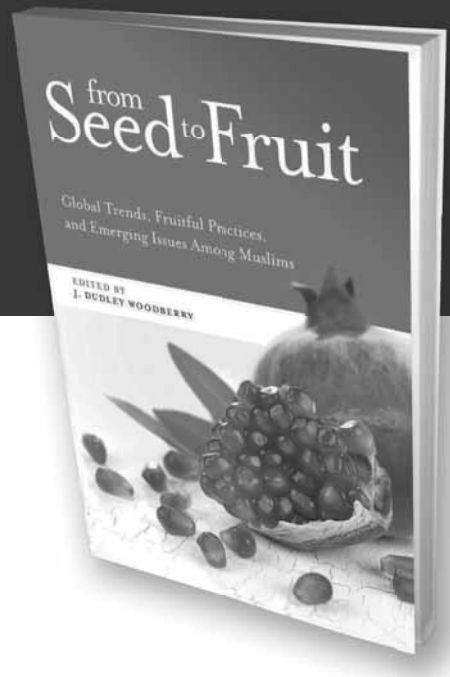




Fruitful Practices



A New Generation of Workers Has Discovered Encouraging Alternatives

by Don Allen

*"Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. . . . Hear then the parable of the sower."
Matthew 13:16, 18*

Picture yourself, a foreigner (expatriate Christian worker), in a crowded guesthouse in a Central Asian city. Accepting your invitation to dinner is a Jesus follower (another expatriate worker) from your home country, widely

respected for his love for and good relations with Muslims. As he sips hot chai, his eyes glance about the room, which reeks of musty clothing and cigarettes. Your own eyes are smarting, and not just from the smoke.

"Tell me the secret," you plead, despairingly. "What is happening here?"

He looks startled.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"How is it possible that your Muslim friends

are becoming followers of *Isa*, and forming communities of faith in the Messiah? My friends and I have been here three years since we left our home country to serve God here, and we haven't seen a single new community of *Isa* come together like this. Not one!"

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He looks a bit puzzled as he settles back into his chair, resting his cup on the slight rise of his stomach. "Tell me your approach," he says.

Your cup clatters on its saucer.

"My friends and I have established a successful business. It brings jobs to our neighborhood." You tick off your carefully rehearsed points on your fingers. "We are well respected in the community. In fact, people look up to us and recognize that we are God-fearing people! Our neighbors regularly drop in for tea and conversation. We seem to be doing everything *you're* doing. Your town is so close and so similar to ours, I can't blame it on culture differences. I just don't get it!" Resting your forearms on your knees, your eyes meet his. "What are you doing that we're not doing?"

"Hm." He ponders the question. "Tell me about your language learning."

"Language isn't the problem, either." You shuffle your chair to one side as an old man stumbles past you, pulling a bottle from inside his coat. "Everyone in our team is fluent in Russian, and each of us shares the good news about *Isa* with everyone we meet."

Your guest sips his chai as he listens; his eyes follow the old man weaving his way toward the door.

"Well, for the first few years living here, our story was much like yours," your companion says. "We

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Excerpted, by permission, from the new book From Seed to Fruit, edited by Dr. Dudley Woodberry. See p 29 for more information on this book.

felt we were stumbling around in the dark, even though we, too, were fluent in Russian. And like you, we spent countless hours with our local friends, actively sharing with them about our life experience with *Isa*. But nothing happened. Then about three years ago, everything changed for us...

“Really? How?” The questions tumble out of your mouth. “A spontaneous work of God? Someone with a special gift in convincing people?”

He smiles, shaking his head *no*.

“Then what? A special program?”

“Not exactly,” he laughs.

“What changed?”

He leans toward you and tells you his story.

“Seeing and Hearing” How God Blesses Muslims

So what was the problem when “you” tried unsuccessfully to share with your local friends about the love of Jesus? Did you fail to take good notes in your seminary classes back home? Should you have followed your supervisor’s philosophy of ministry more closely? Did you lack the spiritual maturity of your countryman who witnessed so much fruit in a neighboring town? Did you simply need to pray more effectively?

