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# simple churches

dramatic transformations, rapid replication.



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*Our goal is not only the multiplication of churches or numbers of believers; our goal is to see transformation.* —Habib, Senior disciple-making trainer.

**M**aysa was a very ordinary person living in Africa. She and her husband owned livestock, and they traveled about the countryside with groups of other nomads looking for grazing areas for the animals. The couple were both Christians, alone in an area where everyone else was Muslim, and they had no church or Bible study to join. Maysa realized that since none of the other people in her nomadic community could read, she had to be the one to bring the life-giving story of the gospel to her people.

So Maysa attended a training seminar offered by a missions organization, in which she learned how to tell stories from the Bible, beginning at creation and moving forward chronologically toward Christ. As soon as she rejoined her family, Maysa began sharing these stories with other nomadic women. In her village, the men would go out every day with the animals to find grazing, while the women stayed behind to care for their children. Maysa used this time as an opportunity to tell many women about God. She told them how God created the entire world in just six days, and how a man named Adam had disobeyed God's command and brought sin and death into the world—a world that had previously been perfect and free from suffering and death. She told them about the great Flood and the man named Noah who obeyed God, and she told them how God had repeatedly made Himself known to men like Abraham and Moses so that mankind could live according to His will. And after every story, the women would discuss what the stories meant and, if they were true, how their lives must change to obey the God of Truth. The most important thing that the women learned was this: don't just hear God's Word; obey it!

Within a few weeks, more than forty women had accepted God's gift of salvation and eternal life through His Son Jesus. Those women began to change as God's Spirit moved in their lives, and their husbands were quick to notice. Now, the people of this village did more than travel about with their livestock; the men were raiders, marauders who would periodically attack other villages and steal their livestock. These attacks were a matter of both livelihood and pride in this culture; a successful raider could boast that he had fought and won. But the men became puzzled by the changes they saw in their wives, and they knew that Maysa's stories were responsible in some way, so they began asking her husband probing questions while they were out grazing their livestock, and he was privileged to lead many of the men to Christ. After this, the men stopped their while they were out grazing their livestock, and he was privileged to lead many of the men to Christ. After this, the men stopped their raiding and began instead to take the good news of God's Word to other nomadic groups of Muslims.

When Muslims discover the truth of Christ, they almost always begin to share with their families or close friends about God's free gift of eternal life. About one year after Maysa began telling Bible stories to the people in her village, two men named Ahmed and Mechela were driving through the desert, on their way to visit some Christ followers in a distant region. Ahmed's missions team had trained Maysa how to make obedient disciples using a chronological Bible storytelling format, and they were presently traveling around to visit with other Christ followers whom they had trained. They were about two hundred kilometers from the region where Maysa lived.



Maysa teaches the Muslim women God's stories. These women go on to share them with others including their husbands.

As they bumped along the rutted dirt track, they came upon two elderly men walking with large burdens wrapped in blankets on their shoulders. The men had heard them coming and were waving them down, asking for a ride. In this region, a person can walk the entire day without seeing more than a few vehicles, and one does not waste any opportunity to catch a lift.

But Ahmed didn't slow down; in fact, he stepped on the accelerator, hard. This region was frequented by bandits, and he was very suspicious of the blanketed goods these men were carrying. It was not uncommon to be waylaid by criminals brandishing AK-47s, and Ahmed was in no mood to take any chances. The two Christians roared past the elderly men in a cloud of dust, but after a moment,

the Holy Spirit pressed Ahmed as hard as he had pressed the gas pedal. "Why did you leave them?" his conscience said, "You have space in your car." Ahmed felt instantly convicted that he had made a poor choice, and he found himself easing off the gas and stepping on the brake. In a moment that paralleled his own inner conflict, he threw the car into reverse, grinding the gears, and began the run back toward the hitchhikers.

