



Church Finding

Colin Edwards, Team Leader of Urban Vision in the UK, looks back on his time in South Asia.

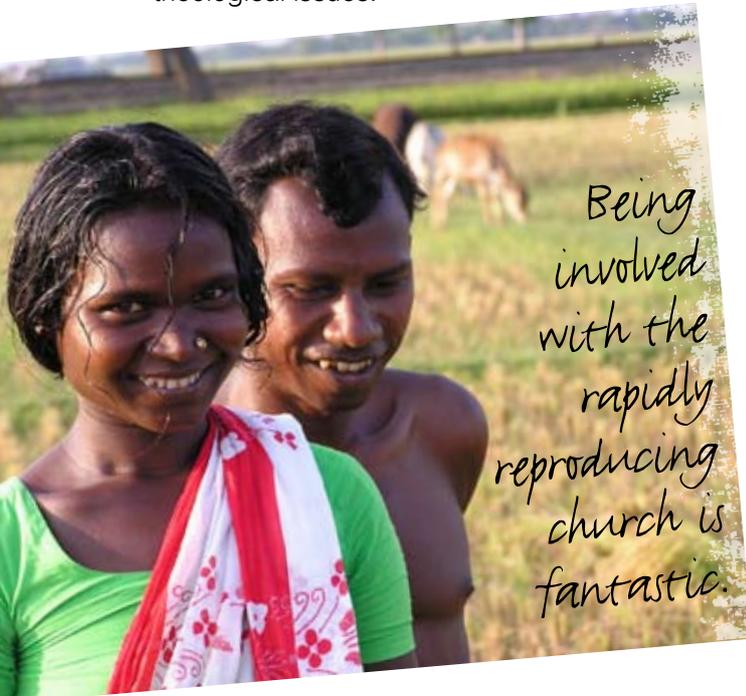
When people hear that I worked in South Asia for many years they often ask “Were you involved in Church Planting?” Oddly enough, the answer to that is “No, not really.” It was more like Church Finding. Church Finding is a lot easier and probably more fun, though just as stressful.

There are seasons of sowing and of reaping. My great uncle served in South Asia in the 1950s and 60s, and saw no church growth among the Muslim community whatsoever. In 1995, on our first Home Assignment, we went to visit him. He had been diagnosed with cancer and we spent a lovely day with him. At one point just he and I were sitting together. “Tell me” he said. “Are there any believers from the Muslim community at all?” I was able to tell him of meeting forty men in the city in which he had worked. Then he started to

cry. Quietly wiping a tear from his cheek, he said in a soft voice “I gave up hope you know. Oh, I worked with the church and we saw tribal people and others come to faith. But we didn’t see anyone from the Muslim community. I didn’t think it was possible” Six weeks later he went to meet Jesus face to face knowing that God was able to do more than he could have thought or imagined.

Since the mid 90s, numbers have grown. Conservative estimates of this new form of Muslim-background church in our region are 50,000! Some estimates are a lot higher. Much of my role was finding new groups of believers, listening to their stories and documenting them, and helping link them to other groups around the region. It also involved walking beside a couple of key leaders as they looked at what it meant to follow Jesus coming from their heritage and in their setting.

Leaders are subject to huge pressures. I would like to report that the guys I walked beside did really well and had no problems. That would, however, be to embellish the truth. As it was, some of them grew in maturity and leadership, but others struggled with issues like finance, use and abuse of power, personal integrity, and didn't really give clear guidance on some major theological issues.



Nor were the problems confined to leadership. The growing groups saw almost all the problems of the New Testament churches and even some problems that hadn't been invented then. When the church grows so quickly there are bound to be problems, but there is also bound to be real growth, maturity and solid foundations. I saw an illiterate young man explain to the police the basis to his faith, that it wasn't illogical or immoral, and that he refused to turn back. I saw families have their crops destroyed and their irrigation systems wrecked, and yet they acted with love and compassion towards the very families who were attacking them.

So the question arises: what real advice can a foreigner give to groups going through genuine, gut-wrenching, painful persecution? Can any advice be more than just fine sounding words from a rich person with a passport? Fortunately, I was able to draw on the experience of others who had been through such times themselves. They were able to give the call - "Be faithful." In the midst of this there are three things that stand out as helpful for people and groups under attack for their faith.

1. *Memorise scripture. The more the word dwells in our hearts, the more it guides our heart responses in times of trouble. And if it's memorised it is with us in the times when our Bibles are taken from us.*
2. *Have a heart song. Have a song that embraces all that's dear to you about Jesus. Sing it daily. Have it embedded in your heart. In those times of hardship, that song will help shine his light into your heart.*
3. *The believing community commits to look after your family. If someone is taken away from their family, maybe put in jail, what happens to their family is a major concern. One thing that helps hold people firm is to know that the rest of the community has committed beforehand to look after the family. No matter what the situation, no matter the amount of mud flung or violence used, others will work to look after the family. If I know that, then I can face what is thrown at me.*

Being involved with the rapidly reproducing church is fantastic. To see lives transformed by Christ, and to see this happen time and again touches our hearts in deep ways. There are problems, of course. There are real hurts, mistakes and wounds. However, many testify that "it's worth it." The change in people's lives, the joy that is radiated and the peace that fills them is thrillingly infectious. Having come back from South Asia where this change is now expected and planned for, it's been an adjustment to come to churches in the UK who fear that they are dying or have little hope that a 'mission' will transform many people. The body of Christ is growing dramatically around the world. For those in areas where it doesn't seem to be, take heart. He is able to do more than we could think or imagine. ●

