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| <b>Topic</b>    | <b>Church planting in Thailand and Norway</b>    |
| <b>Occasion</b> | <b>Church leader's network conference, NMS</b>   |
| <b>When</b>     | <b>19. October 2007</b>                          |
| <b>Where</b>    | <b>School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger</b> |

First off all I would like to thank NMS for inviting me to give a lecture on church planting. It is an honour to meet you and a privilege to share with you some reflections and observations related to “Church planting in Thailand and Norway”.

Just a few words about **my background**. After graduating from this school I went to Thailand together with my family in 1995, less that one year after the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thailand was formally established. For six years we had the privilege to work as missionaries within this church. The main part of our first term we were living in the rural north-eastern part of Thailand. And after a couple of years back in Norway, we stayed for two years in urban Bangkok, as I served as the field representative of NMS. During the first term I was more directly involved in church planting through an evangelistic team. During the second term I was more indirectly involved for instance as a member of the church council, observing church planting in different parts of the country.

As we returned to Norway, I worked as a consultant for the bishop of Stavanger. One of the characteristics of this diocese is that during the last few years several new congregations have been planted. Quite a few of these congregations have been planted in close cooperation between NMS and the diocese based on local initiative. As a consultant for the bishop I had the chance to follow some of the processes. So this is very briefly my background related to church planting in Thailand and Norway.

Since last year I have been working on a Ph.D. project here at the School of Mission and Theology, related to new congregations in Thailand and Norway. The preliminary title of my project is “Contextual Ecclesiology – a comparative study of new congregations in a Norwegian folk church and a Thai minority church.” So, the topic of this lecture “Church planting in Thailand and Norway” relates both to my previous background and to my present research.

Working on Contextual Ecclesiology, I have learnt that it is important to be contextual, to know the context. This lecture is also part of a context. You are church leaders and leaders in NMS, attending a Church leader's network conference. This is the second day of your conference, and this lecture is the first part of a seminar on Church Planting and Church Development. Since later today you will be introduced to church planting from a practical perspective, this lecture will deal with church planting from a more basic perspective, but still related to two specific contexts, Thailand and Norway. Briefly speaking this is the context of this lecture as I now address you as church leaders and leaders in NMS. When I speak to you, I will address you simply as church leaders in a wide sense, including also leaders of NMS.

As church leaders all of you are somehow familiar with church planting.

1. Some of you are familiar with church planting based on your own **experience**, and might share both stories of success and failure.
2. Some of you might be familiar with church planting mainly based on **observation**. By observing the success and failure of others, you might have an opinion about church planting.
3. As church leaders you are also familiar with church planting related to **strategy**. Your church does probably have a strategy for church planting. This strategy is not necessarily written in a strategy document or a five-years' plan on a national level. It could just as well be found in the unwritten strategies of local churches, intending to plant daughter-churches.
4. I suppose that you as church leaders from time to time also have given **advice** on church planting. You might have encouraged a local pastor who has been reluctant to plant a new church, or you might have been forced to stagger an excited colleague who is simply moving too fast.

So I assume that church planting is somehow a familiar topic. I have a lot to learn from you, and you could certainly learn a lot from each other. After the lecture the floor will therefore be open for comments and questions.

A wise man once said: *“The task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen, but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everybody sees.”* (Arthur Schopenhauer)

Related to church planting, the task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen or to ask what no one yet has asked. The task is rather to try to give some new perspectives. We should never be afraid to ask simple questions, because simple questions are very often the most important ones. So I would like to start by asking two very simple, but important questions about church planting.

- 1) First, what are we actually referring to when we talk about church planting? Or simply: **What is church planting?** It is important to have a common understanding of what we mean by church planting, or at least that I make clear what I mean when I use the word. I use the word “church planting” in a quite limited sense. “Church planting” means the “establishment of a new congregation”, either by starting from scratch or by a mother church planting a daughter church. So for me “church planting” has a more specific meaning than the word “congregational development”, which also includes the development or growth of already established congregations.
- 2) The other question is, and excuse for my choice of words: **Is church planting a legitimate “business”?** Church planting is “big” business, and a growing business. But is it really a legitimate? Last week the major Christian newspaper in Norway, Vårt Land, had an article on church planting.

