Fruitful Practices: What Does the Research Suggest?

Paradigms and Praxis
Part I: Social Networks and Fruitfulness in Church Planting

by Andrea Gray and Leith Gray

Background

I n the Spring of 2008 we (the authors) were asked to take part in the Fruitful Practices Research Fellowship, an important interagency research project tasked with determining "fruitful practices" in church planting among Muslims. We were assigned to analyze 33 of the 115 interviews that had been conducted at a major consultation of church planters among Muslims the previous spring in Southeast Asia. We used an inductive approach in our analysis based on Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which had the goal of assessing what were "fruitful practices" among church planters, and how workers identify such practices and adopt them. This paper is based on the analysis we submitted to the Fruitful Practices research team.

Practices Versus Paradigms

When the cross-cultural workers in this study were asked about what is fruitful in their ministry, they usually responded with a description of practices. Consider, for example, the following excerpts from interviews with cross-cultural workers (emphasis ours):

> I find that *to be culturally appropriate* was a key to begin to share with the people and the people beginning to trust in me. (Interview #18)

> I was *modeling the lifestyle of Jesus*, and one of the women's brothers–in–law became a believer. (#23)

> And again, some of the people were semi-literate, and many of the women were illiterate, so we also thought through that. We were really pressed to do that because of the [oppressive regime]. It took a lot of work to really think, "How am I going *to teach this book, by using something around*–a fruit or something?" So that kind of challenged us to do that, in those circumstances, but… they could multiply it, they could remember it and each person could teach another person. (#88)

> …this was the point when we really noticed the importance of *working in the heart language*… (#31)

While most workers[1] did not explicitly relate their practices to a wider paradigm, some did. These workers vary in the degree to which they express the "big picture" issues—from basic expressions of the ideas behind their work to

Leith and Andrea Gray work in West Asia, where Leith has been since the late 1980s. They are involved in training local and cross-cultural co-workers on how to present the message of Christ creatively and incarnationally in local contexts.

fully developed philosophies of ministry. In the examples below, notice how the workers offer support for their philosophies (marked with our emphasis):

> I don't like to think of evangelism and discipleship as separate entities. I think of it as a continuum. *I base that in part on what Jesus did.* (#13)

> We just see that if you can help people remain in their natural network of relationships, *this is really a key passage for us, it's Matthew 5:14-16*, especially verse 15. [Jesus] says, "No one takes a lamp and puts it under the… table, but he puts it on top of the lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house." So we do not extract people from their Muslim background. In fact, we encourage them to remain. (#7)

> …at this point *because we are very sensitive to the insider approach*, we're not trying to Christianize anybody, we're not trying to make a person a Christian. We're trying to get them to have a personal experience with the living God. We simply at that point in time will challenge the person to go to God himself to find out what he wants them to do about this man called Jesus. (#77)

In the above examples, workers identify an activity or an attitude that they consider to be fruitful, and then they offer support for their approach based on a philosophy (often, though not always, with a Scriptural foundation).
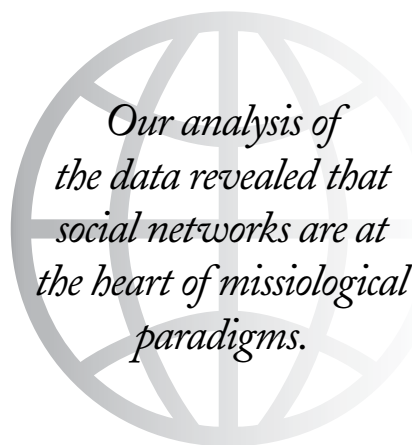
Two Major Models

Our analysis of the data revealed that social networks are at the heart of missiological paradigms. The practices a worker engages in seem to be determined by his or her view or mental model of what the church is and the relationship between the church, the gospel and the local community. Although the workers in this study speak of practices rather than models, they are influenced by their models, whether they are aware of it or not. We have found that there are two main models of church that workers are influenced by, what we

call the Attractional Model and the Transformational Model.

Attractional Model

We borrow the terminology of the Attractional Model from Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in their insightful book on missions strategy, *The Shaping of Things to Come.* As they note, an Attractional approach to church planting is reminiscent of the famous line in the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, "If you build it, they will come." An Attractional model is characterized by a view of the church

Our analysis of the data revealed that social networks are at the heart of missiological paradigms.

as a community of followers of Christ who are brought together by their common allegiance to Christ, whether or not they share other features in common or have a natural relationship with each other. Workers influenced by this model seek to set up a network of believers (i.e., a "church") that is parallel to, and separate from, social networks that already exist in a community. In many cases, a church building or other location of gathering is a prominent feature in the discussion of fruitfulness. The following are examples of situations in which the church is set up as a new community parallel to the existing community:

> We have in our fellowship of believers about 4 or 5 men who are having regular discipleship, who [now] know each other, meet with each other but are generally very fearful, so they are not willing to be very much of a witness in their own community. (#103)

Initially, it's usually one on one but after a significant period of time with the consent of the others, if I'm convinced that they are growing, moving down the path toward faith, with the permission of the others I would invite them to join in the group of other brothers we have who meet together. (#13)

Transformational Model

Workers operating under a Transformational model consider that the church in a particular community will ideally be an existing social network that has been transformed by Christ. These workers often share the gospel and engage in discipleship activities with a group of people who are already connected with each other. In other cases, they evangelize and disciple believers individually, while actively promoting factors that will allow that individual to continue sharing his or her faith with friends and relatives along normal relational lines. In this model, the church building or location of gathering is not prominent in the discussion. If it is mentioned, it is mentioned in passing. The "church" meets when and where the normal social network gathers. The following are examples of how some workers express the transformational model:

> From the very beginning, trying to facilitate a transformation of community, not a transformation of single individuals but an already existing community… (#104)

> What we find is if we can keep the gospel pure, and if… it can be communicated in a Muslim-friendly fashion, it will just naturally move through natural networks of relationships. (#7)

In interview #82, the worker explicitly expresses his view of the church as the transformation of an existing social network.

> Another important thing, and I heard this from someone else who has experience in South Asia, he said what they were seeing was something similar in their area. He said,

"Don't think of it like we have to now build a parallel structure."

Wow, that helped crystallize [it] for me. OK, because if it's growing along naturally, if it's growing within [the people group], kind of like Cornelius….(#82)

This worker goes on to apply this idea to leadership:

Our idea, we think "church plant," and you have to have a plurality of elders…and it's not happening like that. It's doing terrific. It's going along existing ways of gathering. (#82)

Transitional State

Many workers do not simply follow one or the other of these models, but find themselves in a transitional state, or a state of paradigm shift. In our data we found that many workers recognize the importance of social networks, including discipleship of those who are not yet believers, but they have not yet come to see their practices as part of a whole, derived from a holistic vision or model. Furthermore, they recognize the benefit of the gospel moving through social networks, but they do not reflect on what would encourage or hinder the movement of the gospel through these networks.

How Workers Express the Concept of Social Networks

The Transformational Model and Social Networks

Workers operating under the Transformational Model make explicit reference to social networks (emphasis ours in examples below):

We've really seen that by presenting Jesus in this way or the gospel this way really allows the Muslim to see Jesus rather than Western Christianity, which they're repulsed by. And secondly, it leaves the believer on the inside where he or she, their life can be like yeast; it can transform in the mainstream, on the inside. And we can see real *movement of the gospel through relational networks* that way. That's what we're really seeing

and trusting God for more and more of that. (#108)

And so in [our friend's] family, his mother trusted Jesus and his sisters trusted Jesus and some of his other friends have trusted Jesus. And so we see that the gospel comes as long as we don't extract it. Then *the gospel continues to flow to the families*. (#43)

Some workers who have adopted the Transformational Model do not even like to call themselves church planters:

Let me just start by saying, the last couple of years [we] have begun to really not call ourselves church planters anymore. We feel it's most accurate for us to use the term gospel planter, or gospel seed planter. And, because we feel that we're not planting the gospel from the outside. Rather, we're planting the seed of the gospel and as it grows and bears fruit, communities of faithful followers of Jesus are forming. We're seeing that, but they are *forming to already existing patterns of gathering within that context*. So it's less of the model of "We're planting the church, then we have to see who the elders are… and what about stewardship and things like that?" Because it's just natural, *it's flowing along natural family lines*. (#82)

After we completed our initial analysis of this data for the Fruitful Practices team, we were fascinated to discover that our colleague Rebecca Lewis has come to similar conclusions about the importance of transformed social networks (2007). (See also her article "Insider Movements: Honoring God-given Identity and Community" on pp. 33–36 of this *IJFM* issue.) Like many of the workers whose case studies we listened to, Lewis rejects the term "church planting" when talking about promoting movements to Christ within natural communities or social networks. She prefers to use the term "implanting" to refer to this process.

Another useful example of a worker who operates under the Transformational Model and who explicitly talks about social networks is found in interview #79. This worker emphasizes the importance of relationships.

Our message is fundamentally relational. Mankind's relationship with God, but also it's communally based. We don't extract individuals from their relational networks and share God's good news with them. We have them share the good news with each other in the context of relationships. (#79)

This worker describes the process of reading the Scriptures with local people who were not yet believers. Even at the beginning of the process when they were studying the story of creation, the local people in the study group realized that God was calling them to a degree of change. The worker tied this idea of obedience into the concept of social relationships.

