

# Fruitful Practices: What Does the Research Suggest?

## Seven Themes of Fruitfulness

by *Eric Adams, Don Allen and Bob Fish*

Jesus also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29, NIV)

**A**s we gazed across a stunted field of corn along the edge of a dust-choked village in southern Africa, it was difficult not to compare with images of lush wheat fields on the farms of Punjab, stalks heavy with harvest. What accounts for the stunning contrast between these two images? Possible reasons abound, ranging from the cultural to the scientific. But the simplest is that one farmer has the capacity to master the conditions to ensure an optimal harvest, while the other possesses only a fraction of this ability.

The wind of the Spirit is scattering seed across the Muslim world today. Some of this seed develops only into a stunted harvest, some, however, to a lush bounty. As God's harvest laborers, we have been commissioned to nurture this seed and to learn what the Father is doing in order to better participate in his kingdom work. How can we be good stewards of what the Lord is doing in order to enhance fruitfulness?

In March 2007, a group of 300 practitioners met for five days in Southeast Asia to discuss what the Spirit is doing as they seek to facilitate communities of Jesus-followers among Muslims. This consultation represented a network of 34 agencies with members in the Muslim world. Their purpose: to explore the practices that they have learned from watching the Father—practices which seem to contribute to lasting fruit, or, more specifically, those that contribute significantly to the formation

### *Seven Themes of Fruitfulness*

- Fluency
- Storying
- Reputation
- Social Networks
- Scripture Use
- Intentional Reproduction
- Prayer

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*The authors are members of the Fruitful Practices Taskforce, which is a collaborative, multi-agency network of missiologists who are studying effective field practitioners and how God is working through them. Through this they identify and publicize practices that are demonstrably "fruitful" in facilitating faith movements among Muslim peoples.*

of communities of faith. Those meetings, which included surveys, small group discussions and interviews, resulted in a distillation of experience. Our subsequent analysis<sup>1</sup> of this rich deposit yields deep insights for those who work to see viable communities of Jesus' followers among Muslim peoples. While all of these themes of fruitfulness have been richly documented before,<sup>2</sup> this research confirms their effectiveness within Muslim contexts based on the experience of practitioners.

So, how do we cooperate with the Father in the process of establishing communities of Jesus' followers in the Muslim world? What is our part

in his plan to raise up communities of faith? This paper describes seven strong themes which appear to significantly correlate with fruitfulness.<sup>3</sup>

These seven themes emerged in an inductive study of our data and our participants. We compared the technical statistics from our survey and key themes from the 115 interviews we conducted with fruitful workers (those who established at least one fellowship). We then highlighted those themes (such as orality and social networks) which are crucial for fostering movements, but are sometimes overlooked by western workers. Here, then, are these seven themes.

## 1. Sharing the Hope within: Fluency

Two of the strongest associations with fruitfulness are that the workers are ministering in the local or "heart language"<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) of the people to whom they were called, and that teams include at least one person who is highly fluent in the ministry language (see Figure 3). While some participants noted that some workers seem to communicate effectively while speaking in a trade or regional language, the qualitative analysis indicates there was a far more likely chance of seeing mature fruit and/or multiplication of communities of faith when the gospel is proclaimed in the medium of the "heart language."

One respondent, a Muslim background believer who speaks Russian as well as his own local "heart language," remembers talking about Jesus during a visit by his cousin. "My cousin later said, had you shared this with me in Russian, I would never have put my faith in Isa al Masih [Jesus the Messiah], but because you shared it in our language, I said 'This message must be for me!'"<sup>5</sup>

A worker from South Asia concurred that the use of the mother tongue is vital:

I was introduced to a local Muslim woman who had gone to university in the West. There she had met Christians, believed in Jesus, been baptized and gone to church. When she returned to her family, she decided she could no longer follow Jesus because there was no church in her area. We gave her recently translated versions of Scripture in her own language. At first she resisted reading them. She was used to reading the Bible in English. However, when she finally did read them in her mother tongue, she was amazed at how much she had not understood and how the story of Jesus came alive in her own language. She now believes she can be a follower of Jesus in her own culture.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1. The percentage of participants who saw faith communities established, for those who worked in the regional trade language and those who worked in the local language.<sup>26</sup>