The headline said:

*“Starting new congregations –  
Campaigns and evangelists are out – church planting is taking over”.*

And the ingress continued:

*“To start new congregations is the most popular method for fulfilling the Great Commission, based on international trends and research on evangelism.”*

Referring to international trends and research on evangelism, the author claims that church planting is “hot” and that “campaigns” and “evangelists” are “not”. Based on my experience and knowledge “evangelists” are certainly not “out”, neither in Thailand nor in Norway. And “campaigns” are not completely out. The main claim in the article is worth listening too though. *“To plant new congregations is the most efficient way to spread the Gospel”*. We could certainly discuss methods for spreading the Gospel, but nobody can deny that there has been an increased focus on church planting lately, both internationally and in Norway. So church planting is “hot”. But being “hot” doesn’t prove that church planting is legitimate. So the question is highly relevant: Is church planting actually legitimate?

Let me be more specific.

Is church planting legitimate in Norway, which is already covered with churches? Christianity has for hundreds of years had a major influence on Norwegian culture, but still new churches are being planted.

Is church planting legitimate in Thailand, where Buddhism for an even longer period of time has had a profound influence on the culture? Thailand is even more densely covered with sanctuaries, from simple forest-monasteries to gold-covered temples.

Is church planting really legitimate? Let us briefly approach the question from three different perspectives: Strategy, theology and context.

#### **a. Strategy**

First, from a strategic perspective. Is church planting legitimate?

As church leaders I suppose that you to some extent would agree that it is. In order to expand, new churches should be planted. This is obviously the case in Thailand, where the Christians are a minority and where large areas still are without churches. And according to the article in Vårt Land church planting is very strategic also in Norway. *“To plant new congregations is the most efficient way to spread the Gospel”*. The organisation DAWN has, according to the article, therefore an explicit goal of planting 150 new congregations in Oslo within 2015. In Norway people both within and outside the Church of Norway certainly disagree on methods for church planting. Some people may claim that within the structures of the Church of Norway it is neither necessary nor strategic to plant new churches. We will not enter into a discussion about this, but just note that from a strategic perspective there are reasons to claim that church planting is legitimate. But as church leaders you know that it is not sufficient to focus on church planting only from a strategic perspective.

#### **b. Theology**

You also have to ask: Is church planting legitimate from a theological perspective?

Since the topic of this lecture is “Church planting in Thailand and Norway”, we don’t have time to dig very deep into the Scripture. I will just emphasise two important elements.

First, in the Scripture several metaphors refer to the church in terms of growth and planting.

Second, theologically speaking church planting is not only legitimate based on specific metaphors. It is also related to the self-understanding of the church. My claim is that:

Expansion is an essential element in the self-understanding of the church. To expand has from the very beginning been an essential element in the self-understanding of the church. This expansion has been realised in various ways in different contexts, but has basically followed a certain pattern. Throughout history the universal church as the worldwide body of believers has expanded through local congregations. This has happened either by growth of established congregations or by planting of new ones, as we are focussing on today. We will dig deeper into the theological aspect as we move on, but as for now, in order to answer the question, there are certainly reasons to claim that church planting is legitimate also from a theological

perspective based on the metaphor of growth and the self-understanding and actual practice of the church, seen already in the book of Acts and in the Pauline letters.

### **c. Context**

Third, is church planting legitimate from a contextual perspective?

Now we are very close to the core of my research project on Contextual Ecclesiology. Talking about the relation between the context and the church, it is crucial to keep two perspectives together.

1. As a universal fellowship of believers the church transcends local contexts.
2. As local manifestations of the church, congregations certainly depend on local contexts.

