

A Team Leader's Lessons from the Field: Insights into God's Amazing Work Among One Minority Group

by Solomon Seylani

Three years ago our team of 10 ex-pat workers scattered among the Tallo¹ minority people of China saw our first house church established. The next year that number increased to 10 and this past year the number shot up to 52 house churches started just by those on our team! Even more amazing though is what the local house church leaders we've trained have done. Three years ago they started 10 house churches, the next year 156, and last year they started 256 house churches!

Although most of these house churches consist of only 4-14 people, there is an exciting momentum building and it is quite possible that we are seeing the beginnings of a church planting movement. A CPM is defined as a rapid, sustained, multiplying, increase of indigenous churches who are in turn planting multiplying churches within their given people group or population segment. In simple terms for minority groups in China one could say that a CPM is occurring when every house church is starting other house churches and every leader is training up other leaders.

Church buildings, seminary training and full-time salaried pastors are not the focus; instead the goal is to see new churches and new leaders raised up out of each new house church start. These house churches are relatively simple and easily reproducible. Instead of seminary trained pastors preaching, the Bible study part of each meeting is participative with the members asking simple questions about the text, learning from each other and together discovering truths from the passage or Bible story.

Each member is constantly expected to share his or her faith and to teach other non-Christians what they learn at each meeting. In fact roughly one-third of each meeting is spent with the members practicing sharing with each other what they just learned. This prepares them to share it with friends and others they interact with outside the meeting.

Popular thinking is that these kind of rapidly reproducing groups tend to produce shallow weak believers, but in reality the rapidity of multiplication creates exciting momentum and a vibrant environment conducive to obedience and growth. The continual need for more leaders compels people to grow and put their faith into action. Contrary to what most western Christians expect, the rapidity of the movement actually prevents complacency, shallowness and keeps believers from getting side-tracked by non-essentials.

The progress our team saw in the last 3 years did not come easily. We encountered many difficulties and there still remain some major challenges and much work to be done. Through our experiences we've learned some important lessons listed below.

- 1) Stay doggedly focused on the goal.** Our agency's leaders and our immediate supervisor constantly made every decision based on whether or not it would

¹ Pseudonym used for the sake of security

significantly contribute to stimulating a CPM among the Tallo. This was difficult at times, causing us to have to say no to some projects that we might have enjoyed, but over time we came to see the critical importance of this focus. It was especially helpful in guiding us to choose a platform that enabled us to have repeated and welcomed access to the Tallo. This compelling vision of a CPM among the Tallo also has been the glue that has enabled our team of very unique individuals involved in different types of ministries to continue to work together in unity.

- 2) **Create a CPM ethos.** This principle goes hand in hand with the first principle. Initially some of our team questioned some of the CPM principles, but after doing a study of the book of Acts together, everyone became convinced that these principles were Biblical. We found that as we constantly stayed focused on nurturing a CPM among the Tallo, a powerful CPM ethos developed on our team.

We constantly discussed CPM concepts with each other and every team member had to answer pointed questions in their monthly report about whether or not they were spending time on activities that would help stimulate a CPM. As new people joined our team we were amazed at how quickly they got passionate about starting reproducible house churches and getting nationals to take over leadership as quickly as possible. We learned to never underestimate the power of ethos, and discovered that an ethos doesn't just "happen"; but is created through the thoughtful initiative of wise leaders.

- 3) **Focus on the Word and prayer in practical ways.** Especially as we started seeing significant breakthroughs in the work, our team found ourselves against considerable spiritual opposition and difficulties – sickness, discouragement, sudden financial crises, family problems, and relationship problems. Our team (and many nationals) began to require each member to pray and fast once a week for our team and the Tallo.

We also designated one day a month as a day of prayer and fasting for the Tallo and field workers from the different agencies would regularly meet together in lieu of lunch that day to pray for the Tallo. We also encouraged all the ex-pats in our Tallo inter-agency partnership to make a concerted effort to increase the number of people praying for them and the Tallo on a daily basis. We all felt that if we could get in step with God in seeing a worldwide movement of prayer for the Tallo that great breakthroughs would certainly come.

- 4) **Identify and major on those activities that continually bring the most significant results.** In business it is said that 20 percent of the activities produce 80 percent of the results. Business people are exhorted to identify and stay focused on those key activities. The same principle has great merit in mission work. The Asian ex-pats on our team began holding seminars on "how to start house churches that can rapidly and effectively multiply" to House Church leaders in our area (either local Tallo believers or evangelists from House church networks in other areas of China that were sent to our area). We quickly realized that this was an activity that was producing great results.

In order to focus more time doing these seminars and the critical follow-up of those trained, the key players in these seminars hired locals to help with their business platforms so they could have more time for this specific ministry.

We also began to realize that though short-term teams were producing some results, they were requiring an immense amount of our time that could be better spent on other more strategic activities. Consequently we decided to stop hosting almost all short-term teams except those willing to receive only 2 coaching visits from us during their stay. Also we stopped giving on-the-field orientation and training, opting instead to do this through training videos and an orientation manual we developed.

- 5) **Develop and make available appropriate materials** The Tallo are predominantly oral learners so we had to greatly simplify the written evangelism and discipleship materials that we were using. Also a high priority for us has been to recruit and train Tallo mother tongue translators to make the Bible available in their heart language via radio broadcasts, the Jesus film, and through a set of culturally relevant recordings of Chronological Bible stories. Additionally we worked hard to provide reliable house church workers with Bibles, evangelistic VCDs and cassette tapes and tracts that they have faithfully used to evangelize and disciple Tallo.
- 6) **Invest most with those nationals open to change.** A big mistake we made early on was spending too much time with a few of the house church leaders who seemed to be most influential. After investing a lot of time building relationships with them and training them in some alternative methods of church planting we eventually realized that these particular leaders were unwilling to change, even though their current methods were only marginally successful.

Over time we learned that new Tallo converts and young 16-18 year old evangelists from other parts of China were the most influential people for us to invest in. They saw the weaknesses of their current way of doing things, and they were willing to venture out to try something new. It was through the obedience of these kind of people that simple, strong, lay-led house churches were reproduced at an impressive rate.

- 7) **Ex-pats can and should plant churches.** Our team was a mix of Asian and Caucasian ex-pats. Some workers in China believe that the only valid role for ex-pats is to train nationals and that it's too big a security risk for Caucasians to be involved in church planting. We did not find this to be true. Almost all the members of our team were able to plant a church, and several planted large numbers of them. The Asian ex-pats on our team were most involved in training nationals how to plant reproducible house churches. The fact that they were already planting these kinds of churches among the Tallo gave them immense credibility and respect in the eyes of these nationals.

Those nationals who had doubts whether these kind of churches could work were left without excuses after hearing our Asian teammates tell what they were already seeing happen. When these same nationals heard that Caucasians on our team were also planting reproducing churches, they were amazed and often their response was, “Caucasian ex-pats are doing better than we are at reaching the Tallo! We need to learn from them and get busy ourselves!”

It is truly an exciting time to be involved in reaching Chinese minority groups. Many of them are very receptive to the Gospel and some of the areas that they live in are opening up to ex-pats and outsiders for the first time since the Communists took control in 1949. The Lord is moving. It is time of great opportunity, but also a time for well thought-out and appropriate strategies.
