

Why Europe?

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For many, Europe is a place of history or a potential vacation destination. Who really cares about the people and their culture? It is largely a place that has already experienced its best days or made its impact upon the world--the rise and fall of Rome, the rise and fall of the Third Reich, the rise and fall of Great Britain, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union.

Even culturally and spiritually, the great names and great movements are like fond memories--Aristotle, Socrates, Michelangelo, Bach, Beethoven, the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation. Why would anyone want to focus their attention on Europe?

The Context

According to the latest Eurostat demographic studies (2006), there are 821,000,000 people who live in Europe. The spiritual climate among the European population has been eroding for many years. In a 2005 article, USA Today reported that in some countries like France, Sweden, and the Netherlands, church attendance is [less than 10% in some areas](#).

According to the European Spiritual Estimate (<http://emrg.friderich.net/>), only 4.2% of that population follow Jesus and demonstrate a concern about the people around them following Jesus. Hundreds of millions of people are waiting to have the opportunity to encounter the transforming power of the gospel. Is the lostness of Europe a reason to be concerned about Europe? Is it possible that God would want to move among the peoples of Europe once again?

As we explore the people and cultural landscape of Europe, it is helpful to think of Europe as a river with three major cultural streams affecting it today. Each stream is a spiritual challenge in itself, but combining the three makes for extra-difficult navigation, when it comes to engaging people with the gospel and starting new churches.

The first stream - which is decreasing in size - is that of the institutional church's decline. This may be the Roman Catholic Church in some countries, the Church of England or the Lutheran church in other parts of Western Europe, but as a whole the churches are declining in attendance. What makes this stream interesting is that, while it is decreasing in size and influence, the venter of the institutional church still has an impact on the culture.

In Spain, where Larry served for the last five years, his friends would say that they were not part of the church and would speak out against it. In the next sentence, however, they would claim that they were Catholic, thus identifying themselves as religious.

For those of us who live among the peoples of Europe, the opportunity is to help them see it's not about religion but about a relationship with God found through Jesus Christ.

The second stream is the growth and influence of Islam. The flood of Muslim immigrants moving from countries in the 10/40 window to Europe over the last 10 years is incredible. Most major Western European cities have several mosques, and in some cities, mosques are literally buying and replacing the empty cathedrals.

Consider these statistics:

It is projected by the year 2050 that one in every five Europeans will be Muslim.

(Eurostat 2006)

Country / Population / Muslim Immigrants

United Kingdom / 60,776,000 / 1,640,958

Germany / 82,400,996 / 3,213,000

Spain / 40,000,000 / 1,000,000

Netherlands / 16,000,000 / 1,000,000

France / 63,718,177 / 6,737,000

Significant-sized urban areas exist such as Marseille, France or Rotterdam, Netherlands where up to 25 percent of the population are from Muslim backgrounds.

The increase in the number of Muslims moving to Europe makes an impact on the cultural and religious climate. Believers here have a great opportunity for ministry in that we don't face the same restrictions on sharing the gospel as those in closed countries. This gives us some freedom in how we can minister among people. For an interesting blog related to this subject, check out www.reconsiderereurope.blogspot.com.

The third stream we need to mention is that of the post-Christian or secular worldview held by many Western Europeans. In most Western European countries, evangelism research shows that less than 2 percent of the population is evangelical. ("European Believers Report", 2007 by Ruth Robinson, Greater Europe Mission)

The only exception to this is Scandinavia, and they have a whopping 3 percent according to most studies. ("European Believers Report", 2007 by Ruth Robinson, Greater Europe Mission) The worldview of most indigenous Europeans is post-Christian/secular.

While most are generally closed to the idea of institutional church, the hope lies in believers who will live out their faith incarnationally in Europe. While living in this context, we have found that the vast majority of people have never had the gospel explained to them in a relevant way.

Cultural Thought - There has always been a flow of cultural influence from Europe to the US.

Consider this:

Art - Monet, Goya, Picasso

Philosophy - DeCartes, Locke

Science - Newton, Einstein, Pascal

Cars - Mercedes, BMW, Volvo, Audi, Saab, Volkswagen

Music - Mozart, Beatles, Spice Girls, smile

Fashion - Think of Paris or Milan

With this being said, the cultural climate in the U.S. now is similar to that of Europe a generation ago. It is fertile ground for postmodernism to become the predominant worldview in America.

Thus, we believe that Europe is one of the most strategic places in the world at this moment for evangelism. While there are glimmers of hope in Europe, by and large the national churches have declined so much that they no longer have the sending power which they once possessed. Therefore, the lost populations of Europe need people from other parts of the world to come and offer them the hope of the gospel in a relevant way.