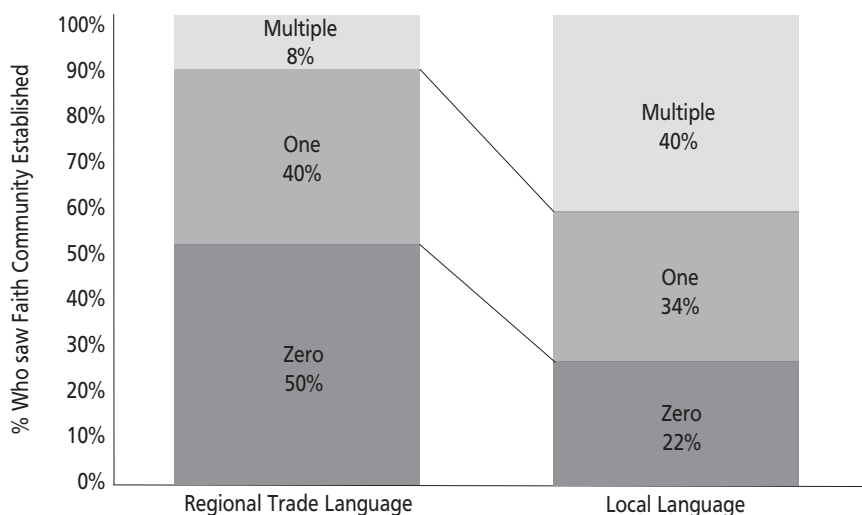
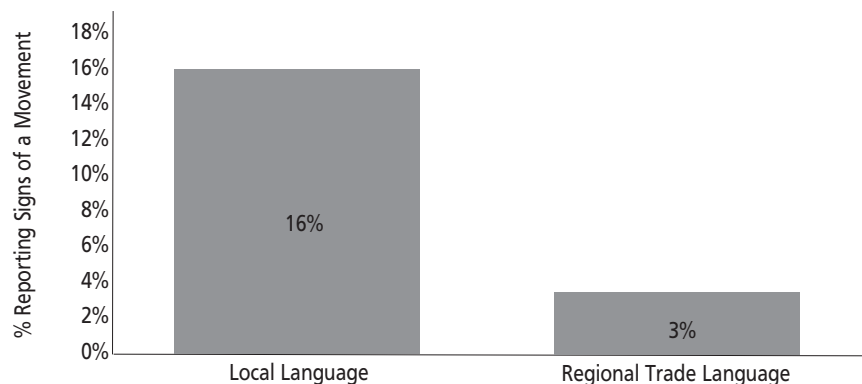


Figure 2. Language choice and percentage of participants who reported faith communities which showed signs of a movement towards Jesus.<sup>27</sup>



Practitioners at the consultation emphasized the importance of perseverance and discipline in pursuing language fluency in order to minister in the heart language.

In addition, a recent survey of practitioners demonstrated an intriguing relationship between fruitfulness and use of terms familiar to Muslims, as shown in Figure 4. There are several alternative explanations of this figure, including that this relationship is influenced by other variables that we did not measure. More research is necessary to clarify this, but it does suggest that use of terms familiar to Muslims may be impacting fruitfulness significantly.

## 2. Engaging Hearts and Minds: Storying

The vast majority of Muslim people groups are functionally oral societies. Though they may be able to read and write, these societies generally prefer to share information orally. Among the consultation participants, 71 percent reported that the people group they work among were primarily oral learners.<sup>7</sup> Fruitful teams recognize this learning preference and use storying to communicate the gospel in reproducible ways. In other words, they couch significant concepts in true-to-life examples that are told using story conventions natural to the people and their culture. Teams at the consultation that communicated the gospel in a way that respected the learning preference of the people saw over 4 times as many faith communities emerge as compared to workers who ignore this factor.

Storying and fluency make a powerful combination. Eighty-two percent of teams that worked in the heart language had at least one person on the team who was fluent in the ministry language, and incorporated the learning preference of the host people group into their gospel-communication strategy reported having formed a faith community. Among teams with none of these factors present, only seven percent reported having formed a community.<sup>9</sup>

**M**uslims are drawn to an authentic spiritual life that is adapted to their cultural values and shows an obvious love and respect for their culture.

