

Planting a Mission across Cultures
Part 1 -- The Host Congregation
By Ken Behnken

This article first appeared in the February 24, 2006, Mission Moments newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions. Permission is given to copy this article for distribution within your own congregation. Please credit the author and the Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, California, www.centerforusmissions.org. For more information, contact the Center at 949-854-8002 x1780.

When you plant a new mission outreach with people of a different culture in your own church facilities, you're placing your church on the foreign mission field. From the time the decision is made to reach out to a nearby group of another culture, your church will no longer be the same. A member of such a congregation said, "I miss my old church where everything was always the same and always predictable." The book of Acts teaches us that God never meant for his church to always be the same, always predictable. Traditions were broken in Acts 15 when the Holy Spirit helped the disciples realize that the church is to be missional, for Jews and Gentiles alike. God's desire is that "all men be saved and come to the knowledge of truth" (1 Tim 2:4). As in the book of Acts, when we reach outside our traditional walls, change happens.

In this two-part article we will study the church planting principles for both the host congregation and the mission. This issue has principles to guide the host, or mother, congregation as they prayerfully consider the Holy Spirit's leading into the mission field that is their community. The next issue of *Mission Moments* will include principles for the mission, or daughter, ministry.

Principle 1: Acknowledge that this is the Lord's church. Remember you dedicated your church facilities to the Lord and His mission, not to the members and their comfort. The Lord's church, people and buildings, are for mission.

Principle 2: Know your community. Who are the people that live in your ministry area? Study the demographics before you make a decision. God has brought the world to our doorsteps. Suddenly we all are on the mission field. More than sending money to missionaries in foreign lands, God is asking us to personally get involved.

Principle 3: Avoid a fortress mentality. The words of the Great Commission, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," (Matthew 28:19) fling open the doors of our church buildings and push us out into the street.

Principle 4: Get to know your neighbors. The church is about relationships: people listening learning, caring, helping, and sharing with other people--not just people like us, but "all nations." (The Greek word is "ethne," all ethnics). We are in a new Pentecost. On that first Pentecost, when the disciples opened the doors to their private hide-away where they huddled in fear, they were confronted with people "out of every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). Their first inclination was to share the Gospel. It's time to open our church doors and get to know the people God has brought to us for this new Pentecost.

Principle 5: Respect diversity. People from other cultures are not going to be like us. We can't insist that they must become like us if they want to share the temple God built in our community. Remember, we are all God's people. One culture does not have all the answers. There is a lot we can learn from people of other cultures. Paul didn't insist that the Greeks learn Hebrew. He ministered to them in Greek. He became "all things to all men so that I, by all means, might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22).

Principle 6: Plan your strategy. Do not jump in without a plan. This outreach must be the decision of the whole church, pastor and people together. Take time to learn about the new culture. Invite people from this culture to help you plan a strategy. Make decisions about facility use. Study what Scriptures have to say about reaching across cultures. Determine how you will start, the costs involved, and the person who will lead the ministry for the new culture. Develop a mission plan.

Principle 7: Be ready for change. Understand that when you, like the apostles, step into the mission field, things are going to change. Understand that not all change is bad. Change often forces us to depend upon God for answers and solutions to mission challenges.

Principle 8: Avoid "us and them" syndrome. As you share facilities, also share ministry. Do not develop a mentality that separates your ministries. Language and cultural differences may make your ministries look and sound different, especially as you work with first generation immigrants. Yet, in spite of these differences, your ministries and mission are still the same. Together, you are reaching out to your community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. See your ministries as one ministry.

Principle 9: Pastors and leaders meet regularly. The pastors and leaders will be the catalyst for unity. As the people see the pastors and leaders of the two cultures working together, they will be a model for the lay people to follow.

Principle 10: Worship and celebrate together. On special occasions, 2 to 3 times a year, hold joint, bi-lingual worship services. Have several fellowship opportunities, with meals or potlucks, each year, planned by teams made up of people from each group. Make these events times when you each share something about your culture (food, music, dance, or history).

Principle 11: Be patient. The primary goal of a new ethnic ministry is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a culturally relevant way, so that the Holy Spirit has an opportunity to touch people's lives and enable them to focus on Jesus Christ and his love, forgiveness, and saving grace for their lives. The next step is to lead them into the Scriptures (teach them) so that they can understand the teachings of the Christian faith from a Lutheran perspective. We can't expect them to be "Lutheran" before they become Christian. Allow the Holy Spirit time to work through the Word and Sacraments.

Ken Behnken is the retired director of the Center for U.S. Missions. He continues to work in cross-cultural ministry with the Pacific Southwest District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