As Ahmed glanced in the rearview mirror, he saw the elderly men running toward him, their burdens bouncing on their shoulders and their faces alight with relief. They clambered into the backseat, bowing and grinning to the Christians in the front as they dumped their burdens, from which no firearms appeared, onto the floor. Mechela breathed a sigh of relief to see nothing more dangerous than brightly colored scarves within the bundles.

"We are taking a dowry gift to a young man in a distant village," one of the hitchhikers explained "We would have been walking all day if you had not come past."

Mechela asked a few polite questions about the engaged couple, then suddenly asked, "Do you know God?" He bit his tongue the instant the words were out, darting a guilty look toward Ahmed. This was not the right question to ask new Muslim acquaintances. Ahmed gave him a quick disapproving scowl. The young man had probably offended his new guests by implying that they might not be good Muslims.

But the passengers surprised the Christians by throwing their heads back in laughter. "Of course we know God," one of the men replied. "Who do you think made you stop and give us a lift? You didn't want to. You had already dusted us up pretty good. But who made you back up?"

The ensuing laughter broke down all barriers between the men, and soon they were chatting together like old friends. After a while, Mechela decided to try his hand at conversation a second time, "Would you like to hear a story?" he asked. There were no radio stations in the desert, and storytelling was a good way to pass the time, so the men readily agreed, "Well" continued Mechela, getting comfortable in his reversed position on the front seat, 'do you know where the whole world came from? It was like this: in the beginning...' He had not gotten more than a minute into his story when he was abruptly interrupted. "Oh, we already know that story!" cried the hitchhikers in unison.

Poor Mechela was taken aback once again. He stared at his new friends with open mouth, too surprised to speak, so Ahmed rescued him by asking the men to tell their own



Ahmed felt sure they must be dangerous bandits and stepped on the gas until the Spirit told him to stop.

story of creation. And they proceeded to recite it verbatim according to the way his missions team taught the Scriptures to those who could not read. As the men began to tell Mechela and Ahnied the story of Noah, Ahmed asked them, “Excuse me, but where did you learn these stories?”

“Last rainy season,” the men answered, “a man moved to our village and taught us these stories and many others. Let us tell you about the great Flood... and we have many other stories that we would like to tell you.”

It took the remainder of the trip, but Ahmed and Mechela eventually were able to piece things together. They traced the source of the Bible stories that the men had learned all the way back to Maysa and her husband, who had led others to become disciples of Christ, who in turn had gone to distant villages and shared the gospel with more nomads. These two elderly men, hitchhiking their way through the desert, were the fifth generation of Christ followers growing out of Maysa’s efforts, and they were on their way to share the gospel with a young couple who would soon be married and would carry it on to others. And all this took place in the space of one year!

This spreading of the gospel through the desert, one person sharing Scripture stories with another outside of any formal setting, is what Ahmed and his team call “the church on the camel’s path.”

## SIMPLE CHURCHES LEAD TO RAPID REPLICATION

When the vast majority of American Christians talk about “church,” we have a fairly common idea of what we mean. Our idea of church usually focuses on facilities, leaders, and programs, and the more of each, the better. The challenge for most Christian leaders is that, regardless of the size of their church, the perceived minimum elements needed to sustain that church are often greater than the existing budget and staff can sustain. It is very tough to lead a traditional church today. Pastors need much prayer and support.

We often talk about two kinds of churches:

- *Elephant churches* have lots of programs, activities, and people. We need churches like this, but they are very slow to multiply, just like two elephants that take two years to produce offspring.
- *Rabbit churches* are small, able to hide in plain sight, and multiply very quickly. Two rabbits can theoretically produce more than one hundred million rabbits in three years.

ONLY A RABBIT CHURCH HAS THE ABILITY TO REPRODUCE RAPIDLY, THRIVE IN A DANGEROUS ENVIRONMENT, AND NATURALLY FACILITATE OBEDIENCE-BASED DISCIPLESHIP WITHIN EVERY MEMBER.