Believing that the church is a worldwide body of believers, transcending local contexts, it is legitimate to plant congregations in any context. But as local manifestations of the church, depending on local contexts, we have to pay attention to the context when planting new churches. To answer the question whether church planting is legitimate from a contextual perspective, the answer is YES, BUT

YES, it IS legitimate to plant churches, BUT it clearly matters HOW churches are planted. Let me be more specific and relate this to the contexts of my study, to Norway and Thailand. It is not possible, to plant churches in Norway exactly the way it is done in Thailand and vice versa. Both the cultural, the religious and the historical contexts are in several ways so different, that it is quite obvious that it is impossible to simply copy each other's methods.

It might be tempting, but often just as disastrous, to copy the methods used in more similar contexts. In Norway it might be tempting to import concepts and copy methods that have proved successful in the United States, not paying attention to the religious and cultural differences. In Thailand it might likewise be tempting to copy methods that have proved successful in South Korea, not paying attention to the religious and cultural differences. Success in the United States and Korea might easily become failures in Norway and Thailand.

If we move even closer, to the local level, it might be even more tempting to copy methods. If you are not familiar with a Norwegian or a Thai context, I am quite sure that you can agree that methods that have proved successful in one part of your country, might not work very well in another part. Later today you are going to meet two Norwegian church planters who have planted churches in distinctively different contexts. To plant a church in this part of Norway is certainly different from planting a church close to the capital. And it is even more obvious that it is different to plant a church in urban Bangkok and in rural Thailand.

What I am saying is NOT that concepts and methods for church planting in one context will not work in another context. The point is rather that concepts and methods should not simply be copied, but have to be evaluated critically and related to each context.

To conclude the first part of the lecture: Is church planting legitimate?

I am convinced that is, both from a strategic and a theological perspective, as far as churches are planted contextually. In the second part of this lecture we will move from a more general perspective to a the local level, as I will share with you some reflections and observation related to two local congregations located in distinctively different contexts.

In my Ph.D. project I am focusing on Contextual Ecclesiology based on observation and interviews with members of two new congregations in Norway and Thailand. The aim of the study is to discover and compare context-depending and context-transcending elements of ecclesiology from a cross-cultural perspective.

At this stage I have only done the first part of my fieldwork. This summer I spent several weeks in Thailand observing and interviewing members of the congregation in the village of Fahoan in Ubon province, on the border to Laos and Kambodia. Soon I will do the same in a local congregation in Norway, focusing basically on the same topics. The informants were asked to focus on the fellowship on three levels; the relationship between the individual and the congregation, the fellowship within the congregation and the relationship between the congregation and the community, in both a narrow and a wide sense.

What I find very challenging in my research is that I have to focus on two pictures at the same time. On the one hand a very detailed picture, a picture of individuals, members of a congregation that clearly depends on the local context. On the other hand a very large picture, a picture of the universal church as the worldwide body of believers that also transcends local contexts.

Some of you might be familiar with Google Earth, where you can select a city or even village in any part of the world. By zooming in the globe will within seconds change to a map of your neighbourhood. It could be very convenient to have a theological version of Google Earth, being able to move from the universal to the local picture within seconds. But thank God, the church involves far more than global and local geography.

First a few word about the large picture. I said that:

Throughout history the universal church as the worldwide body of believers has expanded through local congregations. A true picture has to include three aspects, the **universal** church, the **local** congregation and the **individual** adherents. These aspects are closely related, and are all crucial for understanding the expansion of the church. This close connection between the universal, the local and the individual aspect of the church is seen in the Great Commision, the order of Jesus Christ to go to all peoples everywhere and make them his disciples (Matthew 28,18-20).

Jesus Christ gave his instruction to a number of individuals who carried out the task by sharing the gospel. New believers were soon gathered in local congregations throughout the known world. Without this instruction to his followers, or if these individuals had not taken the instruction seriously, the one, local congregation in Jerusalem might have remained an isolated phenomenon and would probably never have expanded into a universal church. The New Testament and various other historical sources thoroughly document how the church through planting of new congregations in local contexts since its' beginning has expanded from a small congregation of followers to a worldwide church. Already in the New Testament we can see both a large universal picture – to the ends of the world - and a detailed local picture – of local congregations celebrating and struggling.