Such questions are asked because people like you and I often invest a lot of effort living in another culture and sharing about how a community can be transformed when *Isa* comes to occupy a central place in it without seeing the fruit of that labor. Thank God for selfless servants who persevere for years in such conditions! Certainly, this demands authentic sacrifice. But this offers no relief for those who want to see this transformation take place quickly. And when fruit is not forthcoming, you may receive one of two admonitions: a) work harder at following the advice given you back home, or b) love Jesus more. Both imply that you are spiritually inept.

Many frustrated workers reject what they learned back home; in desperation, they use a “scattershot” approach, trying everything under the sun. But this approach may still not lead to people coming together into communities that focus on *Isa’s* teaching and lifestyle, whatever the projects and methods used. We often call this “reinventing the wheel.” As one prominent thinker on this topic acknowledges, “Some people say we need twenty years of experience. But often twenty years’ experience is really just *one* year, repeated twenty times, with no better results after the twentieth year than the first!”

Recently, a new generation of worker-observers has

discovered an encouraging alternative. As they examine common practices among colleagues living in the Muslim world, certain patterns emerge in places where Jesus-centered communities do blossom. So as we labor to make disciples, there may be some patterns which are more effective than others. We call them “Fruitful Practices”¹ because they are principles and activities which have resulted in such communities. Imagine the potential for new fruitfulness around you, if you knew that some practices were more helpful than others!

Fruitful Practices enable us to *delight in seeing and hearing* how God is building a people for himself among all the nations of the world, including Muslims; and empower us to join him in his work. We echo the Psalmist, who declares, “Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them” (Psalm 111:2). We study his works so we can labor alongside him in this awe-inspiring process of sowing, reaping, and bearing much fruit for eternity.

Discovering Fruitful Patterns

What is our method of studying and applying the common practices that most often lead to reproducing communities that are focused on the person of Jesus in the Muslim world? Here is what we did:

Research

We asked questions across various regions and contexts throughout the Muslim world. Rather than hypothesizing about which practices are most fruitful, we surveyed and interviewed effective teams from thirteen organizations representing over 5,800 workers in the Muslim world.

Analysis

We examined questionnaires, interviews, and case studies for common patterns of attitudes and activities among people working cross-culturally. We compiled a list of the practices that were common among those teams that had witnessed the emergence of at least one Jesus-centered fellowship. This working document was issued as a “Primer” to the participants of a larger consultation that brought together many more individuals walking the way of Jesus in another culture.

During the Consultation, we conducted an additional survey in each of the four major areas of discussion:

- Witnessing
- Discipling
- Gathering Fellowships
- Gathering Teams of Ministry

In each of the surveys, we asked participants to respond to each practice in two ways:



- “My team does this fruitful practice (yes/no).”
- “How important is this practice to fruitfulness in church-planting (unimportant/somewhat important/very important).”

We compared these responses to the ministry profile of each participant, as it pertains to their particular focus, the place where they live and other similar factors, in order to discern their individual level of fruitfulness.

Finally, we conducted 100 recorded interviews and collected notes from twenty-five discussion groups that met daily throughout the five-day consultation. The results from all our research tools gave us over 300 responses from individuals experienced in planting fellowships representing over thirty organizations, two-thirds of which have witnessed the emergence of at least one Christ-centered community in the Muslim world. We combined and analyzed the list, the surveys, interviews, and the small group notes.

Benchmark

This book represents the first stage of analysis of the Consultation material. Where do we go from here? We believe we must continually evaluate our plans, goals, attitudes, and activities against the standard of Fruitful Practices. Our approach differs significantly from those who use a *deductive* method of ministry (following the anecdotes and practices of a particular leader, seminary, or missiological theory.) We believe the inductive approach promises to be more fruitful (discovering how God is currently operating to bless the nations by inviting them into his Kingdom among Muslims so we can better partner with him in sowing and reaping.)