If we actually trust them, because they are communally oriented, there is automatic accountability to some degree… They realize that their behavior has to have at least some correspondence to other people's expectations. So if the community is agreeing that we're called to change, then there's actually a bit of social pressure in a good way to change. (#79)

Not only does this worker recognize the importance of social networks, he also reflects on what would keep the gospel flowing through social networks. In the following excerpt, he mentions a practical study of the Bible without making the message seem culturally Christian:

Once they start having such a practical discussion of the Word of God, where there's both learning and expectation to follow God in certain and clear ways, they get excited and they do automatically just share it with other people.

Many workers do not simply follow one or the other of these models, but find themselves in a transitional state, or a state of paradigm shift.

And because it's not Christian in some [way], whatever they understand that to be. It just seems like they've discussed the will of God. They're not in any way embarrassed to discuss that with other people. (#79)

This worker identifies obedience to God's will as being central to better relationships. For example, he tells of many people whose marriages improved during the course of a practical study of the Scriptures in the context of community. He further develops his model by contrasting his approach to a model that emphasizes beliefs over obedience.

This is in contrast with the Western model that many times we present a cognitive message, that is a set of beliefs that we tell people you need to believe in and there is no sense that God is demanding change now…. It creates a very different sense of interacting with the Word. And they have a sense that it is not just for them; that other people are supposed to be obedient and so it helps with accountability. It helps with many things because it builds that into the DNA, the fundamental concept of what it means to follow God. (#79)

The worker also shows an ability to analyze why believers are not afraid to share within their social networks, for example, drawing on concepts of empowerment and shame and honor:

It's almost natural for them to feel comfortable to feel that they can go somewhere else and start a discussion and help that group choose leaders… And I think another aspect of the leaders being chosen from the beginning is that the way they're interacting is just the way people would interact in some kind of group of friends or family to begin with. So there's no kind of foreign or intimidating dynamics that tend to contribute to shame or fear. (#79)

It is interesting that this worker talks about practices—such as reading the Scriptures, empowering local leaders, encouraging believers in evangelism—just as much as other workers, but

whenever he talks about practices, he places them firmly in the context of a bigger picture or model or paradigm.

The Attractional Model and Social Networks

Workers operating under the Attractional Model do not usually talk about existing social networks. While these workers tend to emphasize evangelism, they also express their concern for community and fellowship in terms of gathering individual believers into a new group. In interview #37, we can see an example of a team that had been

When the workers leave, the believers have little motivation to continue meeting.
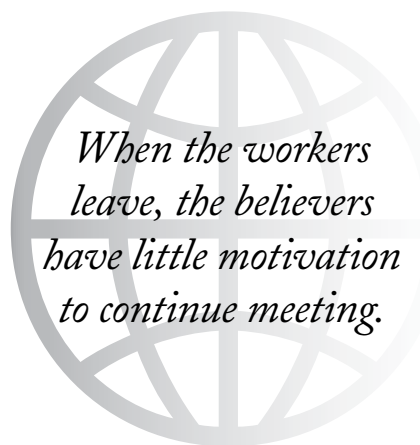
sharing with various individuals over the years, gathered them into fellowships, and now is wondering how to get them to meet on their own, apart from the expatriate workers.

…at least six months before we left, we started encouraging them to think about meeting on their own. None of them [was] married, so they didn't have homes to meet in; at least they couldn't openly meet in homes, but we said they needed to find places, whether it's in a café or on a beach or out in the sticks… but somewhere. (#37)

It is worth noting that in this case none of the believers is married. It seems that each individual believer is from a separate social network, and each has a relationship with the expatriate workers, but not with each other. Thus, when the workers leave the believers have little motivation to continue meeting. This worker recognized that there was a problem with

dependency on expatriate workers for organizing, leading and even hosting the fellowship, but he did not express any awareness of a lack of natural relationships among the believers as being the underlying problem. Later on in the interview, he even mentions the lack of strong family ties in the city to be an advantage in evangelism and church planting.