Combining the large and the detailed picture, my claim is: In order to be truly contextual, church planting in Thailand and Norway, and in any part of the world, should reflect both the universal, the local and the individual aspect of the church.

Let us move on to the more detailed picture and see how these aspects are related to church planting on a local level. Since our time is limited I will focus more in detail on the individual aspect. Concerning the local and universal aspect I will briefly share some thoughts that you hopefully might find challenging. You have to excuse me for focusing more on Thailand than Norway, simply because I have so far collected observations only in Fahoan church.

## 1. Individual aspect

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| <b>Congregations consist of individuals.</b> |
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What struck me when talking to members of Fahoan church, was the importance of the history of individuals. The motives of each individual for joining the congregation were closely connected with his or her history. Why did individuals actually join the local congregation?

Several of the informants had quite strong, and for me strange, stories about spirits (phii) disturbing them, causing fear and disharmony. Several of the informants told me that by receiving and believing the message about Jesus Christ, who is stronger than the spirits, their lives were completely and often quite abruptly changed. So, some of the informants related their decision to join the congregation to their own personal history related to phii. From a Western perspective this might seem strange, but I know that this perspective, Christus Victor, is familiar to many of you.

Other informants told about strange incidents, yes even accidents, in their lives, that made them decide to join the congregation. These incidents were understood in terms of divine providence. Some informants related the incidents to God right away, while others emphasised that they understood the incident because someone had already introduced the message of God or managed to relate the incident to God as the incident happened.

To my surprise, several informants also emphasised that they joined the congregation because they were intellectually convinced that the Christian message was true. I say surprised, because this did not correspond with my presupposition. I had been told that people very seldom joined congregations because they were intellectually convinced.

What about the motives for joining new congregations in Norway?

Let me just emphasise that I am now referring to NEW congregations within the Church of Norway.

Since Norwegians are known to be quite individualistic, there are reasons to believe that the motives for joining new congregations are closely connected with the history of each individual, just like in Thailand.

Some people might join new congregations based on likes and dislikes. They prefer the style, the liturgy, the songs of the new congregation.

Others might join new congregations because of their present situation. I assume this might be the case in the congregation you are going to visit later today. Within a few kilometres there are two congregations, both within the Church of Norway. The NEW congregation attracts a lot of families with children, while the OLD congregations might be more attractive to people in other stages of life.

If we could use Google Earth and zoom out for a while and study the local congregation in Fahoan and the congregation at Bærland, the picture might be quite confusing, yes even disturbing. The motives for joining the congregations are in both cases related to the history of individuals, but the options for choosing are indeed very different. Several members of Fahoan church were deeply thankful to God that there even existed a congregation in their neighbourhood, since in most villages this was certainly not the case, while members of Bærland church could choose between two congregations within the same church, and if they were not satisfied, they could choose between several other independent congregations in the neighbourhood.

Finally, some people are joining a new congregation simply because the congregation is planted in their neighbourhood as their new local congregation. The congregation you are going to visit later today was planted in an area with a lot of expansion. As a lot of families with small children moved into the area, the mother church planted a daughter church. The new congregation naturally became the local congregation of people moving into the area. Many of these newcomers would probably never have gone to church, if this new congregations had been planted.

What do these observations actually tell us?

First, that the motives for joining new congregations are more complex than we may think. Second, that motives for joining congregations are closely related to the history of each individual. Third, when planting a new church it is important to reflect on the individual aspect.

So far we have focused on the individual aspect of church planting related to the new members joining congregations. But the individual aspect is also important from another perspective. In the initial phase, before a fellowship is established, before a church is planted, individuals also play a crucial part.

