

# **The African Planter**

*Nairobi Chapel pastor on mission trips and working well across cultures.*

An interview with Oscar Muriu

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## ***What happened to change Nairobi Chapel from a dwindling group of discouraged whites to a vibrant, international, church-planting fellowship?***

They began to pray that God would show them what to do, and they sought new leadership to help them reach the African students around them. That's how I got to come to the Chapel. I was finishing my studies at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology.

Any given Sunday maybe ten, sometimes only four people were there! They probably figured, "He can't do much damage."

## ***Did you have a plan?***

I knew nothing about church leadership. My core prayer was, "Lord, give me 30 university students," the number I believed was the critical mass needed to turn the place around. And one of the first students who came along is now an associate pastor with us, and several other students who came are now pastoring congregations we planted.

Last year we divided the main church up into five different congregations. I'm pastoring one of the new church plants that's meeting in a tent on Ngong Road.

Since about 65 percent of Nairobian live in the slums, we made a commitment that for every church we plant to reach out to an educated elite, like us at the Chapel, we would intentionally plant two churches that were unlike us, in the slum areas. So of the churches we have planted, seven or eight are like the Chapel, and the others are in the slums.

## ***Is church leadership different in slum areas than it is in educated areas?***

For me, planting churches among the university educated is easy. They are like me. I only need to be myself to be like them. The challenge comes when I cross the social divide of status and wealth. That's been hard.

My hope had been that we could be a multi-economic church, where the poor, the rich, and the middle class were together. But it's not turning out that way. Partly because of the location, partly because we communicate

in English, partly because of what the different groups understand. When I deal with university students and the educated elite, I'm using statistical evidence, I'm quoting historic figures and world leaders, I'm citing books and movies.

Well, that doesn't work with the poor. They do not understand statistical references; they do not know who Einstein was; they do not understand a reference to a movie; they've rarely seen a movie. So the language of the educated elite excludes them. What they understand, what persuades them, are real-life stories and parables like Jesus told.

We have tried to develop a multi-economic church, but I've not been able to do that.

### ***So how does the Chapel plant churches in poor areas?***

I think of us as a Robin Hood, whose task is to take from the wealthy and give to the poor. So we find leaders who can speak the language of the poor, and we link the poorer churches with a richer, more educated church.

I have the responsibility to resource and enable the churches in the slums, and to develop ministries that will be a blessing to them, and to help my members have real presence in the slums as a result of our generosity. We recognize that we need one another and we are going to work together. It's not in the same gathering, but there is a relationship there.

That's not an ideal answer, but it is the real answer.

### ***What's your role as leader in bridging the economic gap?***

King David said he would be happy to be a gatekeeper in the temple of the Lord. I consider my role as gatekeeping. If you go to the Ritz-Carlton, there is a doorman there. He never actually stays in any of the rooms upstairs. But he directs everybody to those rooms and assists them if they need help. I see my ministry largely that way.

I am a doorkeeper at the Nairobi Chapel. My ministry is to open doors, particularly for the younger generation, to get where God wants them to be. There are a lot of young people who want to serve the Lord, but they're stuck. They don't have access to the power structures within the church, to resources, to networks, to opportunities, and so my task is to open doors for them.

If I meet anyone who would be a blessing to Jane, who leads our HIV/AIDS ministry, I get them together, open the door for Jane.

## ***How do you keep from being consumed by all your multiplying ministries?***

I can only oversee so much. I think it's Peter Drucker who said that the larger an organization becomes, the more it consumes resources internally.

Our church is descended from the Plymouth Brethren, a movement of very small congregations, usually 50 people or less, due to their lack of formalized leadership. They have a council of elders, but not official pastors or hierarchy. That means they can give away a remarkable percentage of what they collect.

The Plymouth Brethren originated among the educated elite in England. They didn't need pastors because they were all educated, all well trained. They didn't need well-developed structures, because many of them were tutored in running organizations. Their numbers were small, but if you look at impact on missions, the Plymouth Brethren were phenomenal.