One consultation participant said, “We have mother tongue stories that have been well-crafted by Muslim-background believers. These stories reflect their culture and worldview, and are true to the Bible. The stories are practical, allowing believers to share their faith naturally in everyday situations. So when asked a question about honesty or theft or something similar, the answer is in a story. When asked about salvation, or forgiveness, the answer is in a story.”<sup>10</sup>

From another interview: “These stories eventually change the worldview of the teller and of the listener. These stories, because they are the word of God, and because they are in a reproducible and understandable format, sink down in their heart and allow that tree of eternal life to grow there.”<sup>11</sup>

Another reported an incident in which a group of twelve Muslim women brought her a new-born:

The baby was the size of my palm. The mother had died in childbirth and the father did not want the baby, so it had been discarded. Holding this child, I asked the family, “How old is this preemie?” They said, “Well, it was 28 weeks in the mother’s womb.” Looking at this tiny life in my hands, I just told them, “I’m not a witch doctor. I do not have supernatural power on my own. I am not a medical doctor. But I know the Physician who is all-powerful. Can I tell you some stories about his desire to heal?” I then told them stories about when Jesus healed. And then I said, “You know what? Jesus is after the ultimate healing of us, of our being reconciled to a Holy God. That’s what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Can I talk to you about that?” So these twelve women sat with me as I told them stories about the power of the Lord and the authority of the Messiah, holding this small infant all the while. After these stories, I asked them if they would pray with me for

this infant. They agreed and then we prayed for healing for the baby together in the name of the Messiah. The little girl was indeed healed and is now six years old!<sup>12</sup>

The majority of the practitioners from the consultation were from ‘text-oriented’ cultures, so they had to adjust their own perspective to communicate fruitfully in cultures with an oral learning preference. The distinction goes beyond the written versus spoken word. Text-oriented cultures reason by deduction from generalities, whereas oral cultures generally reason by instances (stories) and analogy, often leading to unexpressed inductions.<sup>13</sup> By storying, practitioners can communicate the gospel in a way that is naturally reproducible—local believers can use these same stories to share their faith, disciple others, and develop leaders.

## 3. Exemplary Lifestyle: Reputation

The gospel is more powerfully proclaimed by our lives than by our words alone. Like most people, Muslims are drawn to an authentic spiritual life that is adapted to their cultural values and shows an obvious love and respect for their culture.

One participant commented:

I found that the key to gaining people’s trust and beginning to share with them was to be culturally appropriate. Because I respect them and I want to be like them, they feel valued. They feel their way is the best way—their dress, their way to move and cook and to be woman, to be a woman of God. They taught me to be more like them. I have three children, and whatever they do with their children, I do too. We ate the same food, we lived like them, and they now trust me.<sup>14</sup>

At the completion of a development project, an independent survey group questioned the people in a South Asian

village about the impact of the developers' work. A field worker told of one woman who called the survey team into her house, closed the door and said, "No one else in the village will tell you this about these infidels, but I want to tell you. Before they came, I did not believe that there were good people in the world—but these foreigners who have come have convinced me that good people do exist, and I want to raise my children to be good."<sup>15</sup>

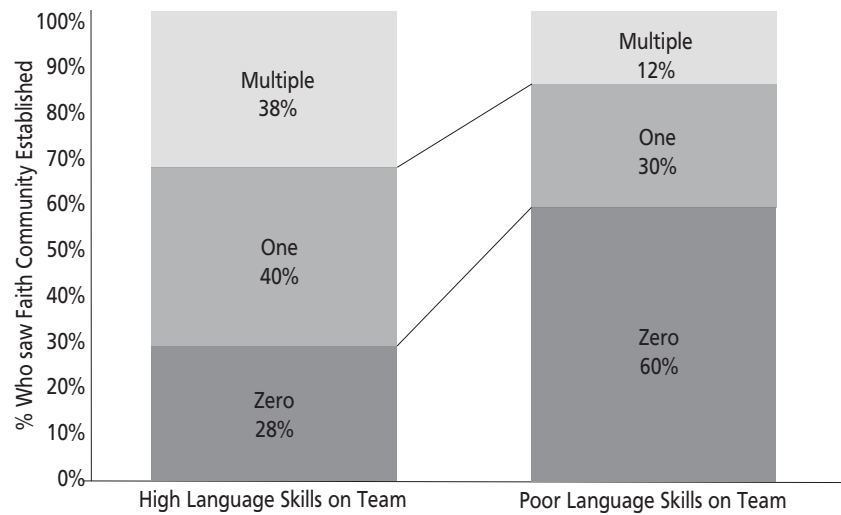
By far, the longest list of Fruitful Practices related to these seven themes falls into the area of the gospel-bearers' reputation—that of the individual, the gospel-bearing team, and the new faith community:

- **Individuals:** Fruitful cross-cultural workers were known as people who demonstrated honor and respect to the local people, who behaved in culturally appropriate ways, and who modeled lives of genuine spirituality, service and obedience of faith as followers of Jesus. They were considered people of God who met tangible needs. They both witnessed to and demonstrated God's kingdom. They persevered through difficulty and suffering.
- **Teams:** Fruitful teams demonstrated the ability to build each other up in love and display a diversity of gifting in service.
- **Faith Communities:** Fruitful faith communities retained the local culture and sought to bless the surrounding Muslim society through word and deed. These Jesus communities demonstrably loved one another. They redeemed traditional festivals and ceremonies, and shared meals and hospitality. The leaders of fruitful faith communities networked together, governed themselves and were locally accountable for finances.

#### 4. Redemptive Bonds of Trust: Social Networks

Fruitful workers also tend to be more effective when they allow the gospel

Figure 3. The percentage of participants with zero, one or multiple faith communities and whether they had someone on their team with high language skill or not.<sup>28</sup>



to transform networks among whom trust relationships already exist, such as within families and other natural social groups. Some call this a *transformational model* of forming fellowships. This approach was demonstrated to be more effective than an *attractional model* of forming fellowships, which extracts people from their natural social networks and gathers them into new parallel networks of relative strangers who may have little trust for each other.<sup>16</sup> As one participant at the consultation said: "Bringing strangers together and calling them community is not comprehensible in most contexts."<sup>17</sup> Figure 5 shows what appears to be significantly higher fruitfulness of transformational over attractional models.<sup>18</sup>

One respondent explained his breakthrough in this understanding. He had taken leadership of a gospel-bearing team that had established a group through an attractional model. "I had inherited a core group of believers who had been strangers and struggled still with trust and many character issues. It was a lot of work to hold this group together. However, we had an opportunity to share the gospel with a family in another region, and that whole family came into the kingdom together. They flourished in their faith and then shared with other family units." As more families across several villages entered God's

kingdom, he said, "Our focus turned to this far more fruitful approach and we allowed the 'core group' to naturally dissolve away."<sup>19</sup>

Another worker described the process of the gospel spreading through social networks:

The first follower of Jesus was an elder in the village. He was afraid that if he announced his faith in Christ he would be cast out of his village. He would lose his wife, he would lose his children, his grandchildren, and everyone else. So, he began doing Bible studies with his wife to seek to lead her to faith before he made a public announcement. She did come to faith. Eventually they let their children know that they were followers of Jesus Christ. That was important in setting an example for the community. Now there are many believers in the village, and they meet together regularly for prayer and worship. It's just natural for the gospel to flow along family lines. Now in this one region, forty families are either believers or sympathetic [to God's kingdom], and a majority of those have been baptized now. Most of these faith communities were organized around families, then also through friendship networks—people that they knew, people [who] had gone to university together, worked together, and things like that. Community was natu-

rally reproducible. Other groups were easily started.

Fruitful field workers (without imposing their own preferences) helped seekers and believers find appropriate ways to identify themselves to their community as followers of Jesus and to remain within their natural social network. Believers were encouraged to establish healthy relationships with each other. Fruitful workers and faith communities continued to share the gospel through existing social networks.

### 5. Getting the Word Out: Scripture Use

Fruitful teams use a variety of creative means to communicate Scripture. As already mentioned, this includes using terms familiar to Muslims (see Figure 4). This would suggest that culturally-appropriate translations of the Bible for Muslim societies could make a significant contribution to the receptivity of Gospel. Muslims value the Quran and many memorize it and recite it, so they value Scripture in written as well as oral forms. And because so many in Muslim societies have a preference for oral learning, effective practitioners often sow Scripture widely through creative use of oral Bible stories.