God bless elephant churches; they serve wonderful functions, But from every strategic perspective, megachurches and even average-sized churches will never fulfill the Great Commission without a goal and plan to launch thousands of rabbit churches. Only a rabbit church has the ability to reproduce rapidly, thrive in a dangerous environment, and naturally facilitate obedience-based discipleship within every member, as evidenced by Disciple Making Movements taking place among Muslims.

In our studies of Muslim church-planting outcomes for more than seven years, in more than six thousand new Muslim-background churches in eighteen countries, including seventy different Muslim people groups, we have found that “church” is being done this way:

- The average church size is 31.2 Christians per church (approximately 15 Christians per church in extremely high-risk areas),

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- Every member is expected to participate in ongoing Discovery Bible Studies in which people together learn how to obey God and help one another grow in faithfulness to Him.
- The leadership of the church is somewhat collective, but typically includes a facilitator, leader, or pastor who is receiving ongoing biblical training. These leaders will typically serve the church and also support themselves financially.
- As noted before, many churches set aside special times every week for prayer and fasting.
- Between 60 and 70 percent of the churches report that, within the first few months of the first Discovery Bible Study, they experience a dramatic healing or deliverance that usually causes the church to suddenly accelerate in growth. Among the most radical Muslim communities, that number is closer to 50 percent.
- The tithes of the church are spent on things like meeting needs of people inside the church, doing acts of kindness for the larger community, and sometimes supporting some members to pioneer the gospel in new Muslim communities.
- The meetings of the church are very simple Discovery Bible Studies, with frequent prayer meetings to pray for the lost and for needs in the local community.
- More than half of the Muslim-background churches are planted among people who are considered totally unengaged by the gospel, or where there is no viable “Jesus option.” In these cases, persecution is very common, and church buildings only increase that risk.
- About one quarter of these churches are in “Muslim dominant” regions where there may or may not be heavy persecution. In some areas, the sheer number of churches that are planted in a region changes the spiritual environment, which in turn gives Christians much greater freedom.
- The remaining 25 percent of the churches are planted in areas that might be considered dominated by “Folk Islam,” a syncretistic mixing of traditional religions and Islam. While serious persecution occasionally happens in these areas, there is typically more freedom, and sometimes small churches will expand rapidly to one hundred or more members and have the freedom to build an inexpensive structure to facilitate larger meetings.
- Leaders in these churches are typically trained two to four times a year, without extracting them to other regions, through the use of more experienced Christian

leaders cycling through pioneer areas training, coaching, and mentoring new leaders. Some are mentored in the meantime by cell phone.

- Disciples reproduce disciples, and churches reproduce churches in ways that are biblically informed and culturally appropriate.

Did you notice that everything these churches do tends to fulfill a function of reproducing obedient disciples of Jesus?

There are not many programs, but quite a lot of genuine transformation of individuals, families, and whole communities.

### **SIMPLE CHURCHES LEAD TO TRANSFORMATION**

Let's return to Ahmed and Mechela, the men who picked up the hitchhikers in the desert. Sometime after that encounter, they were once again bumping over a desert road—hitting potholes, slogging through muddy ruts, choking on dust—when the check engine light came on. On an American highway, this means getting off at the next exit to find a gas station, or calling the auto club on one's cell phone. But in an African desert, it can mean real trouble. Ahmed did not have the tools or spare parts needed to repair his old Land Cruiser, for money and resources were tight for these two men, and they could only observe with dismay as the engine died and the vehicle rolled to a stop.

Fortunately, they were less than three kilometers from a small village where there was a Christian colleague, Waseem, whom Ahmed had trained in making disciples. Unfortunately, they knew that it would take a minimum of three days for a truck to arrive with the spare parts they needed. So Ahmed and Mechela left the vehicle and walked the remaining distance to Waseem's home.