I've taken this legacy to heart. The more I control centrally, the more resources we will need, but the less opportunity there will be for others to grow and become what they could become. If I'm going to have a lasting impact and legacy, I have got to be one who frees people, blesses them, gives them opportunity, opens up the doors, and releases them to go.

At the same time, in our culture people look up to leadership. So increasingly I have taken the role of father figure to many of these ministries.

Our government is introducing tax-free giving next year, so we're saying to many social service ministries our people have begun: "Use us. If you're independent, you may not have tax-free status. But under our umbrella, you will."

While I do not desire to control them, they want to be associated with me and with the Chapel.

## ***What's your overall vision for the Chapel?***

First, we want to bring a million people to Christ by the year 2020. This won't happen just by casual evangelism, member to member. That's important, but we need to do a lot more. That's why we're talking about radio, about education as a means of evangelism, about ministry to children.

Kenya's average lifespan has dropped from 47 to 40 as a result of HIV/AIDS. I'm over 40; I'm living on borrowed time, so to speak. And 50 percent of the continent of Africa, of our 850 million people, is under the age of 15. Without a strong children's ministry and youth ministry, there's no future.

In many churches the bulk of resources go toward adult ministries. How can we construct a church that turns this upside down? In these ways we want to lead a million people to faith.

### ***How do you keep count?***

One way might be to give a Bible to each convert, then keep track of the Bibles, and see how well we're progressing. The numbers give us a target, but they are not sacrosanct. We're after more than conversions.

### ***What else are you after?***

We want to disciple at least 100,000 of those new converts into positions of power and authority. We call them the Daniels and Esthers who will be in the king's court. At the last election, we encouraged our members to seek political positions. Two of our members won seats in Parliament.

In our poorly governed nation, where there is so much massive poverty, we cannot shy away from politics. We have to get into positions of authority and power.

Also, many of our members are in business and industry. We've got to encourage them to rise to the top and to work hard at changing the way business is done, so it is favorable towards the poor also.

### ***Where does the vision to plant churches come in?***

We have a commitment to plant 300 churches. We want half of those to be in Nairobi. Then 60 in other parts of Kenya, 30 in East Africa: Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, southern Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Then about 30 elsewhere on the continent of Africa, and 30 off the continent of Africa.

### ***How do you plant churches internationally?***

Getting visas is hard for Africans. In fact, I was supposed to come here to Urbana with five university students. But the United States denied them visas. Crossing borders is difficult.

One answer is the refugee highway. We don't cheer displaced people movements, but if you look at the gospel over the centuries, refugees—

persecuted, migrant people—have been some of the greatest vehicles for the spread of the gospel. Jesus himself was a refugee, fleeing to Egypt and later coming back.

Another track is business—exporting the educated. I tell our members, “If you have reached the top of the ladder here, think about relocating overseas. Open up an opportunity for some of the younger people on the continent who are unemployed. You can go as a missionary.”

This leads to the fourth point of our vision: to be a catalyst for missions. There was a time when the West would talk about “closed countries” to missions. They were never closed to Africans!

Africans are not looked on as colonialists or imperialists. Usually Africans enter a society at the lowest rank. We are non-threatening. We tend to be looked down upon. Jesus himself entered society at the most vulnerable point, as an infant, threatened, unwanted—a refugee. This tends to be the door that Africans use to enter communities around the world.

Americans don’t do missions that way. Americans always enter from the top. Because they’re well resourced, they represent a majority culture. If you try to enter quietly into the city of Nairobi, we all know that you’re there! But when I go into London, I can enter quietly—except for the police, people don’t notice me. I think that actually puts us at an advantage in terms of the communities around the world that we can enter.

### ***What must Americans learn, and unlearn, to be effective agents of God’s mission in the world?***

When you look at the Scriptures, Paul’s model of missions is very different from the model of Western missions in the last 100 years. The West has designed a model of missions that only works for the West.