Creative methods of using Scripture include culturally relevant storying (described above), radio and video dramas, oral and literate inductive studies, incorporating Scripture presentations in festivals, lifecycle celebrations,<sup>20</sup> everyday use of proverbs, interactive Internet sites, phone texting, and much more.

One member of a team said, “We quickly found many of the Bible study packages from the West were culture bound and not relevant to the local believers. We discovered the power of inductive studies in the Scriptures. Believers were able to look at Bible passages with the filters of their own culture. So when they engaged in the inductive activities of observation, interpretation and application of the section of Scripture, they naturally contextualized their understanding

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of the Scriptures—while still keeping hermeneutic integrity.”<sup>21</sup>

Fruitful workers and faith communities use the Bible as the central source for life, growth and mission. It is their primary means of sharing the gospel, training new believers and developing leaders. They identify and use culturally appropriate Bible passages to communicate God's message in a wide variety of ways, while also seeking to sow it broadly. Believers are taught and encouraged to follow the Holy Spirit's leading in applying the Bible to their context.

### 6. Faith, Community, Leadership: Intentional Reproduction

Fruitful teams keep the end in mind. They teach seekers and new believers to apply what they learn and pass it on to someone else. In the best examples, this principle of reproducibility is applied not only to believers reproducing faith in seekers, but also to communities reproducing communities and leadership reproducing leadership.

One respondent made it a priority to read the Bible with everyone who was interested. Afterwards, he told them that before they came to visit him again, they had to share what they learned

with someone else. He explained, “The question they always have is, ‘Who do I do it with?’ I tell them, ‘Start with your wife. Just sit down and tell your wife what you learned from me.’ Right from the beginning, they have this concept built in: what I learn, I share with someone else. As seekers, anybody can talk to me and just say, ‘Oh, I'm just asking about his religion.’ There's no problem about talking about religion. The penalty is very low. If you wait until they're clearly identified [as followers of Jesus], then there's a gap that grows between the new believer and the one he is talking to, and that becomes an issue. When you pass on what you learn, you learn it yourself. Once you repeat a story to someone else, it becomes yours.”<sup>22</sup>

Another participant interviewed encourages seekers to be change agents in their society and to share what they learn from the very beginning. “There's much ground they still need to cover in terms of what they believe, who they are, but since they share it with others, the conviction of truth grows and everything becomes natural for them. They discover what they believe from the Word as a community. From the very beginning, even before they come to faith, all of the

Figure 4. Fruitfulness compared with responses of field practitioners to the statement: “When communicating the gospel, I intentionally use terms that local Muslims will understand from their own culture, language, or religious background.”<sup>29</sup>

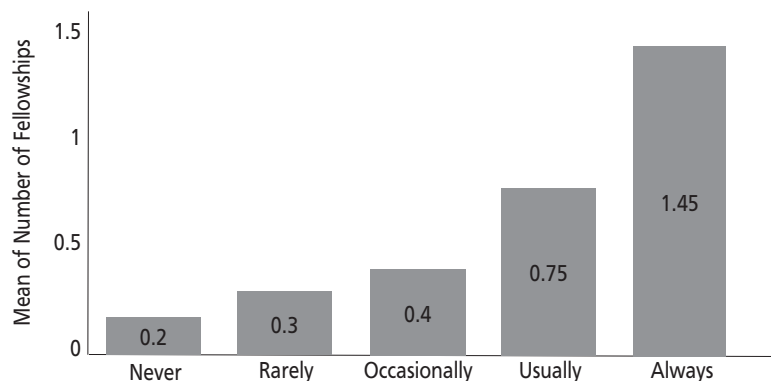
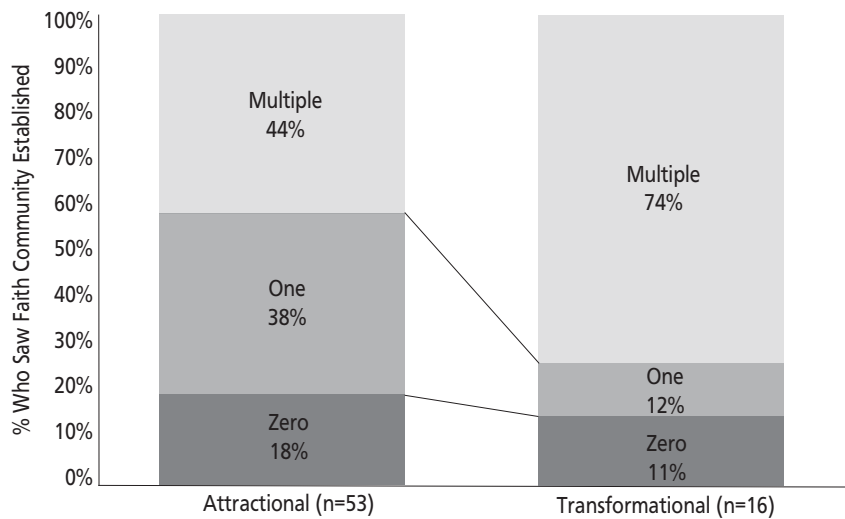


