

Look Where You Have Cousins:

How Proximate Strategies Help Movements Launch Movements

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When persecution broke out in Jerusalem, many followers of Jesus fled—some as far as Antioch. The Hellenized Jews among them (particularly those from Cyprus and Cyrene) shared the Gospel with Hellenized Syrians (Acts 11:19–21). Those two distinct peoples within existing networks received the kingdom message. Thus, the Gospel moved two cultural steps beyond the Palestinian Jewish base.

The church at Antioch became the launchpad for a missionary team, with the tricultural Paul: born a Hellenistic Jew in what is now Turkey, educated like a Palestinian Jew in Jerusalem, and having Roman citizenship by birth. Paul took the Gospel from Hellenized Palestine to the Greek homeland itself—a third step. From there Paul saw the Gospel going beyond Jews and even Greeks to the barbarians and Scythians.



A Western Fulani market in Garabanga, Niger.
Photo by International Mission Board

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A proximate strategy¹ focuses on reaching a people group or population segment that has unusual influence (positive or negative) in their area. It involves training disciples in that group to not only reach those of their own people, but to also leverage their connections to reach across cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, socio-religious or geographic barriers to see other groups (eventually all groups) in their area reached with the Good News of the King.

By the grace of God, part of the success experienced by New Generations involves empowering and training indigenous leaders who are “close in relationship” to other Unengaged Unreached People Groups (UUPGs).

¹ Introduced in a previous article by the New Generations team: “God’s Gift of Surprising Proximate Strategies,” *Mission Frontiers*, March-April 2018

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Movements among Muslims in West and Central Africa

In 2003, directed by the Holy Spirit, Younoussa Djao, Jerry Trousdale, and Shodankeh Johnson of Final Command Ministries began to pray that by December 2013, churches would develop in all the largest Muslim Unengaged Unreached People Groups (MUUPGs) in West and Central Africa. These groups with broad geographic footprints and large populations included the Hausa (today 54 million in 18 countries²), the Fulani (40 million in 16 countries³) and the Kanuri (13 million in six countries⁴).

In February 2005, Final Command launched trainings led by David Watson, a former missionary to India who had taken a strategist-trainer role, in what eventually became known as “Disciple Making Movements” (DMM).⁵ Over 100 leaders from 12 countries gathered in Sierra Leone and Guinea to learn about DMM. Then Final Command seconded Djao, Trousdale, and Johnson to join Watson with the CityTeam International⁶ team to pursue the DMM vision.

The following year, after fasting and praying, the team concluded that the best way to engage all the UUPGs in the region was to focus their efforts on 18 of the least-reached and most Gospel-resistant people groups (later adding the Pygmy people). What made these groups special was the unusually high influence, power, size, and/or wealth, that

persuaded other groups to absorb aspects of these groups’ culture.

Consequently, if large portions of these key people groups were to embrace the Gospel, it would very likely spread to the others in the region. The team called them “gateway people groups,” and Trousdale dubbed the approach “proximate strategy.” In his words, “It’s easier to see a culture change when you have existing links to that culture. When a neighboring UUPG has linguistic and cultural connections to one in which you’re already seeing results happening, it’s much easier to make a difference.”

In 2007, the 99-percent-Muslim Fulani especially captured New Generations’ attention. Fulani communities stretched over a wide swath from Senegal to the Central African Republic. Djao, a Fulani himself, knew they were responsible for bringing Islam to Sub-Saharan Africa centuries before, so he began praying that they would become those who helped other people groups discover Jesus.

Through God’s grace, by 2021 these leaders saw five distinct Disciple Making Movements among the Fulani, one with 10 generations of multiplication. These consisted of 1,761 churches composed of 22,863 new disciples (averaging 12 per church) planted in the Fulani cluster (Fulani, Fulfulde, Fula Jalon, Peuls, Fulani Maroua, and others).

The Fulani cluster is just one success story. By 2022, 94 engagements had begun through these 19 gateway people groups, resulting in 249,001 new Christ followers, in 11,191 new churches.

² “Hausa People Cluster,” Joshua Project, <https://joshuaproject.net/clusters/186>

³ “Fulani/Fulbe People Cluster,” Joshua Project, <https://joshuaproject.net/clusters/173>

⁴ People Cluster: Kanuri Saharan <https://peoplegroups.org/explore/ClusterDetails.aspx?rop2=C0063>

⁵ A DMM is a chain reaction of at least four generations of churches planting churches, encompassing at least 100 new churches.