It depends on a monetary unit that is recognizable internationally. It depends on a strong economy that has a lot of disposable income, so that a lot of missionaries don’t even go to the church for support. They go to the general community, to their networks of friends and family. In Kenya, you cannot support yourself that way as a missionary.

Likewise, Americans enter the economically depressed communities of the world with a lot of resources. They come and stay in hotels. Paul’s model says, “Stay with whomever opens their door to you.”

When I come to America, I depend on the goodwill of Christians in this country to open their doors, because I can't afford to stay in hotels. But when Americans come to Kenya, they prefer to stay in the hotels.

We are a very hospitable people. But we've found that Americans want their space. They want to be picked up from a hotel in the morning and be dropped back in the evening. And they can afford to pay for their space. They can afford to eat what they want. They can, in a sense, travel with a little bubble of America around them.

But the two-thirds world cannot afford this model. In my own country, until recently, when you left the country, you had to pay an airport tax, collected in U.S. dollars. I'm not even out of my country, and they are refusing my money! And if I pull out my money in this hotel here, they wouldn't know what to do with it. But you pull out the greenback anywhere around the world, and they're happy to take it!

### ***So what is the alternative model of missions?***

Well, Paul presents a model that depends on hospitality. When Africans come into the U.S., they go where they can find hospitality. The second largest population of Sudanese in the world is in Minneapolis—St. Paul. When a Sudanese comes into America with no money, that's the first place he goes. Sure enough, he will know somebody, and he can depend on that network of hospitality.

So we want to be a catalyst in missions, to wake up the African church and say, "We may not be able to use the model of missions that the West has used, but we have other models." We can design new models that do not depend on money. We have our ways of getting into countries, our ways of surviving in those countries, of enabling one another.

### ***And what's your vision for you personally?***

A legacy of leaders. As a young pastor I was struck by the passage that says, "David was faithful to his own generation." But Psalm 71, titled a psalm of David, says, "Even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare your power to the next generation." David was not living just for his own generation. He was living for the next generation.

So as a church, we want to impact the next generation, to develop young leaders. That's why we planned for five young leaders to come to Urbana with me—if they had been granted visas! It's important that we continually invest in the next generation.

***Your church has a huge vision. How can churches in the West help? We're used to sending short-term mission teams over to paint walls ...***

Yes, and after you leave, we repaint many of the walls that you painted! (Laughter.)

***Okay, seriously, do short-term mission trips help?***

They work for the West; they don't work for us very well. We don't call them "short-term missions" any more. We call them "short-term learning opportunities." The problem with calling it a mission is that it implies an agenda. There's something I need to come and do for you, or to you, to better your life. In reality that doesn't happen in two weeks. Life is far too complex for that.

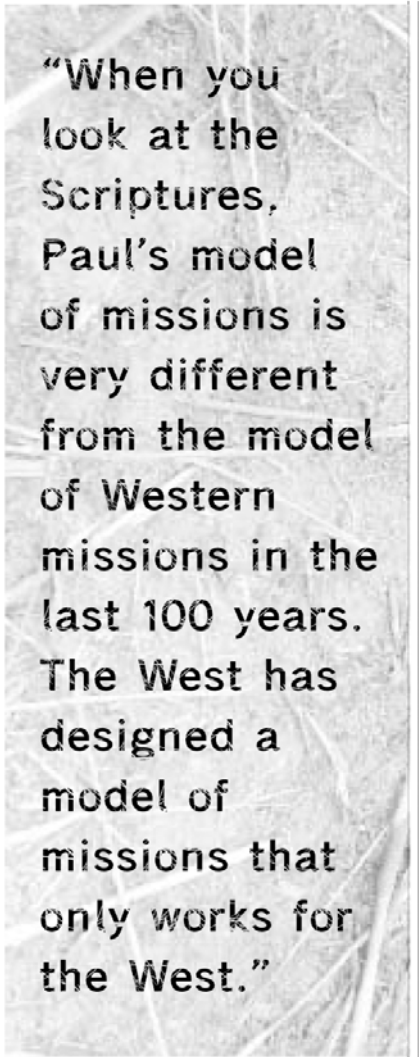
The greatest benefit is that you come and you learn. Unfortunately, not enough short-termers are listening to the two-thirds world, who receive them.

