result, contact with the group is severed and the possibility of witnessing to others and influencing them for Christ is eliminated. Group antagonism to the missionary and the gospel is fostered, for the group feels that to become a Christian is an antisocial act, the act of a rebel. This puts the tribe or group against the church and the church against the tribe. The Christians are considered as body-snatchers or abductors.

Then again, the individual convert usually suffers from a guilt complex because he knows he has made a major decision without going through the regular decision-making process of his society. And finally, a western type of Christianity develops, because the missionary feels obligated to take care of his socially ostracized converts by gathering them into isolated Christian colonies. The result is Christian ghettos in which the converts imitate the ways of the western missionary, particularly in regard to their worship and religious life.

On the other hand, if the western missionary is wise, he will respect the group-making machinery of such close-knit societies, put aside his individualistic outlook, and make an appeal to the whole group rather than just individuals. Suppose a person wants to become a Christian, then the missionary will say to him, "This is fine. But don't you want to bring some others with you? Let's pray for your whole family to come. Why not invite me to your home to tell your family members about Christ. Let's exhaust all the attempts and approaches to win them." Thus, baptism of the individual convert is postponed for a period until he has made an earnest attempt to win the rest of the

## *Church Growth through Group Movements*

family or group. Rather than surprising his people with a sudden announcement that he has already been baptized, or will be baptized shortly, the new convert witnesses to his family of his new faith in Christ and how it has transformed his life. He urges his relatives to consider the claims of Christ upon their own lives. Meanwhile, by the witness of his daily conduct he will seek to demonstrate the transforming power of the gospel.

The results of such a family or group approach have proved to be most beneficial to the growth and life of the church in the Afro-Asian countries. Very often, after much talk and talk-back at mealtime, or around the campfire, or in the marketplace, the whole family or a group of families decides to follow Christ. Then a new pattern is established. The group has been consulted. The regular decision-making process has been followed. Becoming a Christian is no longer an antisocial act. The individual does not suffer social dislocation. Contact with the family and group is maintained, making further witness and outreach possible. A more indigenous type of Christianity develops because people come into the church with their families, social structures, and their own leadership. The gospel not only changes individuals, but has a chance to transform all aspects of the society. Churches made up of such groups are usually more stable, better able to withstand persecution, and more effective in their disciplinary actions.

Someone asks, "What if the individual convert tries his best, but is unable to win his family members; will you postpone his baptism indefinitely?" No, we have no right to do this. But at least the individual's conscience is free. He can honestly say, "I tried my best." Even the people will say, "Yes, he tried his best, but we don't want to be Christian. It's *our* decision." More than likely, however, the individual will be able to win his own family, then his relatives, who in turn win their family members and relatives in other villages. In this way a "people movement" is inaugurated and moves through a distinct homogenous ethnical or sociological unit of society. For example, in India such group movements have spread through certain castes in Hindu society, while in Africa and animist societies they have spread through particular clans and tribes.

Again someone may ask, "But are these group movements theologically valid? Salvation is strictly an individual affair. How can a group decide to become Christian?" The question is based on a misunderstanding of the real nature of a people movement. Such a

movement is not a group of people getting together and deciding to take a vote, so that if the majority votes in favor, then the whole group will go along. A group does not have a mind; it can't make decisions. Only individuals can do that. But it is a group decision in the sense that several people, closely knit in society, make a decision together, after mutual consultation. The decision may take several months, with prolonged discussion and weighing of the implications and cost. There is usually room for stay-outers. Some decide to stay out. So it's not a pressure movement. It is a movement based on multi-individual, mutually interdependent action. Dr. Donald McGavran has defined a people movement as "the joint decision of a number of individuals comprising some section of society, perhaps five or 50 families, which enables them to become Christian without social dislocation, while remaining in full contact with their non-Christian relatives, thus enabling other groups across the years, after suitable instruction, to become Christians and form churches."

Some of the outstanding indigenous churches of the third world originated in people movements. Witness the Karen Church of Burma, the Batak Church of Sumatra, the Naga Church of India, and the Fijian-Samoan Churches of the South Pacific. Take away the great people movements of Africa and Asia and there would be very little left of the church in that part of the world. Undoubtedly the group approach has been God's way in building His church in these lands.

Perhaps we in the west need to learn a lesson from the east. We need to ask ourselves the question, "Have we been too individualistic in our approach with the gospel?"

Would it be more effective to challenge whole families to accept Christ and the Christian way of life? Should we seek out the responsive homogenous units of our society and seek to disciple them in the Christian faith? Should we confront business, labor, and government with the claims of Christ?

Such an approach could well be the evangelism of the future. ■