That evening, after milking his cows, Waseem invited the two men to join him for his Discovery Bible Study at a nearby home. He didn't actually say “nearby,” but he did not correct the misunderstanding of his guests, either. Ahmed and Mechela readily agreed, picturing a short walk to a peaceful round hut with thatched roof, owned by a quiet family in the village. Waseem smiled innocently, then led his friends on a long, arduous trek under the desert stars. After several hours, Ahmed saw a large hut in the distance. It was indeed round with a thatched roof, and things were certainly quiet, but perhaps too quiet. The three men entered the hut and Ahmed stopped dead in his tracks.

Huddled inside was a group of some thirty men. All were dressed in desert camouflage, and all were heavily armed.



**“You don’t have to be afraid my friends. You are in the safest place in the region. Our friend Waseem has been reading God’s Word to us and it has changed our lives.”**

Several of the men had automatic rifles in their hands or within reach. Most had ammo belts draped across a shoulder, and all had unwelcoming eyes focused toward the strangers. Ahmed recognized the men as a group of rebels, whom the Western press would term “freedom fighters,” but whom most Africans know as dangerous brigands. Had Ahmed known in advance that these men would be here, he would never have agreed to come. But Waseem simply beamed his smile once more, then sat down next to the rebel leader as the leader opened his Bible.

“You have heard that it was said,” the rebel leader read, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.” Then the leader asked, “What did Isa say here, in your own words?”

For the next hour, the thirty men discussed the words of Jesus, considering His commands that were so radically opposed to their own traditions, and wrestling with their conviction that they must begin to obey them. Ahmed and Mechela sat silently in a corner, gazing with amazement as many of the men, including the leader himself, wept openly over their sinful condition, These rebels, and many others

like them, cloaked their crimes under the guise of fighting for independence, but they supported their “initiatives” by old-fashioned highway robbery. Indeed, these were the very types of men that Ahmed had feared when he passed the elderly hitchhikers some weeks earlier, knowing that they habitually hijacked cars and trucks in the desert, frequently murdering the passengers under the old adage “dead men tell no tales.”

The rebel leader blinked through his tears at Ahmed, then started to laugh. “You don’t have to be afraid, my friends,” he said, gesturing toward the fearful countenances of the two church planters. “You are in the safest place in the region!” The entire band broke into laughter as Waseem translated, many nodding in agreement as they hefted their loaded weapons. Ahmed smiled politely, but his eyes measured the distance to the door.

“My brother,” the rebel leader said in a serious tone, “our friend [pointing to Waseem] has been reading God’s Word to us, and it has changed our lives.” He glanced around the hut at his comrades. “We have been changed. We used to do all the stealing and... and other things... but now, now we are children of God!” As Waseem translated these words, a few men at the rear of the group scowled and exchanged glances,

**“PLEASE,” THEY SAID, “WE HAVE NOT COME TO HARM YOU. BUT WE HAVE A REQUEST: PLEASE SEND US THE STORYTELLERS!”**

but many others nodded with smiles or tears; a few cried “praise God!” in their native tongue. Many of the rebels had already given their lives to Christ, and the group had slowly been diminishing as, one by one, the new believers returned to their homes to share the Word of God with their families. Some were still hardened in their ways of wickedness, but God had not finished yet. It was for that very reason that the leader himself yet remained, working to obey God’s commands by urging his men to continue following him into eternal life through Jesus Christ.

The next morning, the rebel leader sent several men with donkeys to tow the Land Cruiser back to the rebel hideout. “It will be quite safe here,” he joked. Ahmed and Mechela remained with the band for several days, until the spare parts arrived, and in spending time with these men, whom they had once feared, their understanding of God’s Word was transformed.

“These men were my brothers,” Ahmed explained later. “What I learned was that people don’t need to fight such

men to disarm them; the Word of God can easily disarm. I realized how obeying the Scriptures can change lives, even for people that I think are the most dangerous people. Just obeying the Word of God!

