

24:14 Goal



Movement engagements in every unreached people and place by 2025 (44 months)

Gaining Church-Planting Momentum During COVID-19

BY AILA TASSE

Dr. Aila Tasse is the founder and director of Lifeway Mission International (www.lifewaymi.org), a ministry that has worked among the unreached for more than 25 years. Aila trains and coaches DMM in Africa and around the world. He is part of the East Africa CPM Network and New Generations Regional Coordinator for East Africa and Southern Africa.

The social distancing and isolation related to COVID-19 brought great challenges to Disciple Making Movements around the world because movements thrive on ongoing and intensive personal interaction. But the Lord encouraged us that every crisis has a kingdom opportunity embedded. We have long believed that helping hurting people is part of being disciples as well as making disciples. Applying this principle in fresh ways demonstrated that the kingdom can still thrive in the midst of extremely bad news.

In East Africa, we faced a perfect storm that was more than just COVID-19. Prior to COVID we had severe drought in many parts of North Kenya and other places in East Africa. Then in October 2019, we experienced pouring rain and severe flooding in a week's time. Between drought and floods, everything was affected because most of the people groups are nomadic. Any animals that remained from the drought were killed by the floods.

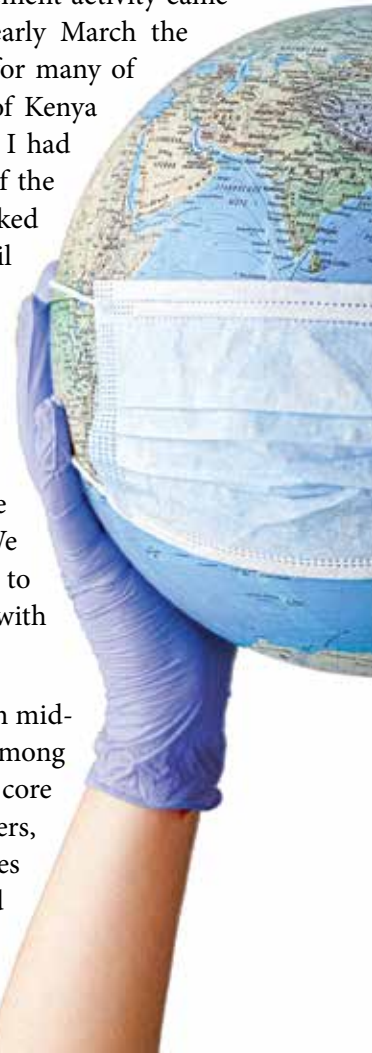
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Then in December, we started seeing locusts for the first time in our lives. The locusts came and destroyed the remaining vegetation, the animals' food and even the farms.

Toward the end of February 2020, COVID-19 hit us and right in the midst of movement activity came this series of challenges. By early March the situation was very depressing for many of our leaders. The government of Kenya was closing down the country. I had traveled to the northern part of the country at that time and got locked down there from March until August.

One of the challenges was that we couldn't travel to other parts of the country; we couldn't even engage with the people. We started thinking, "How are we going to respond to this? We need new ways to do ministry, to be able to engage." We came up with three responses.

Our first response was prayer. In mid-March we called for prayer among all our team members: our core team and our country leaders, representing all the countries where we work. We all started



praying at the same time, using WhatsApp to distribute the prayers. We prayed that God would sustain the movement, because we realized that leaders and families were suddenly losing all their sources of income. Prayer was very key for us to keep the momentum. We all started praying, especially on Tuesdays and Thursdays and we called for fasting on Wednesdays. It was a whole day of fasting every week, which still continues today.

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Second, we said, “We will engage with our team in ways that encourage them, because everybody is going through this.” We started sending texts and we assigned the leaders to their countries and regions and started encouraging them with Scriptures and asking them, “How are you doing? How are you going through this situation? What are you doing to help?” We knew that if our leaders were not encouraged, that would affect the momentum of movement. So, we set aside Fridays for calling our leaders to encourage them. The people who called them were people they did not expect. They would receive a call from somebody who had never called them before. The reason for calling was just to say, “We are in this with you and we want to encourage you.” That really helped us to stay together.

Then in April we started having Zoom meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays with all our team. In those meetings we discussed the situation, which helped keep communication flowing. When we started Zooming,

we began to grow closer through getting to see and hear each other.

Third, we said, “There must be some practical ways of engaging people during this crisis. How can we sustain what has been started?” (We are at the stage of sustaining movements. We went from starting and multiplying to sustaining.) Part of sustaining leaders, groups and churches was to help with income for pioneer church-planters since their income had disappeared. We asked, “How can we help them with food? Many families have run short of food; they cannot get access to food because Nairobi is locked down, and all our supplies to different places come there.” This led to something new. We started seeing the generosity of disciples; they started sharing the small things they had with practical love. At this point it was not how much you could share, it was just sharing the little that you had.

