

Saturation Church Planting: The Vision Becoming Reality - in Romania

Timis County, Romania, could become the first region in a former communist country where a goal of planting a church in every town or village has been fulfilled. Today nearly every city and village in the county has an evangelical church! To learn how this is being done, read on.

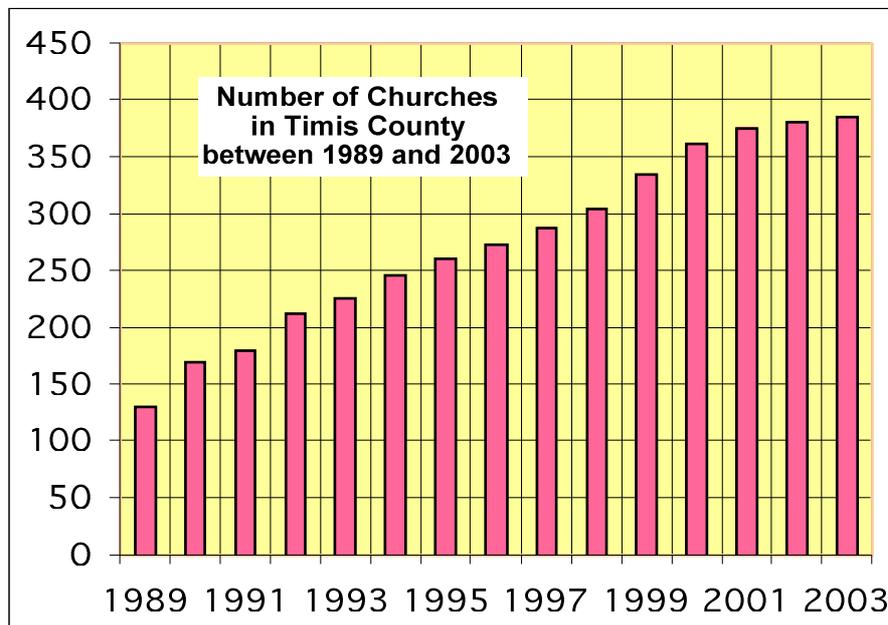
Beginnings

Beginning with 131 churches in 1989, there was a spontaneous desire by pastors and laity to evangelize surrounding areas. Growth was strong from 1990 to 1995 because of the end of Communism, which had been so restrictive. Some 130 new churches were established during this period! These plants were mostly the result of church splits or city churches starting churches in outlying villages where they had commuting members, so that by 1995, most of these 'easy' plants had been accomplished and church planting fell into decline. The region had experienced tremendous growth but many towns and villages were without an evangelical witness.

Vision

In 1995, an electrician named Victor Pascalin caught the saturation church planting (SCP) vision. Under Victor's leadership, a blended team of Baptists, Pentecostals, Brethren, and Independents mapped the county to show the location and progress of every Bible-believing evangelical church. Realizing that over 150 towns and villages lacked an evangelical witness they developed a plan to plant churches in every town and village. While we often think of individual church planters as the ones who start the churches, this team developed a strategy based on the conviction that churches ought to plant churches in a reproductive fashion.

Because the task is so large they split the county into six zones and found what they called 'churches with potential' in each of those zones. From the county capital of Timisoara, Victor's team trained and mobilized these 'churches with potential' to reach all the nearby villages without a church. The vision to saturate the county with churches guided the process.



Seven Strategic Principles that have made this work

While every situation is different, there are certain ministry principles that, when applied, tend to yield amazing results. At a gathering with Evangelical Church leaders in Estonia (Sept, 2002), Victor Pascalin shared the following seven strategic principles applied in Timis county:

1. Priority on prayer – Prayer is the key to spiritual power. Often believers pray for their own health, material needs or for circumstances, but not for the lost. Praying specifically for cities, towns, and neighborhoods that lack an adequate witness (a church) unlocks spiritual power like nothing else can.

Prayer is the key to the success in Timis county. Believers are organized to pray for specific locations where new evangelism efforts are going on and new churches are being planted. The prayer effort is built on the idea that people are

more motivated to pray when they have specific requests from specific places and know the people involved. Listen to Victor:

“When we formed our team (regional) we also formed a strategy. First we prayed. This was our first item.... We needed to produce a movement of prayer. How do we do that? Do I go to the church and say, “pray for this work”? If I were to do that probably 5 or 6 people would then pray, but that is not what I am talking about. If you have wives, they are a “help mate” and should be praying for you. I asked my wife to pray for me in the church planting ministry, and then I asked her to invite 5 of her friends ... This is how we got people praying for us. The result was that we have 400 women praying for us specifically each time we prepared to plant a church. I believe this is the most foundational element in the whole process. You have a wife? Your wife has 5 friends with whom she could pray...and their 5 friends, etc. ”

2. Research – Research helps believers mobilize toward fulfilling the Great Commission. Specifically, research shows the big picture, provides focus, ensures that strategies remain effective, and indicates when the job is complete. Often when God calls people to new ministries, He first leads them to research and take stock of the situation around them.

