

On Cross-Cultural Transmission

Describing Fruitful Practices: Relating to Society

by Gene Daniels

Since 2007, the Fruitful Practices Research team has studied practices across many dimensions of ministry that are bearing spiritual fruit in the Muslim world. The recent IJFM article “Fruitful Practices: A Descriptive List” (Allen, et al. 2009) summarized the researchers’ findings so far. The ultimate goal of this research is to inform mission praxis, helping field workers to apply fruitful practices in their daily life and ministry. This article is the first in a series that will provide further detail about each section of the Fruitful Practices Descriptive List.¹

This article explores fruitful practices about “Relating to Society” primarily using a writing structure that is common in ethnography—excerpt strategy (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995).² Explaining fruitful practices through first person accounts can help other practitioners see what these practices may look like in their own contexts.

Society 1: Fruitful workers communicate respect by behaving in culturally appropriate ways.

A worker’s attitude toward the host culture sends powerful messages. Fruitful workers behave in culturally appropriate ways in major cultural domains such as clothing and food, especially in regards to hospitality. The key is sensitivity to the local setting, not necessarily whole-hearted adoption of local practice.

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This fruitful practice concerns cultural issues such as how workers dress, what foods they eat, and how they handle hospitality in their homes. People coming from relaxed Western cultures may feel these are inconsequential to ministry, but our research found that these areas of cultural adaptation have a major impact on fruitfulness. One participant in our the study went so far as to say that the shift to more culturally appropriate dress was “a key in [a SE Asian country] to the Muslim revival going on there. There was a real change in thinking among missionaries ... that opened the country” (GTFP, Small group 18, 2007).

A number of workers described what “behaving in culturally appropriate ways” looked like in their particular setting. Below is an excerpt from a non-Western missionary that addresses cultural adaptation in a comprehensive way:

I found that to be culturally appropriate was a key for to beginning to share with the people and the people beginning to trust in me. Because I respect them and I want to be like them, they feel important ... They feel [their way is] the best way, their dress, their way to move and cook and to be woman, to be woman of God ... They taught me and that make me more, how you say, be 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. ... Because they think I am a religious woman and they can trust me (GTFP, Interview 18, 2007).

This worker points out that cultural adaptation is not just a matter of changing the clothes we wear or the foods we eat—it is about attitude. When we respect people and the boundaries of their social norms, it pays rich dividends that they return in the form of trust. In fact, one study participant even went so far as to say that “hospitality is one of the greatest strengths and [offers] and a very effective way to minister” (GTFP, Small group 14, 2007).

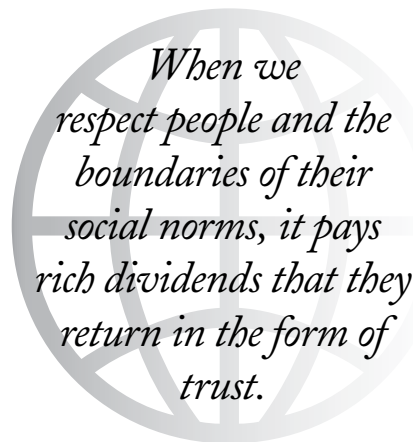
The comments from another worker help us understand how some fruitful workers decide what is “culturally appropriate” in a given context:

I think our main concern was to take Jesus into the community and see how it goes. Make it as relevant as possible, as culturally, as much as we can keep the culture ... [we are] very much at home with the people’s culture and the way they look, the way they dress ... some of us are religious teachers so we dress like them. We don’t go with the blue jeans and t-shirts to preach. In some areas, all of us go with the long flowing clothes, because that’s what they expect (GTFP, Interview 90, 2007).

Notice the end of that quote, “Because that is what they expect.” This is one

way for workers to discern what is, or is not, culturally appropriate—by carefully considering the expectations of the community around them.

However, our research also made clear that one does not need to “go native” to be fruitful. Many balanced their own personal positions on cultural domains such as clothing, food, and hospitality with comments of this nature, one woman said, “[The] key is to be sensitive ... not necessarily whole hearted adoption,” and “‘Culturally appropriate’ doesn’t necessarily mean dressing the same. If dress draws attention and



raises questions, it may well not be appropriate” (GTFP, Small group 10, 2007). Without becoming legalistic or odd, fruitful workers meet local expectations in the areas of clothing, food, and hospitality.

Society 2: Fruitful workers address tangible needs in their community as an expression of the gospel.

Good deeds often help workers gain a good reputation in the host community. Fruitful workers make clear that their good deeds are an expression of the gospel; otherwise, local people may assume that the worker is simply a good person or is trying to earn religious merit.