Americans tend to be very poorly informed about the world. America generates enough news on its own that its news organizations don't have space for international news. Yet America exports so many movies and so much news that everybody around the world knows about America, whereas American knows about nobody.

***So what happens when there is an interchange?***

As a Kenyan I was quite familiar with American culture long before the first time I came here. The culture shock for me is minimal. But Americans know almost nothing about Kenya. And so the culture shock when they come is very deep. Some of them see destitute poverty for the first time ever.

When you see poverty in America, on your television, it is sanitized. But the first marker of poverty is that it smells. That's how you know real poverty: the smell. I have watched short-term missionaries come in, and I've realized, *Oh boy, we need to go and debrief quickly*. Because they're weeping, they're broken, they have an immense sense of guilt. This is more about them than it is about what they came to do.



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## ***Are such “learning experiences” the best use of our resources?***

The problem for Americans is that if a church isn't doing these things, it isn't cool, and the youth program isn't cool. So there's a lot of pressure for all youth programs to do this. Short-term experiences have their place, but they need to be more carefully constructed. All too often a church says, “We'd like to come for a short-term experience.”

Then they say, in so many words, “We're going to do A, B, C, D, and we're in charge.”

We want to say, “Guys, you're coming as our guests.”

Do you know that when the President of the United States travels, his people take over all the security of the nations he travels to? When he came to East Africa, the airports were completely taken over by Marines. The local policemen were moved out. The attitude was “We don't trust you. Your people could be terrorists. We'll do things our way.”

Short-term missions tend to be like that: they come and completely take over the agenda, the programs, the life of the church. But that's not the way you visit a friend.

## ***Besides bringing an agenda, what tends to distinguish the American personality?***

Americans have two great things going for them culturally. One is that Americans are problem-solvers. Every time I come to the U.S., I like to spend a couple hours in a Wal-Mart. I find solutions to problems that I never thought of!

The rest of the world, even Europe, isn't so intent on solving inconveniences. We tend to live with our problems. In America you almost never go into a house where the sinks have two taps, a cold water tap and a hot water tap, because that means you have to mix the water in the sink to get it to the right temperature. You have these single faucets that mix the water before it comes out. It makes perfect sense. But that's a problem the rest of the world wouldn't even think to solve.

Americans don't easily live with a problem—they want to solve the problem and move on. The rest of the world is more willing to live with the problems.



The second great thing for Americans is that your educational system teaches people to think and to express themselves. So a child who talks and asserts himself in conversation is actually awarded higher marks than the one who sits quietly.

### ***How are these traits seen, say, in Africa?***

Those two things that are such great gifts in the home context become a curse when you go into missions. Americans come to Africa, and they want to solve Africa. But you can't solve Africa. It's much too complex for that. And that really frustrates Americans.

And the assertiveness you are taught in school becomes a curse on the field. I often say to American missionaries, "When the American speaks, the conversation is over." The American is usually the most powerful voice at the table. And when the most powerful voice gives its opinion, the conversation is over.

### ***So what should talkative, problem-solving Americans do?***

I tell Americans: "We're going into this meeting. Don't say anything! Sit there and hold your tongue." When you sit around a table, the people speaking always glance at the person they believe is the most powerful figure at the table. They will do that with you when you're the only American. And at some point, they will ask you: "What do you think?"

Don't say anything. If you say anything, reflect back with something like "I have heard such wisdom at this table. I am very impressed." And leave it at that. Affirm them for the contribution they have made. Don't give your own opinion.

