

Is this for Real?

By Steve Smith

The verification process behind CPM statistics

Questions often arise about the validity of CPMs.

- How do we know the number of baptisms and churches is *really* that high?
- A national leader in that country told me there is no CPM *really* going on there. Are any CPMs for real?
- Yeah, but what kind of believers and churches are they *really*?
- You're only telling us the good side of the story. What are the *real* problems – the bad side of the story?

In the early days of reporting CPMs (late 1990s), some of the reporting *was* less than reliable. CPMs were so new that no one really knew how to track them, evaluate them or verify them. The missionaries in the middle of them were working so hard to keep pace with them that it was difficult for them to do much more than that.

There have also been examples of CPMs that were more “flashes in the pan.” They started with a burst and jumped up to a couple of hundred of churches, but suddenly imploded for a variety of reasons – dependency issues caused by outside funds being given to national pastors, leadership overload as leadership development failed to keep pace with the movement, or the sudden loss of contact with key national leaders (for a variety of reasons). These movements are no longer movements today, but this doesn't invalidate that fact that something marvelous started. It just failed to be sustained.

And there have clearly been false claims of CPMs. Some may have been well meaning – missionaries who reported numbers given to them by paid nationals only to find out the nationals were falsifying the data. Some have been exaggerations for the sake of proving a point – CPMs *are* real. Some have simply been deception. I myself served on a CPM assessment team in which I interviewed several fake Christian leaders – tares. I found my faith challenged. Yet as I recalled the parable of Jesus, I realized that my seeing tares did not mean that other team members were not finding real wheat.

In our own home cultures many of us are familiar with stories of failure: a person who professes Christ but later recants; a pastor who falls into sin and renounces his faith; a church that false into heretical teaching and becomes cult-like. These stories are tragic. Yet it would not cross our minds to question the validity of other real believers who never recant, good-hearted pastors who live upright lives or churches that continue in healthy orthodoxy. We instinctively know that isolated bad examples do not invalidate a larger good reality. But we do open our eyes a bit more to watch to guard against this happening with us.

In the same way, the existence of stalled or imploded or even falsified CPMs does not invalidate the many *real* sustained CPMs around the world. They should only serve to make us wiser and more aware of what to look for when we report on CPMs.

The drive toward good case studies

CPM trainers, researchers and practitioners in the last few years have done a remarkable job of developing well-researched case studies of CPMs. Practitioners are learning how to gather reliable data and to spot-check the validity of quantitative and qualitative reports.

Researchers and mission leaders have done an excellent job of bringing independent CPM assessment teams into CPM locales to assess the existence and quality of reported CPMs.

In all of these endeavors, short, public sterilized¹ cased studies as well as exhaustive confidential analyses are written and periodically updated. These case studies tell the good, the bad and the ugly. They also attempt to describe transferable lessons that other CPM practitioners can learn from. They clearly outline challenges that the CPM must overcome to continue growing in the future.

If at times we share mainly the good in print or in conversations, it is simply to demonstrate the potential of what can happen – the breakthroughs. We *all* have examples of not seeing results! But we try to balance sharing CPM case studies by giving a realistic assessment, and have hopefully done that in the T4T book. Hope without hype. Faith without false expectation.

Many of these case studies can be found on the website www.ChurchPlantingMovements.com (see the "CPM Profiles" subsection). Others are available by email.

The validity of the T4T story

The T4T CPM is one of the best-documented CPMs in the world with a good 10 year track record.

Monthly reports: Since the beginning of the movement the Kais have received numerous monthly reports from various national leaders of the movement. Most of them do not know each other, so they cannot collude together. Nor do they get paid by the Kais, so there is no incentive to falsify numbers. Their numbers fluctuate like a movement should, not steadily increasing but rather show rises and drops – very realistic. We have ten years of detailed reports from every stream leader. These form the first layer of numerical reporting.

Research adjustment of numbers: The numbers we quote in all official reports and in the T4T book have actually been discounted by 40% by official researchers of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board (IMB) to account for various factors such as possible over-reporting, possible double-counting, for professions of faith and groups/churches that IMB does not feel are evangelical in orientation, etc.

Site inspections: Ying and Grace Kai, as an Asian, have visited hundreds of the contexts in which the movement is growing as have many Asian pastors from outside the country. In all of these weekly and monthly encounters it would quickly become apparent if something major were amiss.

¹ Since many CPMs are in limited access nations, the places and names are edited to preserve the believers in the movement. In some cases of poor security measures missionaries and local believers have paid the price – even death.

Independent CPM Assessment: In 2005 an independent CPM assessment was conducted by the IMB Global Research Department – trained social researchers. They went on-site to interview a cross-section of leaders and believers in the movement. They produced a short, public account of the assessment as well as other lengthy confidential analyses. The assessment team found that not only were Ying’s claims correct, but in fact he was underestimating the true magnitude of the situation.

In fact, the reports we gather on the T4T CPM are just a part of the story. In many streams, like the one with 18 generations, the Kais have phased out of regular contact. These streams stand on their own and no longer submit monthly reports. There is much more happening than is reported each month.

The validity of the Ina People story

Similar things can be said about the Ina movement we were a part of. Several of our team members were Asian. They not only received first-hand reports from national leaders of the movement, but they were able to do a number of on-site inspections to verify the accuracy of the reports.

Since the Ina CPM was much smaller than the T4T CPM, we were able to pinpoint the location of every church in every village, and knew the exact story of how most them started. We have lived and worked alongside these Ina brothers and sisters and know their stories first-hand.

Other CPMs

The same could be said of many other CPMs around the world. Missionaries and church planters live and work alongside the national believers. They see with their own eyes the reality of what is happening.

The difficulty, however, with almost all of them is that it is very difficult to bring in outside observers who would like to “see the CPM” themselves (other than research teams). This is because these CPMs reside in very limited-access places. The presence of a steady stream of foreigners would imperil the health of the movement (injecting much outside DNA) and imperil the safety of national believers by attracting too much attention to them.

To get around this, a number of people try to go on-site independently to “find” these CPMs. The difficulty in CPMs, however, is that most of the churches do not have buildings or signs – they meet in homes. So, how can an outsider easily walk in and verify its reality or not? Most of the believers are underground because of the level of persecution.

In addition, even in huge CPMs like the T4T CPM, the believers number 1.7 million out of a population of 95 million in their area. Since many of the 1.7 million live in factory dormitories which are inaccessible and/or return to their villages in the rest of the country when their jobs are done, what is the likelihood of bumping into one of the believers on the street? Essentially, in the largest of CPMs you are looking for 1 person out of a hundred. And he is not going to advertise his faith to outsiders but will more likely avoid you. Your presence only invites further persecution for him.

However, many well-intentioned foreigners and national leaders have traveled through CPM fields, failed to see believers and churches, and thereby declared the CPM non-existent. The next conclusion many people take from this is that few if any CPMs are real.

But they *are* real. There is too much to lose for missionaries or nationals to falsify such claims. The persecution that arises from such claims is high. Just like the early disciples in the New Testament: they have too much to lose if their faith is not real.

Will there continue to be flash-in-the-pan CPMs? Assuredly.

Will there be false claims and false CPMs? Absolutely. Our Lord prophesied about it in the parable of the tares.

But do not throw the baby out with the bath water. There *is* a remarkable revolution going on around the world. It's growing in magnitude each year. It's a return to the original discipleship revolution, and we are all the better for what we learn from it.

We all want to see a *re*-revolution!