Our research documented that workers who are engaging human need are also producing spiritual fruit, whether their good deeds were expressed through

hospitals, business development, education, or another route. One important thread that runs through the discussions about these practical activities was the importance of doing them as an *expression* of the gospel, rather than as a *hook* for it. Muslims often accuse Christians of doing good deeds in their communities as the bait on a hook for proselytising. Unfortunately, this is sometimes true. The only way workers can overcome this perception is by acting in an opposite spirit.

A fine example of this comes from an occasion when a worker provided a job to a devout Muslim woman who soon started pushing Islamic observance on the other workers in his business. Despite concerns from other expatriates, the business owner let her stay on the job, but committed himself to pray for her. A few years later, the woman made a clear profession of faith in Christ and explained it to her boss this way:

All our leaders they say don’t go this place, don’t do this or they’ll convert you. But not even once you asked me to change to your religion. You never talk about it ... But you kept on helping me. I have seen Isa al Masih and his things through your life (GTFP, Interview 11, 2007).

As we consider the fruitfulness of meeting tangible needs, we also need to hear an important cautionary note:

We have seen incredible results from meeting physical needs. Also [we have] seen the reverse, where a man had purchased 140 wells but he did not make it clear that it was Jesus helping them. They [Muslims] loved him but not Jesus. The key was they did not articulate the gospel. ... [In the minds of Muslims they were] good people and they are earning merit and that’s why Christians are doing it. It had no impact on the church. Development doesn’t grow a church but must have a verbal witness along with the help. Scripture demands that we do help, but also articulate the good news (GTFP, Small group 15, 2007).

If we want the Muslim society around us to glorify our Father in heaven for

our good deeds, then we must state clearly that it is for His name's sake that we do them.

Society 3: Fruitful workers relate to people in ways that respect gender roles in the local culture.

Gender roles, and the taboos associated with them, are potent issues in the Muslim world. While maintaining a biblical perspective on these issues, fruitful workers strive to understand gender roles in their local context and demonstrate respect for these social norms.

Often workers coming from western societies have a difficult time appreciating the power and complexity of gender issues in the Muslim world. The homogenizing of public gender roles has long been a goal in the West, whereas Muslim society is often marked by stark differences between male and female norms in society. When workers ignore this and are not sensitive to local norms, they send confusing messages:

In [North Africa], there is no connection between men and women ... [therefore] the large amount of women doing evangelism has created confusion in this culture (GTFP, Small group 12, 2007).

According to another worker, part of the reason for the confusion on this point had to do with the fact that we have often misunderstood the meaning of discipleship:

Discipling isn't just "cracking the Bible." [For example] people are watching my wife to see how she cares for her kids ... [then] come and ask about her kids and how it is being done (GTFP, Small group 13, 2007).

This indicates an important point that shapes the gender issue: fruitful ministry springs from workers who are simply living out their faith while deeply connected to their target people. Another worker commented on how his wife simply "lives her life

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among them [new Muslim background believers] and so that's in some ways how discipleship occurs" (GTFP, Interview 53, 2007).

It is also critical that workers do not succumb to the dictates of Muslim stereotypes. For example, in one of the most restrictive environments we studied, one female worker noted that she had freedom of ministry in certain spheres of her host culture:

In [Southeast Asia] there are lots of restrictions. But as a woman, I'm allowed to go to house and do Bible studies. This is non-formal training. We share with the children and men. We pray for them. If we have a group among the family then they can join—even men... One-to-one must be according to gender, but in Bible study you can do groups (ibid).

In this example, we see a female worker teaching men, which would have been unthinkable in public or one-on-one, yet the same practice is fruitful within a family setting. This example reminds us that applying fruitful practices can be counter-intuitive, and workers must carefully learn from their context as they attempt to implement them in their ministries.

The quantitative analysis of surveys from this same consultation unexpectedly showed that the importance of the gender issue in discipleship

(for example, men should disciple men, women should disciple women) tapers off markedly with age (GTFP, Database, 2007). This suggests that the respect that comes with age in Muslim societies is so powerful that it trumps some of the taboos related to gender relations.

Clearly, understanding and respecting gender roles in society is important. Ministry requires intimacy, and one of the ways that outsiders gain intimate connections is by respecting the norms of social life, including gender relations.

Society 4: Fruitful workers mobilize extensive, intentional, and focused prayer.

Fruitful workers invite others to join them through committed intercession for themselves and the people they are engaging. They recognize that this can be as important as inviting people to join the team that lives in the host culture.