Based on declining church membership, studies show that North America is becoming more closely identified with the emerging post-Christian culture of Europe. We believe that we can learn some things from Europe.

Let's consider the European worldview. Obviously, we need to generalize for the sake of conversation, but so much of what's considered the "coming postmodernism" here in the States has been a cultural reality for a couple of generations in Europe.

Consider some of the dominant characteristics of the European worldview:

Fatalism: Civil unrest, religious oppression, political instability, and wars left Europe with a real sense that it doesn't matter what you do; whatever happens will happen. The result is a "live for today" sort of hedonism that cynically (realistically?) says, "Hard work, honesty, and innovation don't always pay off." It affects voter turnout (low), unemployment (high), and family structure (unraveling).

Relativism: The many perceived failures of "absolute" truths (particularly scientific, political, and religious truths) have left Europeans seeking to piece together something that "works" for them. Because they've yet to see one metanarrative that works for all people, they have no confidence that one really exists. Furthermore, European relativism was born out of a deliberate rebellion from the dictatorships of the last century (Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Soviet Union, etc.).

Narrative: This is the first generation with infinite amounts of information. In the past, the government held the keys to the information-controlled society (state-run newspapers, political propaganda). If truth is relative and information is unlimited, how does one make sense of it all? Europeans tend to choose a voice or two and stick with them as long as it's convenient. Socialism, pagan spirituality, secularism, science, video games--these are some of the new micro-narratives.

New Morality: European morality was long prescribed by the church. As they moved away from that, Europeans cobbled together a secular morality which they sought to use to protect society from itself.

One church planting team in France surveyed local students: "Which of the following ministries might be appreciated in your community?--Backyard Bible Clubs, Feeding the Homeless, Provide Education, Charity Fund-raising. *The answer was a resounding "None of the above!"*

Why?

The new European morality, based in this worldview, includes:

Protection of Children- With a negative birthrate (1.3% Europe-wide), children are a rare thing in Europe. To avoid taking advantage of young people's innocence, parents don't talk to their children about religion and don't teach them what to believe. It is seen as immoral (and, in some places, illegal) to proselytize children under 18 in Europe.

Limited freedom of expression- In Germany, you can be thrown in prison for denying that the Holocaust happened. Speaking ill of another person's religion is seen as rude. Religious education is seen as revisionist at best and brainwashing at worst. Tolerance is the rule of the day, except toward the truth of Christianity.

Social Democracy: Towns hold referendums on whether churches should be allowed to continue meeting within city limits. Public events require permits, but these are voted on by the citizens. Local ministries that compete with the government's robust efforts to meet physical needs are seen as obvious attempts to bait-and-switch. Only the government, they say, can afford to be altruistic. Thus, government and social democracy serve to replace any felt need for Christianity.

Environmentalism: 46% say that the environment should be given priority over economy (Gallup). Germans who don't properly sort their garbage into recycling bins are ticketed and fined. Gas prices are artificially raised to deter people from driving air-polluting cars.

Spirituality: Europe continues to react to the lasting negative impact of Roman Catholicism (or Anglicanism, or Protestantism). Nevertheless, most Europeans consider themselves to be very spiritual. For them, this usually means that they look for ways to express their creativity, emotion, and desire for purpose and meaning. Art, travel, love, and experience are all popular spiritual outlets. Many Europeans also hold to a folk-religion-superstition as well, such as belief in witches, the "evil eye," good/bad luck, horoscopes, observing sacred days, etc.

Virtual Society: Europeans, especially the younger demographic (80% among ages 18-34), are extremely connected via the internet. They continue to find, what are to them, meaningful and influential relationships online. For many, the virtual world is merely an extension of their real-world social structure. For others, the web allows them to be who they want to be and interact with whomever they want.

Tribalism: We tend to think of tribes as a third-world phenomenon, but Europeans have returned to a selective form of tribalism for their social structure. As they move to major cities for work or education, many Europeans find themselves disconnected from their network of friends and family, once the center of European society. Now, they piece together loosely-organized tribes of friends based on affinities.

Worldview is the reason for and the challenge of missions. If everyone saw the world from the same perspective, our current church planting strategies would be effective for all people. Planting churches in cultures that are foreign to us brings the challenge of communication, indigenaity, and Christ-dependence.

Church planting models in Europe, and who's using them:

Multi-site - Hillsong London (from Australia)

Ministry - Campus Crusade, International Teams (out of Chicago), Intervarsity (GBU), Navigators, YWAM (student, social, Bible studies, Alpha Course, etc.)

