



# WHEN DISCIPLE MAKING MOVEMENTS ARE MISUNDERSTOOD

BY **JAMES FORLINES**

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**“WHAT YOU ARE TELLING ME IS THAT** what we have always done has always been wrong.” That is what a father of a friend of mine said to him when he tried to convince his father of a non-traditional way of doing church. This is one of the significant challenges of missional paradigm shifts. How do you make a shift in thinking, and encourage others to follow, while not dishonoring the past or being misunderstood?

Those of us who are advocates of Disciple Making Movements believe, often passionately, that traditional assumptions related to discipleship and church planting need to receive a fresh and prayerful analysis. We question whether we in the West have added aspects to church planting that unnecessarily slow down the process and make multiplication difficult — and finishing the task seemingly impossible. We also believe that bifurcating evangelism and discipleship has resulted in many converts who are not obedient disciples. Our observation is that this approach has rarely led to multiple generations in church planting.

As we communicate this, however, there are times when people may hear us saying things we are not saying, or perhaps we say things in a way which causes them to hear incorrectly. This article is meant to address some of the key potential communication challenges that we, as advocates of movements, need to clarify.

The approach to this article will be to focus on six principles within DMM that release multiplication. For each of these we will juxtapose that principle against the Unintended Limiting Factor that seems to exist in many traditional models of discipleship and church planting. Next, we will identify the area where we DMM advocates might be misunderstood, and finally clarify what it is we really meant to say.

Two caveats before we begin: First, though I have worked closely with many DMM advocates and practitioners around the world, this article is from my perspective of DMM. And, second, I do not mean to imply that accurate communication on these areas will eliminate areas of disagreement. In some cases they will probably still remain. Perhaps they need to.

**Multiplication Release Principle #1 — God uses ordinary and untrained people as disciple-makers who make disciple-makers and thereby become church planters.**

**Unintended Limiting Factor** - Church planting and discipleship are formal processes and are best reserved for those approved, trained, and vetted by their church or denomination.

**What some may hear us saying** - DMM does not believe in roles such a pastor, teacher, prophet, or ordination into the ministry.

**What we meant to say** - God can and will use ordinary people to be disciple-makers who make disciple-makers and therefore plant churches. This wave of people who are released will need coaching and encouragement from spiritual leaders who are willing to release them and coordinate and bless their efforts. There are biblical roles for overseers, shepherds, and elders though they make look different than what we have traditionally understood.

**Multiplication Release Principle #2 - People best become disciples of Jesus through personal and group discovery which focuses on obedience.**

**Unintended Limiting Factor** - Those who have received theological training should be the ones to teach people what they should know and believe.

**What some may hear us saying** - DMM never believes in teaching, only discovery.

**What we meant to say** - The Holy Spirit of God can use the Word of God and create the people of God. It is that simple. Therefore, God can and does use the untrained to be disciple makers and church planters. There is very little explanation for the phenomenon that happened in the Thessalonian church (I Thessalonians 1:5-8 – Paul was only with them for three weeks) apart from this.

During the Reformation we got the priesthood of the believer half right, and we seem to be still working on the other half. The half we got right is that we do not need a priest to talk to God. The half we are still working on is that we also do not need a priest in order for God to speak to us.

However, as people grow in Christ there *are* appropriate times where teaching can augment their continued discovery. It is good for them to know the history of the church and see how they and their people fit into a global and historical Church. It is helpful to know historical backgrounds of the Bible and hear how others have lived out the teachings of Jesus.

Care, however, has to be exercised in the early stages. Our early intervention of teaching can thwart the essential personal and group development of the disciples' capacity to hear directly from God and obey Him. The result can be a knowledge-based approach which stunts true biblical discipleship and makes the individual and group to be dependent on a teacher.

The disciples, realizing they do not have the skills and biblical knowledge of their teacher, conclude that their responsibility is just to sit and continue to learn. This often turns into a lifetime habit. This ecclesiastical sterilization stops generational multiplication right in its tracks.

In a DMM approach ordinary people learn to hear from God and obey. Because it was simple, and led by the Holy Spirit with them, they are able to help other ordinary people to hear and obey and the process continues unabated.

**Multiplication Release Principle #3 - Leadership training is best done as ordinary people are serving and true spiritual giftedness and capacities emerge.**

**Unintended Limiting Factor -** Leaders are expected to be fully trained before taking leadership responsibility.

**What some may hear us saying -** DMM does not believe in formal training in Bible colleges, seminaries, or church leadership programs.

**What we meant to say -** An individual with *no* training at all can pray and fast and sense God leading her/him to where they will go make disciples who make disciples, and plant churches. But, formal training has a definite role. The best approach for formal training, however, is *as* workers are making disciples and planting churches. The greater their responsibility, and the more effective their efforts, the greater their need of more training. And, we must be aware that formal training will take on a different approach among oral learning cultures.