This fruitful practice is not about the worker's personal prayer life or about praying for particular Muslim friends,³ rather it concerns mobilizing prayer and prayer networks on behalf of the whole society. Our survey data demonstrates the importance of this activity. When we asked participants at the GTFP conference in Thailand to rate the importance of mobilizing

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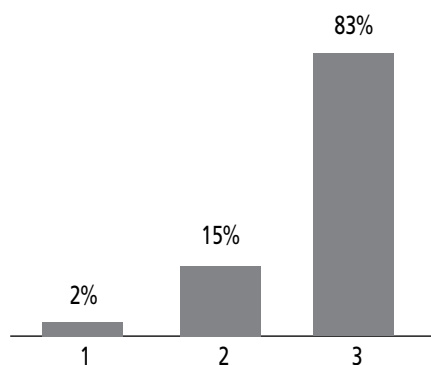
"Missionary attitudes toward African cultures changed as exigencies of the field forced constant reappraisals...The strongest characteristic of the missionary enterprise was the constant reappraisal of policies and strategies. Conferences were held to share the experiences of various denominations operating in different countries. After the Edinburgh Conference in 1910, communication channels were formalized and an attitude highly critical of current strategies emerged...Hardly any of our contemporary issues in mission (indigenization, selfhood and aid, involvement in issues of social justice, and even moratorium) were not raised and debated. Modern missiology often seems like a mere accumulation of papers rehearsing old solutions. Christianity has survived in Africa because of this self-criticism, constant search for relevance, and a modicum of *metanoia*."

Ogbu Kalu, "Church Presence in Africa," 1979

for “extensive, intentional, and focused prayer (i.e., a large number of intercessors over a long period of time),” the vast majority rated it “very important” (GTFP, Database, 2007).

Table 1. Importance of prayer for the society.

The vast majority of participants ranked “extensive, intentional, and focused prayer” as “very important.” Scale: 1=unimportant; 2=somewhat important; 3=very important.



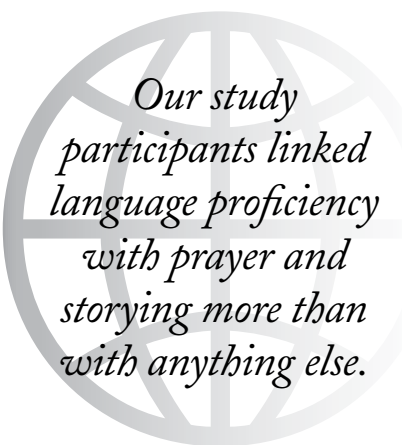
Thus, the cross-cultural workers who participated in our study clearly placed a high value on the practice of mobilizing prayer. However, the relationship between the way a worker rates this activity and its fruitfulness is not as clear. In fact, a significant, but inverted, correlation exists between a worker’s rating of this variable and fruitfulness. Our data showed that those who rated this practice as “important” were almost twice as likely to have planted multiple churches as those who rated it as “very important” (GTFP, Database, 2007).⁴

In other words, we have a bit of a dilemma here. While it is clearly a Fruitful Practice to mobilize international prayer networks, the time a field worker spends doing so might be better spent actively engaging CP work. Our research does not offer conclusive answers to this, but this finding at least hints at the importance of partnerships between active field workers and mobilizers at home, each doing what they are better positioned to do. However, we will do well to remember something members of our research team have

noted elsewhere, “We must do more than pray, but it is unlikely that we will produce lasting fruit without praying.”

Society 5: Fruitful workers pursue language proficiency.

Workers who are able to freely and clearly communicate in their host language(s) are much more likely to be fruitful. Fruitful workers carefully consider questions concerning language choice, such as whether to use heart or trade language, sacred or secular language. By learning



language, they also gain a deeper understanding of culture, making language proficiency fruitful across a number of different dimensions.

Both common sense and cross-cultural experience suggest that language proficiency contributes significantly to fruitfulness, and our research confirmed this point. Workers with strong language skills can build better relationships with their neighbors and can better take advantage of the opportunities that arise to share the gospel. Numerous interviews obliquely demonstrated the fruitfulness of language proficiency, including these:

So all of us prayed together, and for about two hours after that we were just sitting and talking with the elders and the imam about religious topics (GTFP, Interview 52, 2007).

After every story I ask them questions that would make them to think. I am not giving them the answer, direct answers like, oh, this is the story. ... I tell

the story and I ask them the right questions because I’ve been prepared for that beforehand—I’ve practiced those stories (GTFP, Interview 34, 2007).