Neighbors started giving to their neighbors. We started seeing groups multiplying because of the practical kindness that their disciples were showing. We started receiving amazing stories of people who had just enough food for their own families, maybe for a week, yet started sharing with families that did not have anything. And mostly, those they shared with were their Muslim neighbors. This love, shown at a time when everybody was going through the same difficult challenges, helped people to open up to hearing the gospel.

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In May and June, we started asking for help. Help trickled in and by December we were able to feed over 13,500 families (a family in our context has an average of eight people). Through this, each of those families were multiplying churches.



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We did some analysis and reporting in December, as we came to the end of the year. We found that through people intentionally sharing—not only the gospel, but also sharing love—we saw multiplication of groups and churches. Any churches that had depended on meeting in a church building could not meet there. So, people started meeting in homes, and the meetings in homes started to multiply. In that area, the homes are very small; they could not fit many people. So, the home gatherings started dividing themselves into multiple homes. As a result, more neighbors, more people, and more Unreached People Groups were reached.

I looked at what has happened in the last 15 years of our movement in East Africa, and 2020 was the peak. We saw 1,300 churches planted in just that one year. This was amazing because earlier in the year, we had scaled down our goals by 30%; we said we'll trust God for 600 to 800 new churches. But God took us way beyond that, as only he can do. I could hardly believe it, as all the teams presented their data for the year. I had to see the graphs and look for myself at people group by people group.

God did this through what we call the triangle of disciple-making: loving God, loving your neighbor and making disciples. Practical love was able to open people's hearts to respond positively to the gospel. New people groups were engaged, new areas opened up and we are carrying on with that. I just came from meeting with 40 coordinators who have started processing this to determine how to build on this momentum for this year and years to come.

The Role of Learning New Technology

Before COVID-19, many of us in our context (myself included) were IT illiterate. Any mention of using Zoom for a meeting met a lot of resistance about

bandwidth. I had tried a couple of Zoom meetings, somebody would have to call me and give me instructions on how to do it. Even knowing how to turn on the microphone in zoom was very difficult. During the first meeting we held you could hear all kinds of things in the background. It was very noisy, but at least we could see each other's faces and that was exciting. We started learning platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp and others. Because of COVID we overcame that resistance, despite the challenges.

I was locked down for months in northern Kenya where the internet was extremely poor. I remember the first day of the basic DMM training. We had about 130 people joining from all over the world, and suddenly my internet stopped working. I couldn't get any signal whatsoever. So, I got in my car and started driving around, looking for a signal on my phone. Finally, at a small airstrip, I found the only signal in the whole town. People stared at me, thinking: "What is this crazy guy doing with a computer in an open field?" It was embarrassing but I was willing to do it. By the time the signal allowed me to connect again, people were already in discussion, but they were happy I could make it back. I felt so bad, because this was the first day of the training, but we did what we could to learn and be creative and find new ways of connecting.

We still prefer face-to-face for coaching and local relationships. But the way forward is using the new technology to reach people we could not reach in traditional ways.

We started recording teachings and sending them to our teams. We could do Discovery Bible Studies with all our country leaders or all our coordinators on the same platform. When we started using Zoom, we actually kept growing. We started nine weeks of basic DMM training with 115 people from around the world. We had people from India, Sri

Lanka, Indonesia, South America and all over the place. People we'd never met continued for the whole nine weeks and we ran cohorts, some of which still continue.

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We had many mission organizations and global teams bring most of their missionaries for first level training courses, second level training and leadership classes. That kept expanding way beyond East Africa. God used COVID-19 to connect us with others and become a greater blessing to the global body of Christ through our training.

We run a DMM Global Catalyst Camp every year. In October, we said, "Why don't we try doing this virtually?" We didn't know how it would turn out, but we had people from 27 countries join us for the three days of the catalyst camp. Those are some of the amazing ways God used technology to expand the boundaries of our ministry.

I expect this greater use of technology to continue. We are not looking back. We still prefer face-to-face for coaching and local relationships. But the way forward is using the new technology to reach people we could not reach in traditional ways. For example, last week I started mentoring a group of DMM catalysts on Thursday for one hour. It's not me teaching, I'm just facilitating. How could I *not* do that, now that God has provided this tool? In the past I could only meet people in Kenya or around our area. Now I am talking to a team in North India and coaching a team in Panama City—places where I've never been. We've learned through all this that we need to be creative and make use of every opportunity (including new platforms and technologies) for extending God's kingdom.

Two Lessons Learned, That We Can Carry into the Future

We've learned first that bad times can bring out good results, so we should not be discouraged by bad times. God has a way of bringing His own results in bad times. We look to God for the results because the results depend on God, not on the situations. That's why we don't allow the situations to take away what God has given to us.

Second, leaders need to be creative in facing challenges and problems. But that response should come out of prayer and dependence on God because the Holy Spirit will lead us.

In the book of Acts, we see that whenever the apostles or the church faced challenges, persecution or problems they always prayed. Sometimes we want to solve a problem we know is beyond us. As leaders, we pray to get direction from God for the next thing or for the next way to solve a problem. Even in the worst situations, the Holy Spirit can show a creative way forward. 📌

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