Most of the believers are in the capital city, and in the city it's a much more cosmopolitan feel, and it's quite secular compared to other Muslim cities…. In rural [areas] it's a different story altogether, and the family culture is far stronger and much more traditional. (#37)

In interview #73, a worker describes a church planting situation in which an enthusiastic and talented team of expatriate workers were able to gather together several believers:

Things were quite slow at the beginning, it was a very slow beginning; it took several years. They started seeing people come to faith, believers gathering… *often it was young, single men, often unemployed, kind of those on the fringes of society*, but they were gathering together. (#73, emphasis ours)

Over a period of years this church went through a series of ups and downs, and the workers tried various practices, from mass evangelism to building a prominent church building. Eventually, the church grew to about fifty members, with a high member turnover rate and financial dependency on churches overseas. At the end of the interview, the worker brings up the topic of social networks:

Sharing within their social networks, that's an area that we've seen that didn't exist early in the church. Early in the church people were willing to go and share their faith with strangers, but their fear kept them from sharing it to the people closest to them. Many people in the church have overcome that fear now and are quite active in sharing in their family, in sharing with their co-workers, in their social

networks, and that's a positive step forward. (#73)

The interview abruptly ends there, with no further reflection on why people might have been hesitant to share with their networks in the past, or why they are now not afraid. The worker acknowledges that sharing within the social networks is a positive step forward, but does not emphasize it at all and it certainly was not a consideration in the team's decision to try the many various practices that they tried.

The Transitional State and Social Networks

What about those who are in the transitional state between models or paradigms? A helpful example of a worker who has engaged in some reflection and experimented with going beyond conventional categories, but who does not articulate a fully formed model, is the worker in interview #13. This worker was quoted above as saying that he doesn't believe in the conventional division between evangelism and discipleship. In other words, he recognizes the importance of encouraging local people to share the gospel with others in their social network, even before they themselves have made a full faith commitment to following Jesus.

Yet, while this worker recognizes the importance of people sharing the message in their social network, he does not reflect on what would facilitate this sharing. Consider two more excerpts from interview #13:

> And so another thing we've done is to just focus on reading the Scripture. So we just take someone, and *if reading the Scripture turns them off, then so be it*…. (#13 emphasis ours)

> Some haven't responded well and you know, some of them struggle and probably some drop out for that reason. But I think if they are really interested and they're serious about it, that won't hold them back. (#13)

There seems to be an underlying assumption that if the seeker is offended by the Bible, then it is

There seems to be an underlying assumption that if the seeker is offended by the Bible, then it is because of his or her hardness of heart.

because of his or her hardness of heart. The worker does not consider other possible reasons such as the use of unfamiliar or ecclesiastical terminology, use of a literacy-based versus an oral approach, missing background information that leads to misunderstandings of the Scriptural passage, or worldview issues such as shame/honor and individual versus group orientation. The worker acknowledges that some of the Muslim seekers will struggle with the message and the implications of meeting with the foreigner, but he doesn't try to find any way to alleviate their struggle or help them through it. Indeed, while this worker recognizes the importance of men talking about the Biblical message with their families, the approach he unconsciously follows in planting a believing community is one that calls an individual to join an aggregation of individual believers who are, as it were, "glued" together:

> …if I'm convinced that they are growing, moving down the path toward faith, with the permission of the others I would invite them to join in the group of other brothers we have who meet together. (#13)

But why has this worker questioned some of the conventional categories in missions to the extent that he has? From the interview, it appears that he has spent several years reading the Bible with many different Muslims. He describes one such experience:

> It took the utmost of discipline to sit there and keep my mouth shut. I wanted to tell him, "Pray this prayer." Why should he do that? So we just read. And I kept wanting to tell him to do something….

> …We finished that, went to other books, went back to Genesis, read Genesis. But I never told him to do anything. But at some point, nearly two years into it, I asked him, what

have you understood? What do you believe? I never had him pray a sinner's prayer or do the four spiritual laws or the bridge.

> "Jesus died for my sins, I'm a sinner. Jesus died for my sins." He just wandered into the kingdom following Jesus. There was no [sinner's prayer or similar techniques]. That was a rather different case, but the power of the Scriptures, just getting people into the Scriptures, *it was an eye opener to me* again. (#13, emphasis ours)

While this worker follows an Attractional model by emphasizing gathering unrelated believers together, he has begun to question some of his previously-held ideas because of his extensive experience of reading the Bible with Muslims. *If we were to point to one practice above all that would lead workers to reflect on their practices in light of a bigger picture, it would be sitting down and reading the Scriptures with Muslims.* And not just to teach—to learn as well.

Why Is It Important for Church Planting Workers to Reflect on Their Practices in Light of Paradigms or Models?

Understanding the big picture helps workers to be consistently fruitful. We discovered from many of the interviews that without reflection, workers may stumble upon practices that encourage transformed social networks or be forced by circumstances to adopt fruitful practices. However, if they don't have the big picture, there are no overriding principles that direct them, and they will most likely drift away from these fruitful practices once their circumstances change to allow previous practices again. One example of a situation where circumstances led to practices that turned out to be fruitful is interview #75. The worker begins the interview

by discussing some of the limitations they had to deal with in their church planting efforts.