⁶ the precursor to New Generations

An Important Discovery

In 2017, Djao read an internal report documenting discipling activity in the northern part of a West African country, Kundu (pseudonym), that led to ministry breaking out in a different UUPG in a neighboring North African country, Sangala (pseudonym). Yet he knew his team had started nothing in Sangala or among that people.

Djao called the area coordinator, who explained that the churches in Kundu had businesspeople who regularly traveled north to buy and sell products in Sangala. They normally stayed for two or three months at a time. While there, they found persons of peace and shared the Jesus stories they had heard in their Discovery Bible Studies in Kundu. The coordinator reported multiplication happening in the north. Obedient followers of Jesus were just naturally discipling people in their extended network in Sangala, using the bridge already built by their influential cultural identity.

Because their cousins and their cousins' friends showed interest, the Fulani brothers started a Discovery Bible Study that eventually multiplied into three Malinka churches.



Fulani boys in Niger stomp through a lake to drive fish into the shallows where they can be easily scooped up with nets.
Photo by International Mission Board

Djao then noticed the same thing happening between Fulani disciples in northern Cote d'Ivoire and the Malinka people in Guinea. Two Fulani disciples frequently visited their aunt who had

married a Malinka across the border and began sharing stories about Jesus when they visited. Because their cousins and their cousins' friends showed interest, the Fulani brothers started a Discovery Bible Study that eventually multiplied into three Malinka churches.

With more research, Djao found that this was happening in other places as well—not only from country to country but also within countries, from region to region. The team began to be even more intentional about training and coaching DMM leaders to prioritize people groups from which the discipling process was likely to jump to others with whom they interacted. They also encouraged disciples to share with people of other cultures or regions in their social networks.

“If DMM is happening well, this is how it should work,” Djao said. The team now includes presentations on proximate strategies in all their trainings, asking: ‘What people group is close enough that the discipling process can jump from you to them? Is there a people group where you have cousins?’ When trainees come up with some, we say, ‘Why don’t you think of yourselves as missionaries to them?’”

In Cote d'Ivoire, New Generations has seen DMMs jump from the Mona people to the Tura and from the Malinka to the Senoufo. In both cases, this happened organically. It was not part of any plan or initiative. Faithful disciples shared what they were learning in their relational network.

“When God sends you to a place,” Djao tells trainees, “Your responsibility is not just to reach that people group or that geographical area. Do not just think about this small town or this village. Your responsibility not only includes here but also over there on the other side. Look broadly, from a bird’s-eye view of the region. Look at what is around you when you’re praying, planning, and strategizing. Don’t limit God. Look and think big. Do not be afraid to cross borders. But do it intentionally. Be aware of the relationships and attitudes between the peoples and the places. Pay particular attention to those where relationships are good.”

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Three Principles of Proximity

Three principles stand out from this brief history.

Passionate prayer. Jesus wants his disciples to “bear much fruit” because it glorifies the Father. Yet since he is the vine and we are the branches, he says, “apart from me you can do nothing.” Our fruitfulness depends on us abiding in him (John 15:5–8).

True to Jesus’s word, the DMM success New Generations has seen has not come from human genius or effort—not even from proximate strategy itself—but from the power of God unlocked by abiding in prayer. Trousdale urges, “If you are going to embark on trying to see movements happen—I would beg you—do not attempt this without having intercessors in place. Pray before you launch into this.”

When Djao tells movement stories, he repeatedly mentions prayer and fasting. Whenever he sees work that is not thriving, he commonly says, “Okay, they pray, but...” suggesting that the workers have not been praying as earnestly as they should.

Perception: Leaning into God through prayer and fasting elevates awareness. This yields “Aha!” moments. For example, it was no accident that Djao noticed the report of multiplication leaking into Sangala. The team had been praying for movements to multiply among gateway MUUPGs

in the region, to see other groups reached. They were also establishing evaluation as a norm of New Generations’ culture. When Djao received a report, his perception became insight because the team was diligently evaluating: both the quantity and quality of what was happening on the ground.

Pursuing proximity. The team’s heightened perception enabled them to notice what was happening organically, which in turn moved them to train for it still more intentionally. They now instruct leaders to look for the next border or boundary they can cross, just as they had looked for people of peace in their own circles. Especially so when those circles include their enemies: people of other cultures or languages who also need to discover King Jesus.

God is using indigenous workers who are “almost insiders,” to engage in passionate prayer, evaluate from perception, and pursue proximity. This approach isn’t limited to West and Central Africa or to Muslim UUPGs. Disciple makers among any people group in the world can practice proximate strategy, so that all people groups, affinity groups, and population segments have a Jesus option. 