

# A Leadership Strategy for DMM



FEATURE ARTICLE

BY **DAVID PARISH**

[dparish9@cs.com](mailto:dparish9@cs.com)

[www.worldmissionsevangelism.org](http://www.worldmissionsevangelism.org)

David Parish is the President of World Missions and Evangelism, Inc. WME, founded in 1988, has been focused on the DMM strategy in Latin America since 2006. Since then they have been involved as a catalyst of a Disciple Making Movement that has planted over 7,000 discovery groups and churches and that is 17 generations deep. WME is also involved in DMM efforts in Africa, Asia, and North America. David has spent 34 years in Pastoral and Missions ministry and his wife, Patty, teaches at Murray State University.

**“LORD, YOU CAN HAVE YOUR CHURCH BACK!”**

It was February of 2004. I was walking on my favorite hiking trail in the Land Between The Lakes area of Western Kentucky, and I was having an intense time of prayer. I had been in pastoral ministry for nearly 20 years and I was going through a season of discouragement. Although that is certainly not uncommon for pastors, I was at a point where I was ready to question my paradigms for ministry. The local church was not growing as I hoped, and although we were one of the larger churches in our region, I was unsatisfied. In fact, I felt that I was at a crisis point. Something in my life and ministry had to change. As I took my prayer walk that afternoon, I released my own dreams and visions for MY church, and told the Lord that I was ready to simply seek HIS Kingdom.

At the time of that walk, I was leading a church that had a Christian school and a missions sending agency called World Missions and Evangelism, Inc. I did not know it at the time, but that prayer on that trail put me on a path that would take me out of the pastorate and into a world of seeing remarkable multiplication in God's Kingdom. It would take me on a journey of discovering new ways to pray, do evangelism, and make disciples as well as new models of church and leadership.

For the next year and a half, I knew something new was coming, but did not know what. I felt like the Lord was telling me to wait for an open door. Finally in June, 2005 I prayed another unique prayer. I said, “Door....the door God is talking to me about...open NOW!” When I said that I felt the Lord say, “Take the Perspectives course.” Although I was familiar with Perspectives, I had never taken the class. So that summer, I took an intensive two-week version of the class....and one of the teachers was Jerry Trousdale, who told of a remarkable movement that was beginning in Africa. When I heard Jerry talk about what we now call Disciple Making Movements (DMM), I knew that this was the Kingdom focused strategy toward which the Lord was moving me.

Through Jerry, I was introduced to David Watson, who had catalyzed a movement in India. With one of our missionaries who was focused on Latin America, I took an intensive training in the DMM strategy that David taught. David and Jerry became mentors to us and we decided to see what DMM would look like in Latin America.

From the beginning I could see that a different model of leadership development would be needed. The methods

that were designed to grow a traditional local church would not catalyze a movement.

In 2008, we initiated DMM training for leaders in Honduras. We developed a tight knit team made up of 13 Honduran workers and two American trainers. We saw this as a pilot project to test how DMM would fare in Latin America.

Up to this point, concepts and tactics for DMM strategy focused on unreached Muslim and Hindu cultures who had no concept of “church” or “baptism.” Though the principles for DMM were universal, in Honduras we discovered there were challenges translating the strategy into a “Christianized” culture.

Over the last nine years, through trial and error, our team has seen a breakthrough in several Latin American countries with the DMM strategy. Our team has worked with over 50 denominations and fellowships using DMM principles to make disciples, start Discovery Bible groups and plant churches. Over 7,000 groups and churches have been birthed in a movement, 17 generations deep, and nearly 26,000 people have professed faith in Christ.

One of the greatest challenges was relating the concept of leadership to a Christianized culture who already had a set model of church government and leadership. In Latin America, these concepts are deeply ingrained. Introducing a new concept of leadership has been vital to seeing the movement flourish. Facilitating a Disciple Making Movement requires a strategy of leadership that embodies certain principles. What we know about DMM is that highly centralized and controlling structures and leaders will kill movement. So what kind of leadership can intentionally catalyze a movement while avoiding control?

A leader must choose a strategy when trying to accomplish a goal. There are several approaches that a leader can choose and each strategy delivers a different outcome. A leadership matrix can be envisioned around two concepts—initiative and releasing. Initiative leadership moves toward a goal. It initiates something. Leadership is not merely gaining a following or enhancing your own influence and reputation. True leadership is going somewhere, has a goal, and is attempting to accomplish a mission. It initiates. If it did not initiate, then nothing would happen. In the case of DMM, we want to initiate and catalyze a movement in a region or people group.

Releasing leadership equips then frees others to accomplish the goal or the given mission. It is about releasing others into their own leadership role—allowing the person to move forward with their own initiative and the ability to modify the goal or outcome. The more a leadership pattern is releasing, the less it is controlling and the more compatible it is with DMM principles.

To bring this over to a church or disciple multiplication example, think of the distinction between a cell leader in an existing church, and a church planter of a new church. The cell leader is equipped and performs ministry, but is under the direction of the pastor and the church mission. The cell leader follows the directions of their leader and teaches an approved lesson. Though released to ministry, there are constraints to the goal or mission. This is an example of a Low-Releasing model.

