

Daring to Succeed

Adapted with permission from **The Growth Challenge: Do We Dare to Take an Honest Look?**
By L.D. Waterman, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Volume 55 Issue 1 (Jan-Mar, 2019)

I had been serving among a Muslim UPG for more than 15 years. During some of those years I had led a team of over 30 adult missionaries, pursuing what we considered to be a well-crafted strategy to reach that group. I had worked with a team of national partners to plant a contextual church with local leadership. Then a number of factors challenged me to ask: “Is what we’re doing really God’s best?” When I read David Garrison’s *Church Planting Movements*, I realized that some of what we had done had hindered the hoped-for reproduction.

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My new watchword became “reproducible,” but my national colleagues wanted to stick with our original plans, so I phased out of that ministry. That little group still exists, but has never grown or multiplied.

In 2010, a conference workshop faced me with the challenge: “If we keep doing what we’re doing now, will we reach the goal? We might see enough fruit to share good stories in prayer letters, yet actually leave a group *more unreached* than before we arrived.”

This adapted illustration of a fictitious missionary couple brings the point home powerfully:

The Renaldos went to Ethiopia for two years of language study, then in 2010 began work among 150,000 Sudanese Arabs there. This people group was increasing through natural population growth at a healthy 2.5% per year (3,750).

The 1,500 Evangelicals among this group (1%), had become isolated from their Muslim neighbors. They also weren’t growing at all, as natural population growth of Evangelical families was offset by families emigrating

out of the country.

After language study, the Renaldos began witnessing using a fast-track storying approach. Through much effort, they led 30 individuals to Jesus in one year, started a new church and sent home glowing reports. Their supporters were impressed, but at the end of the year the total number of Evangelicals had only increased by 2%, to 1,530.

During that same year, the Sudanese Arab population grew by 3,750 (2.5%) to 153,750. So despite the Renaldo’s fruitfulness that year, the people group in this fictitious scenario actually dropped from 1% to 0.995% Evangelical.

The Renaldos could continue leading Muslims to Jesus every month and hopefully starting a new church each year. Yet if their ministry continued with addition rather than multiplication, the Evangelicals among this people would have less and less impact as the number of lost people continued to outpace their ministry.

Through the original form I saw of this presentation, I realized a ministry that sounded pretty good to me could result in net *negative* progress toward seeing that people group reached. I realized that the ministry effort in which I had been involved for over a decade was likely losing ground compared to population growth.

I had to ask myself, and then my coworkers and those I was leading: “Do we dare to take an honest look—at our fruit and our projected fruit?”

Sadly, the practice of leading individuals to Jesus and forming them into a new church has been the experience of many ministries among unreached people groups. In fact, despite the faithful efforts of thousands of missionaries among Unreached People Groups (UPGs),

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the total number of lost people in UPGs has roughly doubled over the past 40 years.

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I realized that we needed to shift to a ministry model that could rapidly reproduce disciples and churches among a UPG. I saw this as not just a theory or a wish, but a description of what God *was actually doing* among a number of UPGs around the world. Back in 2010, the best estimates claimed fewer than 100 Church Planting Movements (CPMs) globally. Now, in early 2019, the work of God's Spirit and the sharing of known data has brought the number of recognized, consistent, fourth-generation movements to over **700**. These movements are thriving in a wide variety of geographic locations and religious blocks.

Applying a CPM-oriented strategy doesn't guarantee "success." God is the sovereign Lord of the harvest. He chooses what fruit will grow from our steps of obedience. A person could do everything "right" and never personally be part of launching a movement. But at this point we can undeniably say that some ministry approaches *increase* the likelihood of God bringing forth abundant harvest through a CPM. And some other ministry approaches consistently bring forth little (if any) fruit and actually *hinder* a larger harvest.

As Robby Butler has shown in his article "Movements in Every Peoples: How Peoples Become Reached," "The One-by-One Method" (reaching individuals and combining them in a single congregation where none existed) results in "a foreign, conglomerate church, alienated from the local peoples." The alarming result is that "Extraction evangelism makes peoples more resistant. **Extraction evangelism into conglomerate congregations hinders indigenous movements**" (italics and bold font mine). Reaching numerous *individuals* among a UPG may feel like exciting progress, yet it is usually counterproductive. Research shows that this approach at best usually brings slower growth than population increase and at worst hardens much larger numbers toward the gospel.

David and Paul Watson describe the important distinction between extraction evangelism and Disciple Making Movements. They write: "Extraction evangelism is ingrained in Western Christian culture. Yet extraction evangelism techniques create too many barriers to the gospel to result in Disciple Making Movements. Period. Extraction evangelism techniques even inoculate people against receiving the gospel. Disciple-making, on the other hand, is part of catalyzing Disciple Making Movements around the world. If Disciple Making Movements are our goal, we have to make the jump from extraction-evangelism thinking to disciple-making thinking. Extraction evangelism thinking focuses on reaching one person at a time. Disciple-making thinking focuses on reaching one family or community at a timethe minimum unit for disciple-making should be the household (family), affinity group, or community rather than the individual."

