

RESEARCH PROJECTS TOGETHER IN MISSION

TiM STARTS A NEW CHAPTER

BIBLE SOCIETY'S PARTNERSHIP WITH TOGETHER IN MISSION (TiM) could certainly not be described as a research project in the traditional sense of the word. However, the organisation has grown as a result of hard lessons learned in the course of a "test and see" church planting strategy in the 1990s. As such it is a fruit of a practical research project.

At the beginning of the new millennium TiM is now attempting to position itself as the Church's agency for church planting. With a new chapter about to be written, it is worth looking back over the work undertaken during the last decade that has enabled TiM to arrive at this position.

During the early 1990s there existed a widespread sense of movement among the denominations regarding the value and place of church planting within their overall mission agendas. A number of leaders approached Bible Society to see if it would be willing to host denominational leaders at a consultation on church planting. Bible Society was able to provide an open table for denominations across a very wide spectrum to converse. At that consultation it was agreed that the DAWN (Discipling a Whole Nation) methodology, which had already significantly impacted the Philippines, would present an excellent inter church model.

Out of this consultation came Challenge 2000 and a church planting congress in Birmingham (part of the DAWN model) in 1992. Approximately 600 from most of the major denominations attended and goals were set and a strategy was agreed. The DAWN methodology contained a number of elements that were already present within British church life. The Filipino experience had been that good research (already a reality in the shape of the various church census activities carried out by Peter Brierley) had allowed goals to be set for the nation as

a whole. It was calculated that, in order to obtain a similar penetration of church presence in Britain, a further 20,000 congregations would need to be planted.

This became the unofficial goal; to plant 20,000 churches by the year 2000.

The function of Challenge 2000 was not to plant the churches but to establish realistic and inspirational goals, to encourage existing organisations to engage in the training of church planters, to publish resources, to conduct further research, and wherever possible work across the denominations at a local level to identify neighbourhoods where new congregations could be planted.

A second congress was held at Nottingham in 1995, aiming to encourage a higher profile for church planting and to check progress towards the unofficial goals. However, this congress did not really achieve a further firing of the passion, and further setbacks emerged as it became increasingly difficult to maintain the organisational life of Challenge 2000. Not only were resources stretched, but there was also the realisation that the overall goal was not likely to be reached. The eventual closure of the Challenge 2000 office produced something of a hiatus for the whole DAWN process and caused a degree of reassessment to take place.

The process of rethinking the task led to changes in personnel and new resources, both intellectual and practical. The name Challenge 2000 had been deliberately time-limited and a new name that reflected the new direction was needed.

The name chosen, Together in Mission, emphasised the relationship between the task of church planting and a commitment to the creation of new church-plants that were properly equipped for the task of mission. Church planting policies needed to be set in the

context of the overall mission strategy of each denomination and needed to be properly integrated in a holistic mission awareness.

To this end, TiM seeks to re-engage with the denominations, encouraging holistic church planting strategies that will take account of the unique mission field of the Western world. This is not a simple task. It will take the best of our mission thinkers, the most creative of our practitioners, the most generous spirit of mutual co-operation to even begin to think of a church planting praxis that will add to the work of existing churches and not detract from them, and which will plant imaginative new congregations that will feed into the total vitality of the whole church rather than simply be sectarian.

This re-engagement has already begun. Conversations with Churches Together in England have taken place and discussions with senior church leaders are in process. This year there has been another meeting of denominational representatives with the TiM executive. Experience to date indicates that the denominations need constant prompting if they are to continue to think about church planting and other missional initiatives.

Bible Society will benefit enormously from its partnership with TiM in that it has identified the need to create missional church as a primary campaign goal within the arena of the Church. As the profile of TiM gradually heightens, so our joint goal will be nearer to realisation; that is, the revealing of creative church planting to the denominations as a powerful strategic missionary exercise.

For more details of Together in Mission, contact: linsi.simmons@biblesociety.org.uk