My context is among Muslim people groups in Africa. DMM leaders here will watch an individual who is taking disciple making and church planting seriously. As they begin Discovery Groups and begin to plant churches they will say, "You need some more training." When churches reach the 3rd and 4th generation they will say, "You need some formal training." And, in

cases where workers are coaching and mentoring others who are working cross-culturally, those workers have been sent to seminaries here in Africa for cross-cultural training. My observation is that there is more training, not less.

DMM is not against formal training but does question the approach of doing all, or even most of the formal training before ministry has started. In many cases the Western model is to do all of our biblical, ministry, and cultural training before that individual has ever disciplined anyone or planted a church.

There are several significant disadvantages to this approach:

- (1) Some candidates, faced with the daunting challenges and expense of "getting prepared" simply drop out;
- (2) Being theologically, culturally, and linguistically trained, we can depend on what we know instead of the One who is to be known; and
- (3) We create a professional class of Christians and the ordinary people leave the work to them, therefore disempowering most of the Body of Christ.

**Multiplication Release Principle #4 - Disciple making is the goal. This leads to multiple-generational church planting. This is the potency in the process of "going."**

**Unintended Limiting Factor -** "Church planting" is the goal. This is defined as people gathering in some larger group setting, often in some sort of building.

**What some may hear us saying -** DMM advocates believe that we should do away with attractional-model churches.

**What we meant to say -** Most of us have attended, still attend, or have meaningful partnerships with attractional-model churches. As some have pointed out, elephant churches do have the size and capacity to accomplish very needed objectives. It would be disruptive, and counter-productive to Kingdom advancement, to suggest that attractional model churches are the impediment.

It is important, however, to ask critical questions. Is the current model the only one needed as we move forward? Is it possible that our current model encourages attendance without discipleship? What do we do with the growing percentage of people who are

not responding to this approach, even in the West? Can it scale, globally, to reach the 80 million more people on the planet in 2017 and 2.5 billion more by 2050?

The Church of the first three centuries adequately passed the faith along, generation to generation, while penetrating to the core of the Roman Empire. This was all done *as they were going* and obedient disciples were willing to give their lives. In today's world where persecution is a reality, there is often no other option anyway. However, even in places where it is possible it is legitimate to question whether it (i.e. the attractional model) is the only way, or even the best way to engage lostness and see multiple generations of churches.

**Multiplication Release Principle #5 -  
Prayer and fasting precedes any movement.**

**Unintended Limiting Factor** - We have a reliance on strategic plans, training, research analysis and human resources that can be brought to the equation

**What some may hear us saying** - DMM does not believe in strategic planning.

**What we meant to say** - Of course, everyone believes in prayer. And, to varying degrees, it is a part of our daily lives. I have accompanied numerous groups to observe DMM in very difficult contexts. The number one comment during debriefing (and this happens every single time) is, "I thought we were praying, but this experience has shown me how they, as a result of prayer and fasting, are able to hear from God and follow His leading."

Fasting and the sequence of prayer in our planning is the urgent matter. When we pray and fast *first* our spiritual sensitivity is increased and our strategies and initiatives become aligned with God's purposes. He reveals Himself to us. We join Him in what He is already doing.

Too often in the West we meet collectively and develop a strategic plan, with good intentions, and a lot of effort.

But, does this come after an extensive season of prayer and fasting where God revealed Himself and His plan? Far too often in my own experience I have worked hard on a strategic plan and then asked for God's blessings on it. This vital lesson has been the most impactful for me personally with DMM. Strategic plans are great when they have come to us from Him, as we are diligently seeking His face.

**Multiplication Release Principle #6 -  
The church is the people, and they can meet anywhere.**

**Unintended Limiting Factor** - To be a "real" church you must have a building.

**What some may hear us saying** - DMM is opposed to churches having buildings.

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**What we meant to say** - We are called to be disciple-makers who make disciple-makers. If every local body of believers must have a building it *will* slow the process of church planting down, if by no other means than finances. However, buildings will be a reality for many churches in many cultures.

Our goal as disciple-makers should be to cultivate the vine and only build the trellis as the vine is growing and needs support. Because buildings do put a governor on movements we would encourage that this be done spontaneously by those who are in this discipling process, not from the outside. Even then, it will at that point slow down the generational expansion. Realistically, however, such has always been the case as movements become institutionalized.

**Conclusion**

Across the world we are seeing movements emerge and gain momentum. Perhaps this is the 4th era of modern missions. Paradigm shifts create tension, but I trust that our communication will be seasoned with grace. May we conclude with Paul, that the most important thing is that Christ is preached. And because of this [we] rejoice" (Philippians 1:16). 