> Large groups could not meet whether men or women…. It was dangerous for [local people] to meet with foreigners, and foreigners to meet with them, and so forth. (#75)

Because of these limitations, the cross-cultural workers were very careful about giving out Bibles or initiating evangelistic discussions with local people. The team realized that they would not be able to share openly with a lot of people and so they developed a strategy to encourage local believers to share with their family and friends.

> One of the things that we did was, all the people that I'd disciple, from the beginning [when] they came to Christ, we would [ask], "If somebody asked you what it is to become a Christian, well, what do you say?" So we helped them, in a very simple form, to be able to lead somebody to Christ. And they themselves understood that as well, from the very beginning. And we always prayed, from the very beginning, [for] five people that they want to reach, [and for] the opportunity for them to share. (#75)
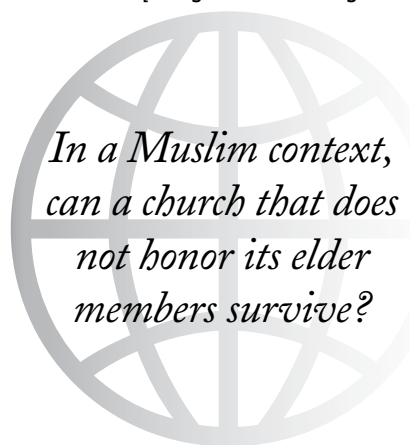
This strategy led to one local man sharing in his social network. Because of the dangers in the local situation, the expatriate worker was limited in his contact with all of the believers. However, this turned out to be a positive thing that led to the gospel spreading naturally through social networks and natural leaders emerging. The expatriate worker baptized one believer and then the believers began baptizing each other.

The groups of believers continued to grow, which is certainly a cause for rejoicing! However, the worker does not reflect on the dynamics that would facilitate the gospel spreading through natural social relationships. When it happens, he is enthusiastic, but he doesn't consider *why* it is happening or what might help it continue to happen. In the course of the interview, the worker describes many practices his

team employs and they seem to bear much fruit. However, because of the lack of a framework to put these practices into, and the lack of reflection on social networks, some unfortunate situations develop.

For example, the worker describes a traditional form of poetry that the believers began to use in their meetings. Usually it was the older men who would compose and recite poetry expressing their faith in Christ.

> But the problem was, two of the believers of that family started to work with an NGO [non-governmental organization] that was foreign. And the NGO that was foreign was Christian. And they started, they came in during this freedom time, not during the [time of the oppressive regime], and they introduced the guitar. And when the workers would go to work, they had their devotion, and they brought their guitar, and they were translating choruses, English choruses…. They would tell the [young believers], "Translate it into [the local language]! Translate it!"
>
> So the young men, they would come to the group [of local believers] and they'd give them the guitar, and they were trying to tell them "Let's sing this song," but nobody could sing it. And the young people… it was horrible. And my wife, and our hearts were just broken. And I didn't feel, I didn't know how to deal with that situation. Should I say no, or…
>
> Well, after that the older people said, "We need the young people to lead us." And they stopped writing [the traditional poetry], and they

In a Muslim context, can a church that does not honor its elder members survive?

> stopped writing that metered way and they–and it was so sad. And I would sit with the older men and say, "Please, please do it. Please do it." And they said "No, that's not the way. This is now the way." And we were just torn. (#75)

At first glance, this situation does not seem to have anything to do with social networks. However, upon further reflection we can see some important social dynamics going on. In this inter-generational group of believers, the old men are suddenly alienated from the group. Their form of worship is no longer accepted and implicitly, their prestige within the group has diminished. We can see this from their admission, "This is now the way." In a Muslim context, can a church that does not honor its elder members survive? Is a church that is dependent on foreign forms of worship sustainable? These are some of the broader questions cross-cultural workers who are looking at the big picture might ask in such a situation.

Would a well-formed paradigm that includes an emphasis on social networks have helped this worker better deal with his situation? The worker admits "our hearts were just broken" and "we were just torn." It seems that the worker was torn between interfering too much in the local believers' meetings and watching them follow a direction that was not in their best interests. A reflection on the importance of social networks might have helped him to realize that the church would not be likely to grow when older men were marginalized and the community began to adopt foreign forms of worship. He may not have been able to prevent the situation, but he would be better equipped to know when and how to "interfere" and how to explain to the local believers the reason for his hesitation about adopting the guitar-led translated praise songs.

When Workers Don't Consider Social Networks, God Does!

In some cases expatriate workers may actually work unwittingly against the

gospel flowing through social networks. However, God occasionally causes a miracle to occur (such as a healing or a dream or vision) that keeps the gospel moving through the network. Interview #22 is a good example of this.

The workers referred to in this interview began working with a new believer whom they refer to as "Alice." Alice is a young teenager who is not literate. Being young, female and non-literate, Alice would not normally be considered a person of influence in her social network.