Cooperating with God

This process is our imperfect attempt to understand the *mystery of ministry*. As noted above, all true ministry involves God’s part and our part. 1 Corinthians 3:5–7 vividly describes this dynamic: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe.... I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” We cannot transform people. That is God’s part. But we can share faithfully God’s Good News of Jesus and demonstrate his love. That is our part.

Fruitful Practices enlighten us as we endeavor to do our part. They show us how God works through certain principles, practices, and innovation to accomplish his purposes. *They point us in a direction that has great potential to bear fruit for his glory.*

People Factors

Differences among individuals within our team—such as personality, skill set, gifting, and personal holiness—can affect fruitfulness. How does team unity affect fruitfulness? What happens if there are no gifted language learners in the team? We can explore such questions thanks to the data from our surveys, interviews and focus group discussions.

Differences among Muslim people groups also affect our ability to bear fruit. Some of the key questions we must ask include:

- Are they literate or oral?
- Are they urban or rural?
- Are they a minority group oppressed by the majority, or do they enjoy social equality?

The challenge is to discern how the divine-human partnership results in fruitful witness. The subsequent five chapters in this section explore the entire process. Here we should just single out some representative processes in three areas—language, learning and leadership.

Language: God Tells His Story

Scene: The urban guesthouse. You lean forward, pen and paper at the ready, as your friend tells his story.

Like you, we poured ourselves into learning Russian; as the trade language, we needed to communicate well to government officials and businessmen. So initially, this made sense to us. But we discovered that while our friends were happy to discuss politics and money in Russian, they changed the subject whenever we brought up spiritual matters—or worse, talked specifically about Jesus.

At first, we thought that people were not interested in spiritual issues. But no; new mosques were popping up all over the city, and we noticed a resurgence of fundamentalist Islam. We thought, “Maybe people are hungry for God, after all.” So we spent a week praying and fasting, asking the Lord for discernment.

Later that week, I met a new disciple of Jesus for tea. He said that he heard about Jesus, but because the message was in Russian, he thought Jesus was a foreign god and he didn’t want anything to do with it. But then a cousin shared with him about the stories of the Injil in his own language, and suddenly Jesus made sense to him. He said, “I would never accept a Russian Jesus. But when I heard about Jesus’ love for me in the language of my heart, I knew that Isa al-Masih must be for me.”

The God who sent Jesus to take the form of a servant and live among us (John 1; Philippians 2) also speaks the language of our hearts. Because of this reality, some teams choose to focus on the heart language first, so they can tell the Good News much sooner. Still others, recognizing the need to communicate effectively in the trade language, the language of trade and education, assign certain members of their team to focus on the trade language while the rest of the team focus on the heart language.

Fruitful Practice (FP) 1: Seeking to communicate a culturally-relevant biblical message in the heart language of the people.

With respect to a culturally relevant biblical message (i.e., using Scripture that addresses the assumptions of the people's worldview and creates spiritual hunger), 99 percent of the practitioners said it was important or very important and 94 percent said they practiced it. With respect to communicating the Gospel in the heart language of the people, 99 percent considered it important and 86 percent practiced it.²

Learning: God Reveals Himself Through the Way People Learn

FP2: Sharing the Gospel in story form for oral societies (98% considered important, 73.5% practiced).

Is it wise to teach literacy to oral societies so they can read the Bible? In previous generations, the answer was an obvious yes. Recently, however, some teams discovered that the answer is found by discovering how beliefs are embedded into the local worldview and how people learn about life. They generally conclude that the written Scriptures are best for peoples who are used to reading and writing; and the word in story form is best for oral cultures.

Consider this South Asian team, who discarded the use of written Bible studies and bound Bibles when they discovered the power of the Good News in story form. Observing how the local community passes on its values about God, community, and social "rules", they learned to ask community leaders their "rules" for telling stories, even asking them for help to craft biblical stories that relate to everyday issues such as truthfulness and forgiveness. Because community leaders were involved, these stories have become so popular that the imam uses them in the local mosque! ("Stories and the Qur'an in South Asia," Interview #3 by Interviewer 02 at Southeast Asian Consultation in Spring of 2007)....

