

Disturbing the Delicate Inner Workings of Indigenous Movements

BY JEAN JOHNSON

Jean Johnson serves as a missionary and coach as well as Director of Five Stones Global (formerly known as World Mission Associates). She has over 32 years of vocational cross-cultural ministry experience. This includes church-planting among Cambodians in St. Paul/Minneapolis and 16 years of service in Cambodia. One of the key starting points of her missional journey was moving in with a first-generation Cambodian refugee family of eight in the inner city of Minneapolis. She presently promotes and teaches about creating a culture of dignity, sustainability and multiplication in Great Commission efforts. Please visit fivestonesglobal.org.

Have you ever had the chance to see inside an ultra-mechanical watch that has hundreds of intricate parts that work together to create the movement? No doubt each and every mechanism and piece plays an important role that only the clockmaker himself understands. But if the clock is opened by a curious hand that tries to “help it along,” the entire thing can come to a grinding halt. So it is with Disciple Making Movements (DMM).

In North America, there are some Disciple Making Movement enthusiasts who neglect the very DMM principles and practices that they advocate for in their homeland when they pitch in to help growing movements in the rest of the world.

Seven key DMM core principles include making disciple-makers, mobilizing ordinary people, meeting Persons of Peace, being discovery-based, being obedience-focused, discipling to conversion and fostering reproducibility.

The process is as follows: a Discovery Group (DG) made up of ordinary people discovers Jesus’ commands

through the Bible. They obey those commands such as love, give, and pray in their network of relationships. As they meet Persons of Peace, they start discipling them the minute they form relationships. This in turn leads to more disciples and

Discovery Groups through four or more generations of multiplication.

Let’s look at how quickly the gears and mechanics of indigenous DMM can be disturbed. Take this hypothetical but very typical example of a church team in the USA. Fully aware of the DMM core principles, they head to a place in Africa with a majority Muslim population. The team is made up of medical professionals who offer compassion ministry alongside a local DMM team. The Westerners’ goal is to pave the way and earn the favor of the community on behalf of the local DMM team. This sounds worthwhile on the surface, but undermines the seven DMM principles listed above.

To unpack where things went wrong, this key principle applies: Pass on function— not form— in cross-cultural work. The visiting team from the USA came alongside the local DMM using a model (form) of compassion (function) that was only doable for themselves, both capacity-wise and resource-wise. In other words, their tangible expression of compassion was not replicable for the local insiders.

The function → obey Christ's command to love our neighbors as ourselves

The form → professional medical teams from the USA serving the sick

In this case, the visiting team's form of ministry was extraordinary. It was not birthed from indigenous discovery and the everyday obedience of the ordinary people making up the DG who would be modeling to their fellow citizens how to love their neighbors in reproducible ways as part of their DMM.

Faithfully stewarded DMM principles and practices would cause the above example to unfold very differently. Consider this scenario: A DG learns the story of Tabitha, otherwise known as Dorcas, and how she was always doing good and helping the poor. (Acts 9:36–43) They discover the breadth and width of the story through retelling the story and Discovery Bible questions. When they get to the question about how they should obey the passage, they decide to offer their help with chores in the house, garden or field among the elderly, sick and vulnerable. These ordinary people come up with simple yet beautiful forms of showing practical love to the vulnerable in their community. The form is indigenous, incarnational, and replicable for their soon-to-be disciples and disciple-makers.

The function → obey Christ's command to love our neighbors as ourselves

The form → offer help with basic chores among the widows, sick and elderly in the community

A few years ago, I sat with a group of disciple-makers in India. They shared with me one of their biggest challenges in their disciple-making efforts. They struggled to reproduce the forms that Westerners implemented and to which the people in their communities had become accustomed. They told me something to this effect: *We try to obey Christ by loving our neighbors in simple yet doable ways for us, but it always pales in comparison to groups who rely on teams from America. We have actually had people tell us to not bother them with Jesus-talk unless we bring them Americans with goodies.*

Along with exporting non-reproducible forms, some American churches and organizations are financially supporting these movements in one form or another. I often rub up against and read about churches and

organizations that chronically raise money for the very purpose of supporting these movements.

Think with me for a moment. If DMMs are multiplying like wildfires—especially if they are learning to obey Christ's commands before they are even converted—shouldn't their giving also be multiplying beyond imagination? Why would we need to fund these movements and their leaders? It shouldn't be necessary!