This is indeed valid both in a Thai context and a Norwegian context. Based on local church history, for instance the history of the congregations involved in my project, it is obvious that individuals also played a crucial part when the congregations were planted.

When I asked members how they got to know the congregation, several names were mentioned. Some said that they joined the congregation through the testimony of the first person who became a Christian. Others mentioned names of evangelists that visited the village. So evangelists are definitely not “out”. The testimony of a neighbour or an evangelist made a difference.

In Norway the planting of a new church is in general not that closely related to the conversion of an individual, but is still very much based on the initiative of individuals who wants a church in the neighbourhood. This does not mean that congregations are being planted based only on initiative of individuals. Both the diocese and NMS have played crucial roles in the initial phase of new congregations. But without the initiative of local individuals, the plans would not have succeeded.

## 2. Local aspect

**Congregations are planted in local contexts.**

A few words about the local aspect. As congregations are planted in local contexts, church planting is not only a matter of knowing the likes and dislikes of individuals or of using the right methods. Church planting is also a question of knowing local contexts. This is crucial whether the task is to plant congregations within familiar or unfamiliar contexts.

Since we have limited time, we will not go into details on HOW to study local contexts. My point is that it is crucial to study local contexts wherever you are going to plant a new church. If this happens to be in your own neighbourhood, this is not an excuse for skipping the homework of studying the local context.

Let me tell you about a friend who taught me a lesson. Let me add that I have asked permission to tell this story. More than ten years ago my friend who had spent several years preparing for missionary work in Thailand, for good reasons had to change his plans just weeks before he should leave Norway. After some turbulent months he got a job as a vicar on a small island in the western part of Norway. After a year I met my friend who told me that he had used quite a lot of time to get to know the local context, especially the local history. After a year he knew the local history of this small island better than many who had spent their whole lives there. This didn't only mean that he could talk with elderly people at the local grocery. He was also more able to understand local conflicts and local pride. What really impressed me was his attitude. He said: As a missionary in Thailand I would have spent more than one year studying the language and the local culture. Why shouldn't I spend time studying the culture on this island? You know what, after eleven years my friend is still vicar on this island and has no intention of moving. Why? I think one of the reasons is that he didn't skip his homework. He learnt to know the context and to love the people.

This story tells me that if it is important to study the local context working in an established congregation, it is even more important to study the local contexts if you are going to plant a new church, even in your own country.

## 3. Universal aspect

**Congregations are local manifestations of the universal church.**

Finally, a few words about the universal aspect related to church planting. As church leaders this certainly makes sense, as you are attending a Church Leaders Network conference. You are part of a universal network and have a high level of reflection.

But on a local level, does it make sense to claim that congregations are manifestations of the universal church? And does it actually make any difference related to church planting?



As church leaders you know perfectly well that local congregations and church planters have a strong local focus – and let me add – this is how it should be. Local congregations without a local focus are not faithful to their mission.

The point is not to change the local focus of congregations and church planters. It is rather a question of having a universal perspective on the local work. To act locally and think globally. To view the local congregation as a part of the universal church. To view church planting as a part of a universal mission.

As church leaders you are in position to encourage local workers and congregations in your church to view the local congregation from a universal perspective. One way of doing this might be to encourage the new church to get a friendship church in another country, like the local church in Fahoan.

Let me conclude:

**Congregations consist of individuals.**

Since congregations consist of individuals, it is urgent to pay attention and listen to their stories when new churches are planted.

**Congregations are planted in local contexts.**

Since congregations are planted in local contexts, it is crucial to study local contexts when new churches are planted.

**Congregations are local manifestations of the universal church.**

And finally, that congregations are local manifestations of the universal church should make us proud and thankful. Proud that we are taking part in God's universal mission and thankful that the universality of the church is not primarily a question of whether individual members are able to relate the local congregation to a wide universal question. The church is universal whether members, pastors or church leaders are aware of it or not. That the church is universal is not only an empirical reality – it is also a divine mystery!