On the other hand, the church planter has been equipped as well, but is fully released to plant a new work. The church planter is allowed to initiate and plan the work himself/herself. This is an example of a High Releasing model.

Most of us will have one style that feels more natural, but there are times when another strategy may be more effective for the goal desired.

### **1. Low Initiative, Low Releasing:**

In this style, the leader becomes a caretaker of the organization. However, due to the low initiative, the organization is not going anywhere, there is no goal or no mission being provided by the leadership. The leader is either unwilling or unable to influence people to move in a new direction, and has no sense of future strategy for the organization. With this model, the organization may continue to exist for a time, but eventually may wither or die.

### **2. Low Initiative, High Releasing:**

In this style, the leader has the “title” or position of leadership but has little vision or little influence over the direction of the organization. The leader may feel comfortable allowing their followers to initiate leadership more than providing the direction himself/herself. This leadership style seems to encourage leadership from the bottom up, but often results in a plateaued organization or movement. A leader using this style must be very careful.

A leader can hinder upcoming leadership or movement by saying “no.” When followers initiate things that may cause a problem, the leader steps in to squelch the new project or idea.

### **3. High Initiative, Low Releasing:**

In this style, the leader is a visionary and an activist. The leader sees where the organization or movement should go and takes steps to lead and influence others in that direction. However, the followers are restricted and limited in terms of their own initiative. This type of leadership can be good or bad, depending upon the person and how it is implemented. Military organizations traditionally use this type of leadership. It is top down, directive, and focused. However, it can also be the kind of leadership in an oppressive dictatorship. It can help grow a mega-church and reach thousands with the gospel, but it can be perverted and create a controlling and dominating cult.

### **4. High Initiative, High Releasing:**

This style involves the highest risk, but also offers the highest reward. The leader has vision and takes initiative to accomplish a mission and does his/her best to influence others to see the value of the vision and equip them effectively for the mission. The leader influences the follower but does not control those who pick up the vision. This is risky because no control can be chaos. But it also brings the possibility of exponential success. In fact, this is the **ONLY** style of leadership that has the possibility of boundless success.

What was the practical impact of these styles of leadership in the intentional facilitation of DMM in Honduras? When our strategy team started in 2008, they invited both experienced church leaders and new potential leaders to hear about the DMM vision and gave them an opportunity to be a part of a new team that would focus on this strategy for one year. In the first year the focus was on training and initial outreach into unchurched areas of western Honduras. It was both training intensive and experimental, with a lot of focus on trial and error in terms of access ministry, finding persons of peace, and discovery Bible study. That first year the style was clearly **High Initiative, Low Releasing**, and the leaders were the Missionary Strategy Team.

During this time the DNA of the strategy was being set and the Indigenous Team was being formed and trained. During this year everyone was learning; both the Indigenous Team



**“Our team has worked with over 50 denominations and fellowships using DMM principles to make disciples, start Discovery Bible groups and plant churches. Over 7,000 groups and churches have been birthed in a movement, 17 generations deep.”**

---

and the Missionary Strategy Team. This style of leadership allowed the strategy team to learn and make modifications, while not allowing the DNA of movements to be watered down or given up altogether. Beginning with zero groups in May 2008, there were 73 groups by June 2009.

The next four years (during which time the project grew from 73 groups to 266 groups and churches) were transitional years in terms of leadership style. The Strategy Team gradually moved from a **High Initiative, Low Releasing style** to a **High Initiative, High Releasing style**. By the end of 2012, the entire Missionary Strategy Team moved home to the United States and continued as long distance mentors of the Indigenous Team. The Indigenous Team took responsibility for training and mentoring the movement at that time, and the missionaries moved into a role as partners, encouragers, and mentors of the team.

For the last five years the movement has continued to multiply. By the end of 2017 there were approximately 7,000 groups and churches resulting from this movement. The Indigenous Team (which we now call the Vision Team) has now become a Team of Teams, with each member of the Vision Team focused on developing teams that multiply DMM leaders.

Overall they employ the **High Initiative, High Releasing style** of leadership. What does that look like in a DMM in

Honduras? In some cases the new teams receive individual visits, one on one with their mentor. New Bible study leaders and trainers/catalysts spend individual face to face time on a regular basis with their mentor.

In another instance a couple of mentors work together. They are focused on leaders in six different areas and these teams are gathered bi-weekly or monthly for training, reporting or encouragement.

Another Vision Team leader gathers his team each month for an all day meeting. The daytime is focused on feedback and problems, the evening on teaching and solutions.

Another team member focuses on multiple teams divided regionally or by affinity group. This involves a team being trained in a Bible Institute, two teams in the more remote La Mosquitia region, a team in a mountainous coffee growing zone, and university students.

As the movement grows, some leaders rise to higher levels of responsibility. With more responsibility comes more accountability, thus even in a High Releasing model, people that rise to the level of staff have less freedom. But to see movements multiply the High Releasing model is crucial. To paraphrase Shedonkeh Johnson, “Control will kill movement.” 