The Timis county facilitation team researches the county to see where there are no churches. For example, they have discovered that today (December 2003) 31 little villages -- the largest having 204 people -- do not have a church. This information enables them to determine where to send new church planting teams.

They do not do research for research's sake; it must be a part of the church planting planning and strategy. They also use research to learn the needs of the lost like what is a predominant sin of an area. As these things are discovered, the information is passed on to the prayer supporters, and they pray this through. Existing churches are also studied to determine their potential to reach their region. The research needs and state of the churches help motivate churches to reach out while also guiding them to work effectively.

3. Mobilization – The Timis county facilitation team, made up of Baptists and Pentecostals, mobilized the churches to do the church planting task. They began this process by getting the pastor involved in helping him see the need for the church planting vision. What became called the ‘churches with potential’ were identified. A ‘church with potential’ is a church that has an outreach vision, at least 20 believers, and is able to release and support five or six of their own members to the church planting task. In 1996 about 80 such churches were identified in the county. These 80 churches got aggressive about church planting while at the same time influencing other existing churches to join the task. Again, listen to Victor:

“The pastors would sometime accept this [church planting vision] and sometimes not. If not, they later became jealous when another local church had planted 20 churches around them. From their holy jealousy they entered into the plan. This is how Timis county was saturated.”

4. Training – When people think of ministry training, they commonly think of theological training in residential seminaries and Bible colleges. However, many of the most successful training programs in the world are skill-oriented, church-based and non-residential. The facilitation team developed a training program with these values in mind. They began to train lay people in six regional centers (in ‘churches with potential’) in ministry skills such as prayer and children's ministry. The ministry training for the local church includes evangelism, discipleship and small group leadership with the expectation and emphasis on planting new churches. By making the training available in regional centers, close to the church planters, instead of expecting workers to move to a school far away, costs are kept to a minimum and the training is naturally more relevant to the immediate context.

5. Church planting teams – Almost any difficult task becomes easier when a group attempts to do it together. This is true in church planting as well. When people work alone they often become frustrated and prone to burn out. This is why working in teams is the normal pattern for ministry in the New Testament.

In Timis county teams of lay people are mobilized and trained to do church planting. No single person needs to excel in all the aspects of the task since the work is done with a focus on working in teams. The church planting teams are the local churches – churches plant churches.

6. Mentoring – An important component of the training is mentoring. Mentoring is a purposeful relationship in which a mentor transfers ministry skills or character to another person at a teachable time, resulting in growth and development. A mentor is not an ivory tower scholar who only delivers lectures and writes books. Rather, he is a friend who visits trainees in ministry in order to observe his activity, pray for, encourage, and help him.

In Timis county each church planting team is visited by a mentor once a month and every three months several teams meet together with their mentors to discuss problems and pray together.

7. Finance - The history of the expansion of the church demonstrates that the church expands best when local finances are utilized. There are many reasons for this. One reason is that people tend to highly value what they give to. Self-financing then brings resources as well as commitment and passion for the task that does not come when resources come from a distant land.

The Romanians confront poverty, inflation and economic instability. But they are no exception to self-financing. Financial support for church planting comes from the ‘church with potential’. The cost is usually kept to a minimum because the

churches reach out to nearby villages, and many of the church planting teams include volunteers. Money for all expenses such as gas to travel and evangelistic materials come from the 'church with potential'. Bibles have been donated by an international mission agency. Victor explains:

"My church has planted 35 churches. When we go to evangelize a village we have no money for buying a house. We rent a culture house. We do evangelism in an intelligible way that people can understand. We ask them, "Who has a place so that tomorrow we can start services?". If no one had a place, then we pulled the team out since the people were not willing to receive them. Jesus said to the disciples that the harvest is plentiful. We figured if people would not receive us, then the harvest must not be ready there. We would come back later after letting the fruit mature for a while. Then we found that people were open."