Figure 5. The average number of faith communities facilitated by those using an 'Attractational' model vs. a 'Transformational' model.<sup>30</sup>



disciples and seekers are expected to share what they have learned.”

He describes what this looks like, saying, “After a Bible study, [several Muslim leaders who had come to faith in Jesus] were encouraged to go out and duplicate what they experienced with other leaders. They asked other chiefs if they could have a Holy Book study in their villages. So these guys are the ones now reproducing the model of deliberately going to leaders and engaging them in Scripture.”<sup>23</sup>

Fruitful workers and faith communities intentionally model following Jesus in relationships with believers and seekers. They begin discipling seekers as part of the process of coming to faith, and they encourage seekers to share what God is doing in their lives from the beginning. They disciple others in settings that fit the situation, encourage believers to share their faith, and prepare believers to explain why they believe. Fruitful workers and faith communities intentionally develop and reproduce leaders, acknowledging emerging leaders early in the process of building a community of faith. They mentor leaders who in turn mentor others. Fruitful faith communities equip their members to share their faith in effective and culturally appropriate ways. They involve their children in worship and ministry to

encourage faith to pass on and reproduce in the next generation. A number of fields demonstrated that fellowships which networked together found it easier to reproduce new fellowships.

### 7. A Holy Sacrifice: Prayer

Prayer is not an afterthought. It is essential to every aspect of the process of forming faith communities. Fruitful workers are known as people of prayer, individually and corporately. They mobilize strategic prayer for the people they serve.

One interviewed participant told us:

One of the things workers at our NGO would do every morning at the beginning of their day was to pray together. They had a paper flip chart on which they write down prayer requests. Every morning, they prayed for these requests—expecting God to intervene—adding new ones and recording those that had been answered. An elderly Muslim gentleman, one of the elders of the village, watched this small group go through this ritual over weeks and months. He would come in periodically, going through all the flipped pages, looking over all of the prayer requests that had been answered. Over time he finally responded, “These people are the ones God is listening to. It’s their prayers in Christ’s name that are being answered. Our people’s prayers are rarely answered. The truth

is with Jesus.” One of the NGO workers observed that this was a kind of power encounter, leaving a profound impression on the elderly gentleman who witnessed it, and on the community around him.<sup>24</sup>

Another team leader described his experience of a prayer movement that over five years developed from a handful of people to a network of more than 10,000 within the country who are committed to strategic prayer. He said, “As the annual prayer meetings grew and local networks of prayer sprang up across the country, we noticed a simultaneous ‘temperature change’ in Christians’ attitudes toward Muslims—from antagonism, to fear, to a tentative openness for Muslims to hear the gospel.” One night, he and a team mate were invited to talk about prayer to about thirty young adults. In the past, he had sat through countless prayer meetings while many prayed with tepid faith: O Lord, maybe someday you might do a little bit in our country. “But at this meeting,” he recalls, “when we told them that God had called us here to bless Muslims, the group surged around us, laid hands on us, and prayed: ‘O God, pour out your power! Move on our land!’ Their prayers revealed a tangibly different faith.” Today more Muslims in this country are putting faith in Jesus than ever before in their history.”<sup>25</sup>

Fruitful workers and faith communities engage in regular, frequent corporate prayer and fasting. They mobilize extensive, intentional, and focused prayer. They pray for God’s supernatural intervention as a sign that confirms the gospel, and they pray for the needs of their friends in their presence.

