**2 1/2 Percent: Church Planting Movements from the Periphery to the Center**.

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Social change movements follow a bell curve pattern with innovators and early adopters on the front end and laggards on the tail end. Rarely are they cataclysmic. This article will discuss movements in general and specifically discuss the role of individuals within a small group of early adopters as well as media's role identifying and mobilizing small groups of early adopters in a church planting movement.

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## 2 ½ percent – anomalies in social research

The US Census bureau average height for American adult males is 5' 9" and for females is 5'3" with the normal range of 5'2" to 6'4" for males and 4'9" to 5'10" for females. Statistically, most people are grouped around the average (mean) with a tapering up and tapering down from the average to create a bell curve. 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 concluded 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 European country, 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% of a population, and in this case, including 2 ½ percent excessively tall people and 2 1/2 percent excessively small people, both outside the range of 5'2" to 6'4. The actual odds of our European friend using a sampling of the basketball team is small, less than 5 in 1000 or in research terms .005. But anomalies in social research do exist. There are pockets of anomalies that cluster together for some reason, and a researcher must be careful to consider this possibility and take steps to avoid them by using research methods that yield statistically valid samples. Yet 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; Rogers, 1995). 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. Wesley argued for good research to consider timing and methods for evangelism (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 are discussing with each other the dissatisfaction with their prevailing religion and are sharing ideas on how to make sense of their dissonance – what they were taught not matching up with what they experience (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 is new, what is 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. I had an Indonesian friend describe his innovator friend with a phrase: "not all bamboo in a cluster grows straight."

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 when he made his presentation.

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 such as *Consumers Reports* or content driven Internet sites. Maven-ness will have a specialty focus, some people in our office have the inside scoop on Florida plants, others on the best auto repair shop. If mavens don't know the

answer, they generally know where one can get the answer. Innovators and opinion leaders look to mavens to validate the introduction of an innovation into their small group. As one can guess, these roles can be somewhat fluid, yet are still identifiable in a small group setting.

Connectors overlap with innovators in the way that they interact *within* the group - they are channels of networking (cf Barabasi, 2002). This is 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. "Rahmad's (the innovator) ideas may be weird, but he may be on to something. Let's try it." In such a setting everyone now looks to the opinion leader for final approval.

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

John chapter 1 provides a case study in which we can see some of these roles played out. The context is the core of Jesus discipleship team coming into existence. Actually, they already existed as a 'bunch of guys" before Jesus met them. Jesus only recruited them to a new calling – to become fishers of men.

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." It is no mistake that two of John's disciples (Andrew and John) went from following John the Baptist to following Jesus – innovators are notorious for being into one thing only to later switch tracks and be into another (Rogers, 1995, p. 263). Jesus accommodates their innovativeness and invites them to spend the day with him. I can only imagine the conversation these innovators had with Jesus, and how John and the rest of the disciples felt as these two abandoned the ministry team.

But 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, which means stone or rock. MacArthur (2002) argues that the nicknaming of Simon (his given name) to Cephas (Aramaic) or Peter (Greek) was the distinguishing mark or 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 didn't 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 Jesus finding Philip on the next day. He was from Bethsaida the same small fishing village as Andrew, Peter, John, and James (John's brother and the business partner of Peter's). 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 the thread of conversations between this "bunch of guys" focused on such topics.

But who was the maven of the group - the collector of information and the thinker? Look at exchange in verses 1:46-51. But before proceeding, it is important to discuss the concept of the fig tree. Fig trees were symbols of places of learning and meditation (cf Proverbs 27:18). 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 whom there is nothing false" (v:47). This passage is pregnant with meaning, but for the purpose of brevity, suffice it to say that Jesus affirms Nathanael's maven learning style by acknowledging that his "sitting under the fig tree" was an honorable style of learning (MacArthur, 2002, p. 145).

Several observations can be made from this passage. The first is that Jesus' first contact with the group was through 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 the innovator and connector- John and Andrew, and Philip), but he had the charisma to be recognized as a leader just the same. Peter was not without his issues, but Jesus stuck with him as a leader. 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 is key as Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 states:

> 9 Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.
> 10 For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.
> 11 Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?
> 12 And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

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).

Though the above can seem interesting, a field study can be more practical. The case study below is from an outreach strategy.

**Case Study: LETMI**

LETMI was a media ministry of Pioneers in a Muslim majority country in South East Asia. 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 from Campus Crusade for Christ, radio programs with FEBC, 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 in a northern island 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 of less consequence than the offering of an opportunity to respond to Christ oriented 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 that highlighted a relationship with God in Christ. 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 (Sogaard, 1993, pp. 1-75). From this LETMI altered its purpose statement to read: "To use any and all media as a means of identifying Muslims who are searching for a religious alternative."

Not feeling the constraint to be directly evangelistic in media products but to provide ways for seekers to contact the organization, gave LETMI more media options that secular national mass media organizations found were acceptable to be aired. LETMI worked with a local television producer to develop several "specials" that highlighted social problems and how the love of God through Christ could help people to overcome those issues. For example, in 2000 LETMI was part of the *Jesus* film *Millennium* 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 her being pregnant outside wedlock, 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.

After being engaged in correspondence with the group, often using a set of template "main points" letters, respondents would write back with other questions or requesting further material. The next stages of material would become increasingly evangelistic and were, for the most part, received positively by respondents. In analyzing the content of the respondents letters, less than 2% of the respondents had theological questions, whereas over 28% just wanted to know that God cared for them, 24% were people looking for prayer to overcome health or family matters. Clearly LETMI was touching a hurting audience.

**We, not I**

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 the to the model 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). Several groups split into several cell groups in an area and were successful in thwarting local persecution because of their combined numbers.

**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 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 2 ½ percent who are open for religious change (Rogers, 1995, p. 17). Field leaders should to spend time and money in developing follow-up systems rather than developing a slick gospel product. As LETMI saw, gospel presentations via mass media will not be as successful in church planting as connecting with the media respondent in his spiritual journey.

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 only lose focus because they lack roots (Matthew 13:1-23). But innovators can be a gateway into a network of "bunch of guys." Spending time with them, can be strategic, but for seeing them as a link to the opinion leader. The evangelist should be searching for the group leader. Most likely the aberrant group has been discussing their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Apply the "good-news" to their questions. In the LETMI case, people were not asking theological questions but they were asking if God cared for them.

3. **Teach them as a group**

> "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather the wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."
> Antoine de Saint Exupery

As noted earlier, the aberrant group finds their restlessness in the fact that the majority religion does not satisfy their soul. In additional research that LETMI conducted, 26% of Muslims have experienced a dream or vision in which a "prophet or being of light" spoke to them in the night. In 1 Samuel 3, Samuel had Eli who instructed him what to do after he had a dream. These groups are looking for someone to help them make sense of their restless soul. Help 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 the teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). Often LETMI found that gathering the leaders together with an "outsider" church planter as a facilitator of discussions allowed the group to teach one another. This kept the "teaching" from being foreign and kept the vision alive. Allow the scriptures and the Holy Spirit to be the main teachers, with the evangelist as a guide, and methods of expansion into the "majority" will emerge as they learn to love the "vast and endless sea."

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