

What's Wrong with "What Could Be Wrong with 'Church Planting'?"

Dave Coles

I appreciate Mack Stiles' significant experience planting churches in the United States and the Middle East. I also appreciate that he began his article [What Could Be Wrong with 'Church Planting'? Six Dangers in a Missions Strategy](#) by enumerating four strengths he appreciates about those he knows who attempt to put CPM into practice. I noted that both the four strengths and the six weaknesses he lists focus *not on the movements themselves*, but on those he knows "who attempt to put CPM into practice." Both are valid sources of information and useful for Christ's global body to interact with. Whenever possible, though, I prefer to learn directly from CPM leaders themselves rather than just outsiders attempting to catalyze movements.

Sadly, Stiles' perspective reflects a very limited set of sources. If I had the opportunity to talk with him (which I would warmly welcome), I would love to share some information about CPMs around the world which I think he might find encouraging – much more so than the perspective reflected in this blog. As I read through "What Could Be Wrong with 'Church Planting'?" I noticed several misunderstandings and inaccuracies in his portrayal of CPM/DMM. See below my responses to 11 issues.

1. "church' for many in CPM is merely that 'two or more are gathered.'" DC: This is untrue, depending on what constitutes "many." Of the 1350+ movements known to the [24:14](#) database, *none* of them use "two or more are gathered" as their definition of church. I've seen some Insider Movement and "house church movement" advocates mentioning that definition, but not CPM or DMM advocates or leaders.
2. "When I've asked CPM folks to define church — the end goal of their movement — many of them seem to be at a loss." DC: I'd love to help Brother Stiles to network more and become more current on the CPM literature available (and/or introduce him to better-informed "CPM folks"). He would be better informed if he had read "[The Bare Essentials of Helping Groups Become Churches: Four Helps in CPM](#)" – either when it appeared in the September/October 2012 issue of *Mission Frontiers* or when it was reprinted on pages 74-86 of [24:14 - A Testimony to All Peoples](#). Or he could have read "What is your definition of church?" on page 326 of [24:14 - A Testimony to All Peoples](#).
3. He asks: "What about doctrine? Can a non-Christian become a member?" DC: Obviously not, in any CPM I've ever heard of, or any CPM in the 24:14 database. I wish I could help allay his groundless concerns.
4. "what I hear in CPM is an evangelism strategy, not a church-planting strategy." DC: He seems quite out of touch with CPM literature, too abundant to fully list here. The items cited in #2 above would be a good starting place. Then books such as *Church Planting Movements*, *Miraculous Movements*, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, *Movements that Move*, *Bhojpuri Breakthrough*, and *Contagious Disciple Making*. Many more could be names. But any one of these would suffice to show that CPM (or DMM) is, in fact, "a church-planting strategy."
5. He seems stuck in a traditional paradigm: "Churches do just a few critical activities: They hear the word preached...."

DC: Apparently he thinks that inductive Bible study and discussion don't count as valid ways to internalize and apply God's Word. He thinks we need passive listeners and a one-person lecture, in order to really have a church.

6. "since mature teachers and preachers are sidelined in the CPM model in the name of indigeneity, the fellowships can be susceptible to wolves and charlatans."

DC: This has been answered numerous times. He could have read a good answer to "Doesn't rapid multiplication increase the possibility for heresy?", for example, on page 238 of [24:14 - A Testimony to All Peoples](#).

7. "their desire for growth and numbers and rapid effects sometimes seems like a distinctly American value wrapped in different words."

DC: Ironically, the leaders of practically EVERY real CPM is a *non-Westerner* (a non-American). Again it appears he has been talking to the wrong people (just Americans?) or is just using his imagination as he considers the dynamics of CPMs.

8. "Who is a genuine believer, for example? If someone says he loves Jesus, does that mean he is his follower? (I've heard Muslims claim they love Jesus more than Christians.) Or what constitutes the gospel, for that matter? Clarity about biblical conversion on the mission field is crucial, but CPM is often fuzzy at best."

DC: Stiles doesn't cite any source for this strong accusation (except for Muslims he has talked to). In most CPMs, baptism (coupled with a lifestyle of obedience to Scripture) functions as the decisive mark of genuine faith.

9. "calling for "homogeneous church growth," which CPM advocates often do."

DC: Brother Stiles seems to have gotten the wrong address. I've never heard this phrase among any CPM leader or advocate. I've heard it *plenty* among advocates of other approaches. But in a CPM, people share the gospel with whoever they can, often effectively bridging cultures to share with people different than themselves.

10. "Many involved in CPM over-contextualize....When we cut and paste the gospel, even giving different interpretations to clear biblical texts so that we can fit the gospel to culture,"

DC: Again, he seems to be critiquing an approach in which contextualization is controlled by cultural *outsiders*. That's not how a CPM/DMM works. The whole point is that cultural insiders search "the biblical narrative" and grapple with how it applies to their culture and personal lives.

11. "But in the world of modern missionary methods, CPM (circa 2001) is old. It is already being shelved for something newer. Another missionary friend says, 'DMM (Disciple-Making Movement) is a kind of next-generation CPM with a focus on obedience-based discipleship and discovery Bible studies, and with less focus on planting churches.' But this new method only serves the point: Missionary fads come and go."

DC: That might be how his "missionary friend" understands the two, but that's not how those who coined the terms or the majority (to my knowledge) of those actually implementing CPM and DMM view it. An overview of the terms' history and meaning can be found in "[Disciple Making Movements – a History and a Definition](#)". A briefer description and comparison of the two can be seen in the "Definitions" section of [24:14 - A Testimony to All Peoples](#), on pages 314-316.

I appreciate Brother Stiles' effort to think through and process important issues related to CPM/DMM. If any of you reading this have an idea of a way I could talk to Brother Stiles (and/or those in charge of the Desiring God website) to help bring clearer understanding, let me know. I'd love to talk with him about these things.