“It is not about condemning them for what they do, though what they [have done] might have been very violent in the past. It is not about telling them, ‘this is the wrong thing’ or ‘that is the right thing.’ It is about sharing the Word of God with them, letting them discover God. And once they want to obey it, they have no choice. It is the true freedom of God; it is the whole freedom. Just obeying Christ is the whole freedom, because you don’t struggle with ‘do this, don’t do that.’ You just teach people to obey Him, and they will then make their choices.

“These men taught me. They stopped doing what they used to do because they wanted to obey Christ, not because they wanted to be religious people.”

And that is the very definition of transformation.

### **DRAMATIC TRANSFORMATION: THE KEY TO RAPID MULTIPLICATION OF CHURCHES AMONG MUSLIMS**

By 2007, CityTeam had been catalyzing disciple-making and church-planting movements in Africa for only a couple of years. That year, a group of senior staff were gathered for a strategy meeting in a mountainous retreat, when a call came from the field with a remarkable story. Several Muslim leaders had surrounded the leaders of one of our key ministry partners while they were having midday prayers. That team had been seeing breathtaking breakthroughs among highly resistant Muslim peoples, so they had anticipated that something like this might happen. The team was justifiably fearful, but they kept praying. Surprisingly, the Muslims just stood around them observing the proceedings and making no signs of hostile intentions.

When the Christian leaders finished praying, the group surrounding them approached. They turned out to be a delegation of Muslim civic leaders from a distant region, and they had come with their imam and with a request. “Please,” they said, “we have not come to harm you. But we have a request: please send us the storytellers!”

The Muslim leaders from this community had observed other communities in their area that had become Christian, and they had noticed a dramatic change in people’s lives—broken families now in unity, a sense of love and compassion among the people, and a breaking of old hostilities and vendettas—and they wanted the same thing in their community. The Christians told the imam, however, that they were already overstretched and understaffed, and

they did not have a single disciple maker or chronological storyteller to spare.

The imam came close to the head of the ministry and spoke in an urgent tone, “Please, sir, we are begging you to help us. We are needing to have a storyteller to come stay with us.”

After some rearranging of schedules and responsibilities, the ministry was able to send out a team of storytellers to the distant village. Nobody imagined at the time that events like these would be repeated again and again, or that we would see entire mosques come to faith in Christ, en masse! It was never part of our strategic planning to make Muslims jealous to have the gospel because their neighbors had been blessed by it, yet that, in a nutshell, is just what continues to happen. Indeed, Paul wrote, “to provoke them [Israel] to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:11).

We can say categorically that the powerful testimony of transformation so resonates with the discouragement and disillusionment inside Islam that it is the single most significant reason for rapid multiplication of churches among Muslims today. When Muslims observe the types of dramatic transformation that only the gospel can bring in individuals, families, and whole communities, they are often jealous to experience that same transformation.


Over the course of interviews for this book, we discovered a very long list of what transformation looks like among Muslim-background disciples. When transformation happens, there is always evidence. These are some of the most common changes seen among Muslim individuals and communities who accept Christ:

- *Healed Families.* In families where women and children have been treated almost as slaves, wife beating becomes no longer acceptable, and love begins to heal broken marriages. Children are given permission to attend schools and are treated with new appreciation. Fighting between parents and children diminishes. Polygamy is no longer the choice of Christian men, and prostitution dies out.
- *A Spirit of Freedom.* When people discover freedom, it affects everything in their lives. They find release from fatalism, they are willing to try new things, and they expect God to bless their lives.
- *A Spirit of Love.* Many Muslim people report that God puts love in their hearts for the first time. In many cases, they have a new compassion for fellow Muslims who are still in the mosque.
- *Diminished Violence.* There have been instances in which, upon becoming Christians, former Muslims refuse to

participate in ongoing ethnic warfare. In one case, when the Christian men were called to account for why they no longer “supported the tribe,” they shared the message of Jesus. This caused tribal elders to rethink their reasons for fighting, and the fighting stopped. Today, the two men who stood up for their convictions are church planters.