Leadership: God Works Through Faithful Influencers to Establish Communities of Faith

FP3: Developing leaders with methods that fit the local context.

The mentoring of leaders is planned and normally occurs in non-formal ways such as apprenticeship (98% considered important, 80% practiced).

Some teams, acknowledging that leaders can either be bottlenecks or avenues for their community, are slow to pass the baton of leadership until those potential leaders receive extensive training. Others, however, look for existing influencers of integrity and release them quickly. In the former, the team builds leadership principles in the emerging community. In the latter, the team employs existing leaders, empowering them quickly. Both approaches depend on the local context.

And both approaches have risks and rewards. Among the villages of this African people exist numerous mosques which are led by the village sheikh, or leader. "Daood," the team leader, entered such a village mosque one day; as an unexpected guest, he was invited to present a greeting. Instead of a standard greeting, Daood decided to tell the story of God's call to Abraham from Genesis 12:1-3. After briefly describing the idolatrous culture in which Abraham received his call and telling the story, Daood turned it over to the sheikh for his interpretation.

The sheikh explained that while many people are seeking after God, the good news is that God is seeking us; he initiated his call to Abraham and is calling out a community of righteous faithful from Abraham; and that today God is calling their community to be righteous and follow God's will. He did not identify his own mosque as the company of righteous believers, but rather was calling a new community of transformed followers of God! ("Empowering Existing Leaders," Interview #19 by Interviewer #250, Spring 2007).

While there may be significant risk to such an approach, this team has discovered that the sheikh has validated the new community, defending its existence because he acknowledges that God is doing a new thing among his people. In such a case, faith is not a battle between "Christianity" and "Islam," but a total submission to God and to holy lives. As a result, the cross-cultural worker does not have to fight the stigma of "foreign intrusion."



Conclusion: The Fruitful Practices Approach

The existing list of Fruitful Practices is a snapshot of current wisdom among many teams across the Muslim world, not an exhaustive catalog of formulas. We are just beginning to discover the common practices of effectiveness between us. It serves as a helpful but limited benchmark of what God is doing among us.

As a benchmark, the Fruitful Practices are a description of effective works among Muslims, but they are not a prescription of detailed instructions to follow. Neither should you expect any guarantees. While Fruitful Practices report what we see happening among us, there is no substitute for prayer and reflection. Even then, we should expect surprises, as Jesus reminds us: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8).

Even so, our search continues to “see and hear” what the Father is doing among Muslim peoples, as we discover more questions: “Are some Fruitful Practices limited to specific regions? How do Fruitful Practices compare between teams who are engaged in humanitarian efforts, and those who are engaged in business? As you commit to a Fruitful Practice approach to your work, how should you track your progress?”....

Scene: You have returned to the rustic and smoky guesthouse in your Central Asian city. This time, it is two years later, and you have been invited to meet a young worker who recently arrived in your area, hoping to share the Good News of Jesus. “Tell me the secret,” he begs, trying to keep the despair from his voice. “What is happening here?”

You smile at the familiar conversation. “What do you mean?”

“How is it possible that so many of your Muslim friends are becoming followers of *Isa*?” he implores.

You place your tea on its saucer. “Let me tell you my story . . . ”

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (John 15:8). †

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Endnotes

1. The designation “Fruitful Practices” has been a modification of the business term “Best Practices” to convey that the results, like fruit, are dependent on factors beyond our control, such as the sun. The witness, like the farmer, has a role to play but there are also divine factors beyond our control. According to Melisse Rumizen, “Best Practices, processes, and techniques are those that have produced outstanding results in another situation and that could be adapted for your situation. Like all knowledge, it is contextual. A best practice is what is best for you.” Also see Carla O’Dell and C. Jackson Grayson, *If Only We Knew What We Know: The Transfer of Internal Knowledge and Best Practices* (New York: Free Press/Simon Schuster, 1998).
2. Such a notation indicates that 99% of the participants felt that the practice was important or very important and 86% practiced it.

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