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If someone like the Renaldos wanted to catalyze a reproducing Church Planting Movement, how could they shift their approach? While learning language and culture, they could:

- Catalyze a prayer effort for a CPM among the focus people.
- Work with others to prepare Bible Discovery materials appropriate to the focus people.
- Learn to talk with unbelievers from their focus group about felt needs among individuals and communities.
- Learn to verbalize (in the focus language) appropriate spiritual comments to see if they could find spiritually open people (persons of peace, Luke 10:6).
- Meet believers from their focus group and share vision for a rapidly reproducing movement among the group.
- Interact with near-culture Christians and share CPM vision while learning about relationships and attitudes between the cultures.

When their language ability allows, they could:

- Enter deeper conversations with focus people who seem spiritually open, to ask if they would be willing to gather their family and/or friends to study the Holy Book.
- Facilitate CPM training for near-culture and focus group believers. Offer ongoing coaching to believers who want to implement what they learn.
- Meet intensively with any believers who catch the vision, to pray and encourage one another in looking for people of peace and starting Discovery Groups.
- *Make sure* they don't just reach isolated individuals who then become alienated from their family and network; rather always aim to reach families or groups.
- *Make sure* to use a very reproducible Discovery approach in reaching and discipling groups, not a teaching approach that depends on someone with a lot of training and knowledge.

Let's say within their first year after finishing intensive language learning, they host a CPM training led by an Arab CPM trainer from the Middle East with themselves as co-trainers. Fifty people attend: five believers from their focus group and 45 Christians from a near culture that lives in regular contact with this group. From that training, four people show significant interest. They include a married couple from their focus group, a married man from a near culture who actively serves in his local church, and this man's pastor, who is favorable but too busy to actively engage in UPG work. They confirm the pastor's willingness to "release" his church member for active focus on UPG ministry. They have the man confirm that his wife is favorable toward his engaging in this ministry (though she herself doesn't plan to become involved).

The Renaldos begin meeting weekly with this man and couple. They pray, study Scripture together, follow the Lord's leading and plan to find people of peace. Through a variety of creative approaches, within six months they have found six potential people of peace. Two of them never gather a group, one group starts but soon disbands, one group meets for a while, but then people drop out for a variety of reasons. Only two groups (each having six adults plus six teens and some other children) continue

through 30 chronological Discovery Bible Studies from Creation to Christ, including steps to saving faith and baptism. During that time, six of the group members have also found other interested people and started additional Discovery Groups (second generation).

By the end of that year, two groups of six adults from the focus group (plus teens and children) have come to faith and begun moving toward functioning as house churches. At the end of the second year, those two house churches and six Discovery Groups have multiplied, becoming six house churches, 18 second-generation Discovery Groups and 20 third-generation Discovery Groups, with a total of 80 baptized believers and 250 seekers studying chronological Bible stories. The Renaldos' national partners have also started four additional Discovery Groups, two of which have come to faith together, yielding 16 baptized believers (10 adults, 6 teens). And those two groups have birthed six additional Discovery Groups.



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At the end of the third year, the first stream has 50 house churches, 500 baptized believers, and 150 Discovery Groups (25 of which are fourth generation) with 700 seekers. The second stream has six house churches, 46 baptized believers, and 15 Discovery Groups, of which five are third generation.

At the end of the fourth year, the first stream has 200 house churches (some of which are fourth generation) with 2000 baptized believers. The second stream has 20 house churches with 200 baptized believers.¹ Both streams continue to multiply Discovery Groups. A third stream has also begun, having one house church of eight new believers and two new Discovery Groups begun.

¹ If any reader considers this growth rate unrealistic, see for example the growth documented in "How God is Sweeping through South Asia" (a portion of "God is Using Movements to Reach the Unreached" by Dr. David Garrison) in the January-February 2018 issue of Mission Frontiers, pp. 18-19.

Within four years, a pattern of indigenous multiplication has been established, yielding over 2,200 baptized believers. The 1,500 Evangelical believers have become 3,700. In the meantime, the population has grown at 2.5% per year. The 150,000 Sudanese Arabs have grown to 165,573 in those same four years. The 3,700 believers now constitute 2.2% of the group's population. They have crossed the 2% threshold to be considered a reached group, having internal resources to keep spreading the gospel to their own people. And with good reason. A pattern of multiplication has been established, such that Kingdom advance can continue to exceed population growth.

God is doing amazing things in our day, in apparent answer to the prayers of his people and diligent application of simple reproductive approaches. Church Planting Movements (Disciple Making Movements) hold out the best hope we know of for all peoples to hear and receive the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In light of this, we do well to ask ourselves: "Will the approaches I am pursuing or supporting yield the results for which I'm praying? Am I doing the things most likely to bear maximum fruit for Christ's glory among the nations?" 