Missionary Church Founders - Mostly Americans, some Latin Americans, Greater Europe Mission (GEM), Christian Associates International, etc.

House Churches - Wolfgang Simpson, IMB, etc.

Affinity Churches - Hip Hop Church (Zurich), The Bar (Copenhagen)

Existing Churches Planting Cells - Especially in the UK

Denominational Church Planting Efforts - European Baptists, Assemblies of God, EV Free, etc.

Few existing Evangelical Churches are growing. In Spain, for example, the evangelical church has seen some growth, but this is generally due to the large number of Latin American immigrants moving into Spain. Some believe in actuality that the number of Spaniards in those churches has decreased.

Very few success stories have been reported in European church planting. Let's take a look at some common elements of many church planting efforts.

1. Nearly all are attractional. The idea being- if we can get their attention, we can share the gospel. The "come see" mentality fails in European culture. Because 1) they've seen it all, 2) your show isn't nearly as good, and 3) they're not looking for church.

2. Discipleship is extractional (Frost and Hirsch). Because they're looking for a movement that is rapid and reproducible, many are quick to group new believers into Christian social circles. The side effect is that it breaks the naturally existing social structure and hinders further spread of the gospel.

3. Building-focused -- in an effort to build credibility, many churches start with a building. A location, they seem to think, will help people find and connect with the church. Having a location, however, means being an institution. It requires funding and maintenance- things that add "overhead" to your ministry.

4. One Per Town (Parish Mentality) -- in an effort not to build on another's foundation, most ministries focus on geography and demographics to decide where to plant a church. They look at where there is no church and focus there. In a complex and dynamic European city, however, physical proximity has little to do with culture and subculture.

5. The founding pastors are often "outsiders." Way too often the church planter or founding pastor is from another country. The result of this is often a church that will be for immigrants who can relate to the church planter, instead of the very people the pastor wants to reach.

6. It takes a long time to plant a church. In some parts of Europe, a national convention will consider a 25-year-old church a mission point. The reason: They have placed certain expectations upon their church planting model--a church has to be a certain size, have a location, seminary trained pastor, self supporting, etc. In many places, it is simply too hard for the church to "make it" as a church because they cannot reproduce the model that often was brought over by Americans. Therefore, they consider it almost impossible for these new churches to think about planting another church, when they cannot "make it" on their own. The emphasis is on the form of a church and not the function of the church.

We can learn from successes in Europe--Church planting must:

1. Be missional/incarnational - bold gospel presentation to people in whom you are socially and spiritually invested.

2. Value the tribes ("oikos" ancient Greek, household)- these existing social circles are churches waiting to happen.

3. Be indigenous - as long as it is a foreign faith, church, and gospel, it will not be adopted in any influential sort of way. Leadership must be (at least, in part) local and tribal. If a person must learn, appreciate, and join a different culture in order to belong to your church, it is not indigenous. Just because it "worked" in your context doesn't mean it will in another.

4. Be Spirit led - efficiency, effectiveness, and reproducibility are not necessarily biblical concepts. Even our very best and innovative strategies are worthless if we're not walking in step-by-step obedience to His Word and Spirit.

5. A reproduction mindset - if a new church will think about how to reproduce itself from the onset and put that in their strategy, then we will see churches move toward multiplication. The church plant needs to think in terms of the function of the church, and reproduction would be a part of that--not the form that may be a transplanted version of a church in another culture.

While there are some success stories using a variety of methods in Europe, we see these five principles as essential in any church plant.

Conclusion

Why Europe? Because hundreds of millions of the peoples who live there are without hope and without God apart from Jesus Christ. It is also obvious that the institutional church and the attractional, extractional, building-focused, one-parish-per-town, outsider, long-term approach are not really penetrating the lost peoples of Europe.

We must consider the cultural climate that exists in Europe and adjust our strategies and methods to be more effective. In addition, we must seize the opportunities that the streams of culture present. For example, could it be that God would enable us to reach Muslims who have been moving to Europe in droves? It would be just like Him

to open doors for the gospel that way so that many Muslims can be reached who can then take the gospel back to their countries of origin.

Why Europe? Because it can be a strategic location in God's economy of things--in reaching Muslims and maybe in laying the groundwork for what will need to happen in the US in years to come. As the American culture rapidly moves in the same direction as Europe, God may raise up people to figure out how to impact the secular culture of Europe, that in turn will help stem the receding spiritual tide in America.