Not only have I observed American churches and organizations subsidize movements, I have seen them introduce forms into these movements that are not readily reproducible to provide a way for their donors to get in on the action. For example, they may offer centralized trainings where their donors have the opportunity to teach about disciple-making in a particular country. Centralized trainings require lodging, food, transportation, and more—which makes this form dependent on outsiders. In this case, a key component of the movement is now dependent on foreign funding, foreign languages and foreign teachers, who have little to no personal experience in the culture in which they are attempting to serve. Unfortunately, many also do not have firsthand experience in DMMs in their own society. Jonathan Martin reminds us, **"If a church or ministry starts out dependent on Western money—Western money will eventually end it."** This potent statement includes Disciple Making Movements.¹

Dmmsfrontiermissions.com shared a recent blog of how merely giving several pairs of rubber boots to local new disciple-makers who were originally willing to wear their flip flops through monsoon-flooded areas stopped a DMM in its tracks.² What seems like a little generous boost can easily upset the delicate balance of a local DMM.

The well-known *Perspectives* course material states, "Many churches in the Wealthy West unwisely splash surplus resources in misguided ways that may feel as if 'compassion' is being expressed. But such funding often causes a dynamic dependency in which multiplication is shut down."³ Ron Klaus, Ethiopia Director of Hope In View, commented on a blog about Disciple Making

1 Jonathan Martin, *Giving Wisely*, (Sisters, OR: Last Chapter Publishing, L.L.C., 2008), 118.

2 Dmmsfrontiermissions.com, "Money – It Both Helps and Hurts," June 10, 2017.

3 Steven Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: The Study Guide Fourth Edition* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2009 Edition), 149.

Movements: “We have not yet seen a single example where outside money has not produced dependency. It hinders the development of tithing communities and thus prevents movements from expanding without outside support. Furthermore, if and when the money ends, there are always relational problems.”⁴

Is all this outside unhealthy influence because we can't stand to be on the sidelines? Do we still feel a need to somehow be the ones making big things happen? Do we not trust the momentum of the movement or the ordinary people and their extraordinary prayer, and thus feel we need to artificially speed up the movements?

Most of us cannot conceive of DMM disciples, groups and churches discovering and practicing their own forms of compassion, and supporting their own movements. We have lifted the ceiling of our imaginations for what ordinary disciples can do around the world in regard to DMM. **Maybe we need to lift that ceiling even higher and trust them to discover and obey Jesus Christ with indigenous expressions of obedience in areas of compassion, giving and resourcing their own movements.** Additionally, we really don't want Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Spiritists to assume that foreigners are the ones in control. We can wrap DMM terminology around our dependency-generating approaches, but at the end of the day, it is still bad missional habits on our end.

Roy Moran, the author of *Spent Matches*, reminds us that we have focused so much on the external elements of modern Church in regard to our strategies that we haven't had the patience or principles to let function lead form.⁵ Likewise, we have amazing DMM principles under our belt, but we need to make sure we have the patience to go along with God's timing. When we hurry to usher in Jesus' return by trying to reach all nations rapidly, we take shortcuts and slowly return to human-motivated pushes. (Matt. 24:14) George Patterson, known for his church multiplication strategies in Central America and beyond, wrote: “Spontaneous reproduction of churches means the Holy Spirit moves a church to reproduce daughter churches on its own without outsiders pushing the process.” (Acts 13:1–3)⁶

4 Ron Klaus comments in “Strengthening the Foundation” blog, May 30, 2019, [http://jonlewisblogs.blogspot.com/2019/05/sobering-reversal.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed:+blogspot/Zre-Ge+\(Under+His+Wings\)](http://jonlewisblogs.blogspot.com/2019/05/sobering-reversal.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed:+blogspot/Zre-Ge+(Under+His+Wings))

5 Roy Moran, *Spent Matches*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 59.

6 George Patterson, “The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches,” ed. Steven Hawthorne, *Perspectives*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2009 Edition), 633.

Where does that leave us?

1 We should consider being a part of a DMM in our own neighborhoods on the home front. God can use us where we are!

2 If you are an apostle in an unreached people group and you start the DMM process, as soon as possible, commend the movement to the local disciples and the Holy Spirit. Keep outside funding and presence out of the way.

3 We should be a part of the extraordinary prayer for the movements, rather than the extraordinary dollar.

4 We must do everything possible to affirm the DMM principles in others when given the opportunity. At the same time, avoid undermining those principles even in seemingly small ways such as rubber boots.

5 We can be patient and trust the ordinary priesthood of indigenous believers who pray extraordinarily for God's power, intervention and provision in their own realms of responsibility.

6 We can learn from these movements and then practice in our own networks of relationships where multiplying disciples, discovery, obedience, extraordinary prayer, and persecution become our norm instead of riding on the waves of others' success.

We definitely want to be at work where God is at work, but as the cross-cultural workers it is important we don't inadvertently stop the gears and momentum of indigenous movements. As Paul wrote, “My ambition has always been to proclaim the Good News in places where Christ has not been heard of, so as not to build on a foundation laid by someone else.” (Rom. 15:20, Good News Translation) 