Americans find that almost impossible. They do not know how to hold their tongue. They sit there squirming, because they're conditioned to express their opinions. It's a strength at home, but it becomes a curse on the field.

In a sense western missions has been marked by that. But isn't it strange that Jesus not only entered society incarnate at the weakest point, as a defenseless child who needed the care of his host community, but he also told his disciples: "Do not go with money; do not go with a second pair of shoes; go in a stance of vulnerability; be dependent on the communities you visit"? Isn't it interesting that for 30 years he doesn't speak out; doesn't reveal himself; he remains quiet, and only after 30 years of listening and learning the culture does he begin to speak.

## ***So how can Americans communicate well with Africans?***

When we communicate in Africa, we are very guarded in what we say. We don't want to offend. Westerners say that Africans never tell you what they really think. They tell you what you want to hear. And yes, that's true! Because from our perspective, every engagement between two people always has the potential of leading to a lifelong relationship, or preventing a lifelong friendship.

Africa is a very relational continent. It's the relationships that make society work.

In the U.S. things work irrespective of relationships; in fact, if you have a relationship, it can sometimes work against you. In Africa it's the opposite. So we are always guarded and gracious in our communication. We want to guard the relationship. When the Bible says, "Speak the truth in love," we err on the side of love. The possibility of a relationship means I cannot tell you the total truth until I am secure in this relationship with you, until I know that the truth will not hurt this relationship.

You do it differently. Speaking the truth has a higher premium in your context, so you are unguarded. You speak the truth, call a spade a spade, at whatever cost. And if the relationship suffers, well, that's too bad, the important thing is that the truth was spoken.

We never do that. I've had to learn to be more assertive in my dealings with Americans just so they would hear me! I have had to learn to speak truth more directly. Americans have to learn to listen to the relational side of things.

## ***Your church has developed some deep partnerships with churches in the United States. What have been the key ingredients of those partnerships?***

In each of these churches it's been important to find a bridging relationship—someone who comes in quietly, speaks slowly, is a good listener, and is trying to learn.

## ***Many churches in America have been inspired to think about the needs of the world, but they may not know of anyone who can play that role. How does a church in North America cultivate those kinds of people?***

There are several starting points. First, many churches should start with cross-cultural opportunities nearby. The most important is the racial divide. The tensions that govern that divide, things left unsaid,

presumptions, stereotyping, are the same as at the international level. But at the international level they're more easily disguised so that you think they don't exist. Whereas here, in the racial divide, you know they exist, they're the elephant in the room, and you know they have to be brought up at some point, otherwise the conversation isn't really going anywhere. So I think that's actually the first cross-cultural training ground.

A second would be internationals who have come to live in America. They are wonderful bridges. They understand Third World perspectives. They can be your "consultants."

The third approach is to send individuals. We have an exchange program with Chapel Hill Bible Church in North Carolina and with Elmbrook Church in Wisconsin, where we exchange our budding leaders to serve on the pastoral staff for one year. After that year in another culture, they come back and become a bridge person. That exchange gives those individuals the gift of seeing that the world doesn't always work from your cultural perspective. If you send us a young leader, we will do all we can to ensure that he doesn't incarnate into the missionary community in Nairobi, but that he incarnates into the African community! A year is a short time, but when those leaders go back, they can think biculturally.

***Are there enough such churches in Africa to handle this level of partnership? I'm afraid once we publish this article, you'll be overwhelmed with churches wanting to do this with you.***

In the whole continent of Africa there are increasingly more. What you need to become bicultural is a mentor, someone you can sit with on a weekly basis who will help you begin to understand our world from our perspective. It doesn't have to be a church like the Chapel; it could be a church in the slums that partners with a church like ours. In a cosmopolitan place like Nairobi, where so many have traveled overseas, there are countless potential mentors. And in the whole of Africa, there are multitudes of such churches.

The task we at the Chapel have is to say to other churches, "Wake up, there's a golden opportunity here to craft a new model of missions. So come, learn with us." There is enormous potential for us all to learn together.