- *Less Addiction.* The levels of addiction to alcohol, khat, and other things that consume people’s lives are greatly diminished as these people receive prayer for deliverance.
- *Redemption and Hope.* Historically, when lost people become obedient disciples of Jesus, they typically exchange fatalism for optimism, have new energy and initiative, and become more productive people. In addition, they abandon expensive addictions, and they see the tangible blessings of God on their family situation,
- *Evidences of Divine Favor.* Many new Christians share with joy how, after they became followers of Jesus, and during a time of prolonged drought, the Lord caused it to rain on their farms or on the pasture where their livestock was, but not on their neighbors’ land. And it became so obvious that the Muslim neighbors came to them to find out why these Christians had such favor. Farmers in every region that we have interviewed report that, since they have become Christians, they have begun praying over their fields and have ceased using Muslim

or spiritist blessings on their land, and their harvests have dramatically increased.

- *Grace in Persecution.* Many new Christians in Muslim areas face harsh persecution. But these believers, though persecuted in cruel ways, have been transformed so deeply that they find the courage to speak a blessing on their persecutors. This forgiveness in the face of persecution can, over time, be the way that God gets into a persecutor’s heart to transform it as well. Numerous Muslims who formerly persecuted the Muslim-background Christians in their areas have come to faith as a result of those whom they persecuted responding with grace and kindness to the evil things done to them.
- *Freedom from Demonic Oppression.* Many Muslims have experienced years of torment from demonic powers. But when they repent of sins and receive Jesus as Lord, those spirits are successfully cast out. These deliverances are very tangible witnesses of the power of the gospel in Muslim families.
- *The Power of Individual Prayer.* Common people discover that they can pray and God moves. Even the Muslims see this and thank God for the changes in the communities, as many who used to disturb them are now peaceful Christians. 

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## DISCOVERY BIBLE STUDY (DBS)

The challenge in making obedient disciples is to teach obedience. In the context of Disciple Making Movements, we have seen that the best tool to teach obedience is Discovery Bible Study (DBS). Do not teach or preach; instead, facilitate discovery and obedience.

When people are simply exposed to the Scriptures, God will reveal the truth to them. Abdul Nut and his team have seen exciting things happen through the Discovery Bible Studies in homes:

We have the Discovery Bible Studies in our house-to-house programs, and we study different books of the Bible. When we study a certain book of the Bible, we prepare questions that will help participants understand the verses and messages. People love the Discovery Bible Studies and usually read more than the weekly assigned readings. We make sure that the people understand the passages through the questions, and we continue to read the passages if the people don’t understand what they’ve read. We have leaders lead the DBS and that is how they make disciples. We encourage the believers to translate what they’ve learned to applications in their lives.

The Discovery Bible Study uses the inductive method of

Bible study. Its purpose is not to build knowledge, even though people do develop their understandings of biblical teachings as they develop sound doctrine. Rather, it is a careful analysis of the Word of God in order to discover what are the principles of life for a disciple, for a Christian leader, and for the church. As people discover these principles, they align their lives to them. So the primary purpose of the DBS is to help people (nonbelievers and believers) discover and understand the teachings of Jesus in a way that leads them to obedience (2 Timothy 3:15-41).

In the context of Disciple Making Movements, the DBS is a group meeting. It introduces and develops from the beginning the core values of discipleship, leadership, and church. The DBS is designed in such a way that the different parts of a session develop the DNA of church in the group, (When we refer to “the DNA” of a church, we mean that habits learned early—obedience to God’s Word, prayer, worship, and so forth—will remain habits when a person accepts Christ. Those habits become part of the new believer’s daily life, simply because they were implanted as “DNA” previously.) By so doing, when the group members accept Christ, they will discover that they have already been “doing church” from the first days.