### Fruitfulness in Our Work

These seven themes summarize categories of fruitful activities distilled from the experience of the 300 practitioners at the 2007 consultation. They are not prescriptive—that is, they do not ensure success. Contexts and “soils” are different, as are the spiritual gifts and competencies of the gospel

bearer. And of course the Holy Spirit often moves in surprising ways.

Similarly, each farmer throughout the world works with a different set of contexts, soils, competencies and weather. Yet an understanding of effective agricultural practices is relevant among widely diverse circumstances. Successful farmers learn to understand and apply sound principles of agriculture to their specific conditions to produce the best possible harvest.

This initial analysis suggests emerging categories of activities that are associated with fruitful efforts in the Muslim world. They may be the beginning of an understanding of how God is drawing the Muslim heart into His Kingdom—and allow us to better participate with him in this effort.

Over the next few years, we will continue to interact with practitioners to increase our understanding—making a special effort to include the experience of non-Western workers and the perspectives of Muslim background believers. May this allow us to be better stewards of opportunities to nurture the seeds of faith the Father is growing in the Muslim world today. **IJFM**

### Acknowledgments

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In our analysis, we used a mixed methods approach, specifically the Concurrent Triangulation Model. We analyzed surveys using quantitative techniques appropriate to the type of data collected and the hypotheses being tested. These included cross-tabulation with subsequent Chi-square testing, t-tests, logistic regression, multi-dimensional scaling and cluster analysis. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods (narrative and phoneme coding) based in grounded theory. For some analyses, this included the use of a computer program designed for this purpose (Atlas.ti). For more detail, please see Don Allen, "A brief review of mixed methods research and its application to Fruitful Practices for church planting among Muslims" (2008). This unpublished paper is available from the authors at [fruitfulpractices@knowledgestewardship.org](mailto:fruitfulpractices@knowledgestewardship.org).

<sup>2</sup> See "Further Selected Reading" at the end of this paper for seminal discussions on each of these factors.

<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the insights from this consultation, see J. Dudley Woodberry, ed. *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> We use 'heart language,' 'local language' and 'mother tongue' interchangeably to describe the language spoken in the home.

<sup>5</sup> Fruitful Practices Consultation Interview 30, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Adams, personal experience, S Asia, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> The Knowledge Stewardship Team. 2008. Modeling the relationship between contextual factors and fruitfulness in church planting. In: *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims*, Dudley Woodberry, ed. Pasadena: William Carey Library. CDROM Appendix, pp.41.

<sup>8</sup> The Knowledge Stewardship Team, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> The Knowledge Stewardship Team, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Daniels, G., *An Ethnography of Fruitful Practices*, Narrative Research Fellowship, The Knowledge Stewardship Team, 2008, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Daniels, G., 2008, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Fruitful Practices Consultation Interview 30, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Adams, personal communication with Rick Brown.

<sup>14</sup> Daniels, 2008, p.14.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Adams, personal communication, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Gray, Gray, Baker and Fish. Manuscript in progress, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Small group No. 4 discussion, 2007 GTFP consultation.

<sup>18</sup> Gray, Gray, Baker and Fish, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Interview between Eric Adams and Alex Dwight, 11 December 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Life cycle events include birth, coming of age, circumcision, marriage, death.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Adams personal experience, S Asia, 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Fruitful Practices Consultation Interview 13, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Fruitful Practices Consultation Interview 79, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Daniels, 2008, p.48.

<sup>25</sup> Interview between EJ Martin and Owen Campbell. November 17, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> The Knowledge Stewardship Team. 2008.

<sup>27</sup> The Knowledge Stewardship Team. 2008.

<sup>28</sup> The Knowledge Stewardship Team. 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Knowledge Stewardship Team, Regional survey project, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Gray, Gray, Baker and Fish. Manuscript in progress.