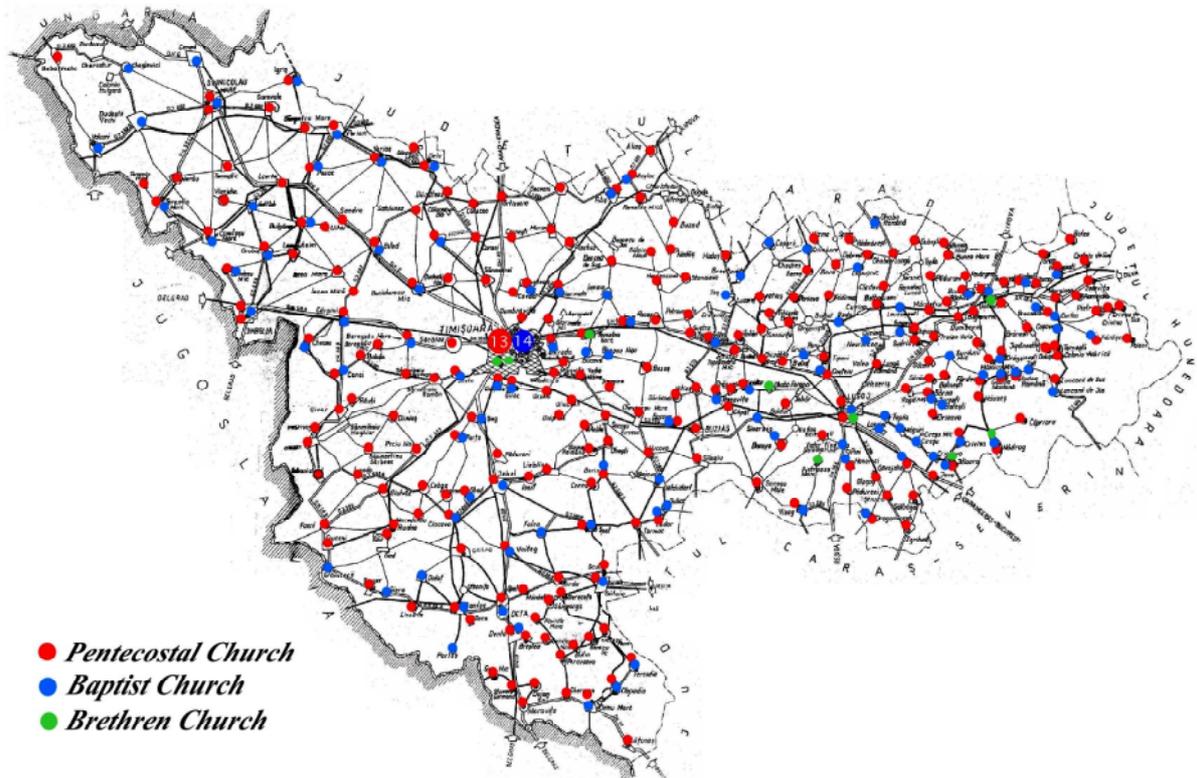
The Result

More churches naturally translate to more believers. Romanian government censuses confirms that between 1992 and 2002 the number people who identify themselves as "evangelicals" in Timis county grew from 28,161 in 1992, to 39,496 in 2002. This increase of 11,335 or 40% is especially impressive when the population of the country was in *decline*. This also shows that growth is by conversion and not just transfer.

When a vision is clear and bold it inspires people to go beyond what they would normally do. In Timis Co. the vision for saturation has given the impetus and strategy to go beyond what had been accomplished during the early 90's so that today there are 386 churches in Timis county. That amounts to a church for every 1,755 inhabitants. More strategically, with only 31 villages having a total population of less than 3,000 people (0,4% of the county's population) without an evangelical church, they are moving toward planting a church in EVERY town and village.

Victor and his team now have a ministry beyond their county as other counties in Romania now look to Timis county as a model for them to follow. Ten other counties have similar strategies and this approach is being pursued in other countries as Victor has shared his strategy in Serbia, England, Estonia, Slovenia, and Hungary.

The next step is to saturate the big cities in the county with churches. Though there are strong churches in the larger cities, there are not enough. For example, the city of Timisoara has a population of 330,000 but has only 34 evangelical churches (about a church for every 10,000 people). Local pastors are trusting God for 46 more churches in Timisoara by 2005.



Questions and Answers with VICTOR PASCALIN

1. **Q:** How and what is defined as a church in your county?

A: First from the Bible if 2-3 are together. So we recognize 3 baptized people taking the Lord's supper, whether registered or not, as a church. They are of course part of the larger body of Christ. In Romania you need, for a daughter church, 8 people. For a self-standing church 21 people are required.

2. **Q:** You mentioned returning to a village after not being well received the first time. What is a typical amount of time before you return?

A: There is no a pre-established rule. We do it all under prayer. We go back to them when we feel God telling us to go back. 99.9% of the time it is the right time. It is important to not abandon the village, but to hold it in prayer.

3. **Q:** There are 7 points you mentioned. Does the regional team lay out how much time goes to each point?