> When she accepted the Lord, her family cut all relationships with her. Before she came to the Lord, she was a very strong character, and because she became a Christian, society saw her as a bad woman. (#22)

However, in spite of her marginalized status, the workers felt that her strong personality, her boldness in evangelism and her commitment to prayer indicated leadership potential. Therefore, they began to invest a great amount of time in her spiritual and leadership formation.

When Alice's nephew, whom she had been praying for, came to faith in Christ, Alice's sister had her put in jail. Soon afterwards, however, God stepped in with a miracle in response to Alice's faith:

> When this sister became very sick, Alice went to visit her and asked if she could pray in the name of Jesus because He could heal her. Her sister said yes and Alice prayed, and her sister was healed. Because of this, the rest of the family became believers. They were baptized and began studying the Scriptures. (#22)

It is interesting to note that in this interview, the worker does not mention social networks at all. When asked about what made this situation fruitful, she says it is because she focused on leadership training. There is no indication that she is aware of the significance of the whole family coming to faith in Christ. She simply

Since the workers in this incident did not recognize the importance of the gospel spreading through social networks, they did not encourage it to happen.

places it in the same category and assigns it the same importance as other scattered individuals who have come to faith through Alice's evangelistic efforts.

However, what is most interesting is that even though the worker is not aware of the importance of social networks, Alice is. She had been praying for her sister and her nephew since the worker had first met her. And in response to her step of faith in praying for her sister, God answered her prayers and this supernatural event led to the rest of the family becoming believers. Unfortunately, since the workers in this incident did not recognize the importance of the gospel spreading through social networks, they did not encourage it to happen. Worse, in such a situation they are likely to hinder any significant transformation of social networks.

Another situation in which God used a supernatural event to help the gospel spread through social networks is interview #18. This scenario is related by a woman who is working, together with her husband, in Central Asia.

After about three years of lifestyle evangelism and modeling faith, a friend of the expatriate family came to faith in Christ through a dream. His wife noticed the change in the new believer's life, but she herself did not want to become a Christian. The worker tries to encourage her by recounting her own testimony.

> …they were thinking that I was all my life a Christian. And I said, "No, I was before another religion. But when I know Jesus, he's the way and I make a decision, my life changed."
>
> [The wife of the believer asked] "You changed the religion"?
>
> "Well, I changed my Lord and now I'm here."

And she said, "I can do that?" Because she was thinking that because she was born a Muslim she can't change. But this day she doesn't want to make any decision. She only listened.

> And then the next day she came to me, "You know, I saw difference in my husband." (Before he was very aggressive, and he was beating her and the children and he was angry at everything). "And now he doesn't do that, he doesn't beat me. But no, I'm afraid. I'm born Muslim and I can't change. And no and no." (#18)

Because this worker considers that the church must be set up as a network parallel to the existing networks in the society, she emphasizes the importance of her friend changing religions. She does not attempt to explain life in Christ in any other way. Finally, she realizes that her friend is not going to accept changing religions of her own accord and so she turns to prayer.

> [We said] "This is work for the Holy Spirit because you see how your husband changed and you don't want to accept that [the reason he changed] is because now he is a Christian. But you want your old style life. It's your decision. But now you know." And when she left, [we prayed]. (#18)

At this point, God answers the prayers of the workers by sending a dream to the woman who then believes in Jesus. The woman's sister then becomes a believer and the gospel begins to spread quickly through their social networks. At that point, the interviewer asks the worker, "So do I hear you right that it was actually a family network that you were able to work in that case?"

The worker responds, "Yes, that was one of them." And then goes on to talk about a completely different topic. She doesn't seem to be aware of the importance of the gospel spreading through social networks. It is almost

as if in this case, the gospel moving through social networks happened by accident, and it was not considered any more significant than if the same number of unrelated individuals had come to Christ.

What about Contextualization?

In the interviews we analyzed, many workers make reference to contextualization in various ways, including reference to "insider" approaches or the C-scale. How do they relate contextualization to their broader philosophy of ministry? How do they relate it to their understanding of social networks?

In order to answer these questions, it is instructive to look at the chart in Figure 1, where we identify which workers interviewed identified themselves either implicitly or explicitly with an insider or contextualized approach. The interview numbers in bold are those in which the cross-cultural worker either self-identified as using an insider or C5 approach, or in which there was significant evidence from the interview that the worker was using such an approach.[2]

Contextualization as a Key to Transforming Social Networks

All of the interviewees that have a fully-developed paradigm that deals with social networks are following an insider approach, whether they use this label or not. Perhaps this is because these church-planting workers are thinking about what

would encourage the gospel to flow through social networks. In these situations, the workers are not so much concerned with outward forms of contextualization such as the length of one's beard, whether women wear chadors, or whether believers continue to go to the mosque. These workers are more concerned with contextualization *at the level of world-view and identity*.