A: For prayer there is no real time frame, because the Bible says to pray at all times. Research.... in Timis county was almost 9 months of work, then 14 days of compiling data. We found 330 towns and villages. This is not a fixed rule. The shorter time the better.

4. **Q:** When you do the research, do you ask the town officials and leaders for the information?

A: Most important is building relationships. When I go into a town, I need to have a relationship with the mayor, school, priest and police.

5. **Q:** Were there other confessions besides Pentecostals, Baptists and Brethren in Romania?

A: We are the main three who have formed an alliance to plant churches. We cooperate with others who are independent though. We do have orthodox churches everywhere (87% of people).

6. **Q:** How easy or difficult is it to motivate/mobilize the church? Our people are so pre-occupied with making a living, etc.

A: We had the same problem. The people who are part of our regional team work for a living. After the revolution Saturday was considered a day off. You have to choose people on your team who have passion and compassion. I've had people who thought like this: the Americans came and came with money. I will quit my job, and the Americans can support me. These people very rarely have passion or compassion for the lost. Remember from the Bible when the Lord saw the people and felt compassion? If I am his follower, I too have compassion for those who are destined for hell.

7. **Q:** When a team goes somewhere do they return there? Do they live there?

A: The team that plants the church doesn't do more than go into the town preaching, singing, reciting poetry, etc. We first use this as evangelism. The team leaves but the leader stays. On a periodic basis the team comes back to help the leader. The leader is not there permanently. If you follow our Omega Course [training program], the leader knows that his job is to raise up a leader in 1-2 years so that he can move on. If the process is not going well, we bring in mentors to help work out the problems.

8. **Q:** How much fellowship and on-going contact do you have with these planted churches?

A: Do you have a family? You are always visiting them and relating with them, because they are a part of you.

9. **Q:** What about planting where there are not churches?

A: Now we're talking about villages. We want 1 church in every village of 1,000 people or less. Our coordination team helps oversee this. We don't plant churches from different denominations in villages of this size. If towns are 2000-3000, then we might have different denominational churches.

10. **Q:** In the beginning we (Pentecostals) had difficulty getting a team. We choose 1-2 people and trained them, but they got discouraged. What is the solution to that?

A: We had the same problem. First you have to deal with the mentality. One way of thinking is that only men and youth do the work. Women only sew and cook. We have mixed teams. The women have more compassion. The women also help to build better relationships. The evangelist opens the Bible, preaches a text, closes the Bible and is gone. The sisters stay and make relationships with others. You can do more with a mixed team. Another issue is that if you trained someone, they need to train someone else. We have male and female leaders. In a church we work with in Timisoara, among the youth, we have women leaders and sometimes they do a better job than the guys.

11. **Q:** What is the greatest problem for you in doing this work?

A: The 7 steps we follow are a difficult process, especially if you are missing prayer. Understand that I am not a fanatic. But I am always talking about prayer, and this is my experience. Get this process (7 steps) in order and get going.

12. **Q:** Your church has planted 35 churches. How many of these churches have also planted churches?
A: 15 new churches from the originals.
13. **Q:** How big is your church?
A: 4,500 members.
14. **Q:** How many members in the 15 new churches?
A: Between 20-70 members. ...We have 22 church planting teams, but what they are doing is visiting and helping the already planted churches. We cannot abandon the churches once we plant them.
15. **Q:** Are these vocational teams?
A: Yes, lay people. They do it on the weekends.
16. **Q:** What is the evangelistic process? Do you just go to a place, advertise and people show up?
A: We do research to find who in the mother church is related to someone in the place where we are going. In the city of Timisora we have 15,000 believers and most have relatives in the villages. Many in the city were forced there by Ceausescu. You may have had the same thing happen here in Estonia. For us it is impossible to not have a relative in the country. That person with a relative or contact in the countryside is the bridge. It is not like I show up in the village and everyone repents. We work through relationships.

This information about Timis County was collected and compiled by Bob Mackey, a missionary with *The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting*, working in Moscow, Russia.

The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting is a partnership of local churches and mission agencies. Our purpose is to facilitate the planting of evangelical churches throughout post-communist Eurasia so that every person has the opportunity to hear and see the gospel of Jesus Christ! For more information contact:

The North America Office
P.O. Box 843
Monument, CO 80132-0843

Telephone: (800) 649-2440
Fax: +1 (719) 488-8019
<usa@alliancescp.org>



The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting
Regional Resource Team in Budapest
H-1111 Budapest
Budafoki ut 34/B, III/2
HUNGARY

Telephone: +36 (1) 466-5978
Fax: +36 (1) 365-6406
<alliance@alliancescp.org>