> So in many ways, it's not so much about contextualization, that's the issue–how contextualized are you? [What's] more important for us, at least in our context, is really thinking through "what is the Church?" What does it mean to plant the gospel seed, and then for the churches to be formed? (#82)

The workers cited in this interview are not so much concerned about how specific forms look, but rather concerned that the church that emerges in their context is truly the result of the intersection of gospel and community.

A powerful example of contextualizing at the level of worldview occurs in interview #41. The worker describes a woman coming to their team, desiring to learn more about Jesus. However, she is afraid because she knows of another woman in her village who had been ostracized after converting to the local Christian church.

> [The seeker said,] "And now nobody in the village will speak to [this other woman who converted], because they see that she has turned away

from her [local] culture and traditions–who we are as [a people]."

> And so, she said, "I'm beginning to understand about Jesus. I think it's the same as this woman. But, is this what's going to happen to me?" (#41)

This woman was concerned about whether there would be a conflict between becoming a follower of Christ and being a loyal member of her own culture. Fortunately, the team was sensitive to the struggle she was facing and effectively used a passage from the Qur'an to encourage her to seek guidance from God.

> We began to share [from the Qur'an], "'If you fear Allah, and obey me,' Jesus said, 'you'll be on the straight way.'" We showed her later on how the Qur'an says the disciples of Isa al-Masih are the true disciples, they are the true Muslims. It's what it says, the disciples of Isa al-Masih are the true Muslims.

> So we said, "Be a true Muslim. Follow Isa al-Masih as the Qur'an says." And so she's remained that way. Her husband has put his faith in Isa al-Masih. And her husband and [she] are becoming real leaders in their village. She may become the next superintendent of the school, because she has such an excellent reputation. Nobody has ostracized her, just the opposite. They've embraced her. (#41)

We can see here the relationship between a culturally appropriate way of sharing the gospel and the gospel spreading through social networks. Because the team shared with this

	Expresses practices in terms of fully-thought-out paradigm or model	Thinks beyond practices, but has not formulated full model	Does not express practices in terms of any model
Attractional Model			18, 22, 23, 37, 89, 90, 103, 73, 92, 97
Transformational Model	**3, (7, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44), 76, 79, 82, 106, 108**	104	
Transitional state	**77**	13, **29, 52, 53**	88, 102, 75
Unable to determine from data			31, 107

Table 1: Worker Model and Awareness of Model.

woman appropriately, she is able to share her faith appropriately with others in her sphere of influence. The key lesson we can draw from this interview and several like it is that when the message is contextualized at the level of identity and worldview, and is therefore portrayed as something that will strengthen the social network, rather than tear it down, it is more likely to be embraced.

Contextualization without Fully Considering Social Networks

Interview #77 is an interesting case. We placed this interview in the transitional state category, even though the worker clearly expresses a Transformational model of church. This is because there is one important element that differentiates this interview from other interviews that fall in the transformed social network category. In these other interviews, the focus is on transforming an entire social network. However, in interview #77, the worker seems to focus on the individual believer:

> But if I allow him to stay in his community, and help him to grow and understand the truths of Christ in a true discipleship format, including how to share his faith, then he is a far more effective evangelist, as a Muslim, than I ever will be. (#77)

This worker is part of a team that employs an insider methodology, usually using a study of the "seven signs" in the Qur'an that connect with the Bible and ultimately point to Christ.[3] This approach to discipleship has led to many Muslims coming to faith in Christ in a short period of time, which certainly is an extraordinary feat. However, when we look more closely at the situation, we can see that the worker is still trying to bring believers together who do not have anything in common except their relationship to the expatriate worker.

> We have a small group of believers and the next step is to make them into a so-called church. What does that mean? What does that look like

*D*oes discipleship that takes place in English, rather than the local language, send the message that the gospel is relevant for the whole community?

in our environment? So that's where we're at now, is to figure out how to get to the next step. (#77)

It doesn't seem from this interview that the believers are related to one another. Some of the believers bring their friends to the Bible studies and social events, but unlike in some of the other interviews in which the cross-cultural worker encourages the believers themselves to become involved in discipling others, in this situation, the expatriate worker remains the teacher and the one who binds the group together.

> And they're constantly bringing unbelievers to us, introducing us to unbelievers who are getting to know us and are getting comfortable hanging with us and with our believers. And so as we continue to grow and develop, the unbelievers come to us, "Hey can you meet with me and can you share with me and do these things?" We've got one of our believers, he's bringing two unbelievers to my home every week now because of that. So we'll pretty much on a weekly basis have some kind of social event. (#77)

Although it is certainly a positive thing that so many men have come to faith in Christ and that some of them are also bringing their friends to be discipled by the expatriate worker, this situation is lacking the potential for growth it might have if the gospel were transforming existing social networks. Why is the gospel not moving through social networks in any significant way? It is hard to answer that question definitively based on just one interview, but we can deduce some possible explanations.

First, even though the worker is talking about allowing an individual to remain within his social networks, he does not speak in terms of transforming an entire social network. Second, there are some characteristics of the

Seven Signs study itself that might make it difficult to reproduce in family situations.

One thing that makes the Seven Signs study difficult to reproduce is that the discipleship conducted by this team is done in English. While the people being discipled appear to be highly educated and therefore highly proficient in English, can we assume that they will know how to transfer what they have learned into their own language to share with their families? We should also ask the question, does discipleship that takes place in English, rather than the local language, send the message that the gospel is relevant for the *whole community*, rather than just the individual believer? It is also worth exploring issues of literacy and oral versus literate communication preference when addressing the question of whether men can easily share the spiritual insights they gained from a literature-based study with less educated friends and family members. These would be important areas for further research.

It is significant to note that in interview #3, the workers discovered that female followers of Christ from a Muslim background were not interested in sharing from the Qur'an as a bridge to the Bible. Furthermore, women in the community did not seem to be moved by such a strategy. The expatriate workers found chronological or situational Bible storying to be more effective among women. This may or may not be the case in the setting of interview #77, but it is worth investigating.

The importance of discipling whole families, including a significant number of women, can be seen from some patterns we observed from our analysis of the interviews. When the first believer was a female, the

gospel often spread quickly through her social networks. When the first believer was a man who shared with his mother or sister, the gospel also spread quickly. In the case of a man sharing with his wife, a super-natural event often was needed to convince the wife. Finally, when the first believer was a man who shared with other men, the group of believers resembled an aggre-gate of "glued-together" individuals until there was a breakthrough of several related women coming to faith in Christ. Even in areas where strict gender-segregation was prac-ticed and enforced by an oppressive regime, natural social networks in the community included women and when these social networks were transformed by Christ, they were stronger and showed more potential for growth than was the case in situ-ations where the fellowships included only men.

While contextualization is a highly debated topic in church planting circles, our analysis of these inter-views indicates that contextualization in and of itself is not the chief factor in the formation of church planting movements. It appears from the interviews we analyzed that contextualization is effective only insofar as it supports a trans-formational model of church. We also found that contextualization of external practices (e.g., grow-ing a beard) was less important than contextualization at the level of worldview (including language, terminology, group identity, and the application of the Bible's teachings to real life).

Conclusion

We have seen that church planting workers tend to choose their mission strategies based on their view of what the church is. Some workers follow an Attractional model, in which the church is a structure that is paral-lel to existing social networks in the community. On the mission field, such workers share the gospel with

many different individuals and then gather them together into a "church" to which they gradually invite others from the surrounding community.

Other workers view the church as the transformation of existing social networks. On the mission field, such workers share the gospel with a community of people who already know each other, and that group gradually grows in knowledge of the Bible and obedience to Christ. In cases when such workers share the gospel with an individual, they carefully choose their practices to

> *When the first believer was a female, the gospel often spread quickly through her social networks.*

facilitate the spreading of the gospel message through the seeker's exist-ing social networks even before that person becomes a believer. Many other workers are in a transitional state in which they borrow strategies from the Transformational paradigm without having developed a complete paradigm or philosophy of ministry in relation to the practices they have found fruitful.

Why are many workers making a switch from an Attractional model of establishing a church to a Transformational model of plant-ing gospel seeds? In Part II of this paper we will look at the theoretical frameworks of social network theory, paradigm shift and the missional church movement to see how our analysis relates to the big picture of church planting in established church contexts and on the mission field. **IJFM**

References Cited

Frost, Michael and Alan Hirsch
   2003 *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
Glaser, Barney and Anselm Strauss
   1967 *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.
Lewis, Rebecca
   2007 Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities. *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24:2, 75-76.

Endnotes

[1] We use the term "worker" as a short form for a church planting practitioner ministering in a cross-cultural context. We use the term church planting throughout this paper, even though some work-ers following the transformed network model prefer not to refer to themselves as church planters.

[2] The numbers on the chart given between parentheses represent interviews from the same church planting team and context.

[3] The *Seven Signs* are seven prophets mentioned in the Qur'an as being signs from God. These are (1) the sign of Adam, (2) the sign of Noah, (3) the sign of Abra-ham, (4) the sign of Moses, (5) the sign of David, (6) the sign of Jonah, (7) the sign of Jesus.