As they came in [for audio recording sessions], we started from day one meeting as a group, every morning beginning in prayer. Though we are foreigners, we used mother tongue in our prayers (GTFP, Interview 75, 2007).

We are teaching our team members right now to tell the Bible story from the beginning (GTFP, Interview 90, 2007).

These and many other interviews contained implicit statements about language proficiency that connected with two specific concepts—prayer and storying.² In fact, other than the importance of language proficiency for relationship building, our study participants linked language proficiency with prayer and storying more than with anything else. This leads us to conclude that when a cross-cultural worker can pray with people or tell Bible stories in their target language, then they have begun to have the language proficiency to be fruitful.

This could mean that we need a shift in our way of thinking. Perhaps field teams and sending organizations need to start talking in terms of “prayer proficiency” or “storying proficiency,” even developing assessments for these, rather than the various scales of language fluency that are currently the norm for field workers. Other findings from the GTFP research also indicated that fluency in the language, use of the heart language of the people, and use of the learning preference of the local people (oral vs. literate) are a particularly fruitful combination of practices (Fish, Allen and Adams 2009, 14).

Society 6: Fruitful workers take advantage of pre-field and on-field research to shape their ministry.

Fruitful ministry is shaped by many different streams of information, including ethnography, linguistics, and history. Workers who conduct

research or actively reflect on the research of others are more fruitful than those who base their ministries on preconceived ideas of the patterns of ministry in their sending countries.

Consistently, fruitful workers in our study demonstrated a high degree of knowledge about the contexts of their ministry—historical, cultural, or linguistic, to name a few. In many cases, it was obvious that this research had contributed significantly to their ministry. Though fruitful workers rarely mentioned their research explicitly, their depth of contextual understanding did not just appear out of thin air. The idea of research was often just below the surface in the interviews, such as this one, in which a worker explained some of the theological implications of the way he was using the Quran as a bridge:

These Muslim background believers are not the first to come up with these answers. We can look in other types of Quranic tradition and back up their answer that other people within the Muslim fold have given before (GTFP, Interview 75, 2007).

Although the interviewee said nothing explicit about research, his statement implied a deep knowledge of the various traditions in Quranic interpretation. Later in the interview, he mentioned in passing that he has a graduate degree in Islamic studies. Therefore, in this case we can see that an innovative approach to using the Quran as a bridge was the indirect result of a worker investing time in pertinent research and study.

Another fine example of the impact that research has on fruitfulness comes from a worker explaining how her team developed their own style of biblical story telling:

Before I tell the stories we have prepared, we ourselves have explored the community... if I want to talk about the story of Creation—that we are made in the image of God—I should first understand what they think about the image of God. What

The shaykh himself stood up and said, “No, if these people were trying to [destroy Islam], I would have stopped them.”

is in their world-view about Creation. So I myself have to do the thorough community exploration in light to the story that I’m going to tell (GTFP, Interview 34, 2007).

Again, there is no explicit use of the term *research*. Nevertheless, this worker deliberately studied her context as a means to understand the nature of orality in her host society. The fact that she does not use the term *research* to describe her efforts does not mean that it was not.

Few of those we interviewed were comfortable describing what they did as *research*, though it was clear that many of them had done intentional, and at times extensive, investigation into some aspect of their context. This raises the question, “Why are workers hesitant to use the term *research*?” Unfortunately, our data does not answer that question; however, we might speculate here. Could it be that most cross-cultural Christian workers consider *research* to be the exclusive realm of graduate studies or formal, full-time fieldwork by people with degrees in the social sciences? Perhaps most are unaware that untrained Christian missionaries conducted a vast amount of early ethnographic work, so much so that Whiteman tells us:

Although most missionaries are unaware of it... It is arguable that the discipline of anthropology would not have emerged without its heavy reliance upon ethnographic data provided by missionaries (Whiteman 2003, 36).

If more cross-cultural workers were aware of this historic contribution, we might see an increase in those who do first-rate, although often unofficial, research—and this would undoubtedly be fruitful.

Society 7: Fruitful workers build positive relationships with local leaders.

By sensitively and carefully relating to local authorities, including non-Christian religious figures, workers gain respect and good standing in their host community. Those who are intentional about choosing their relationships with local leaders are more likely to be fruitful.

Christian workers often give little thought to how they, or the new group of believers they hope to start, will relate to existing authority structures. For this reason, local churches can find themselves in unintentional competition with key people in their community. However, many of the fruitful workers involved in our study consciously sought to respectfully engage local leaders. One way was to invite local leaders to participate in their projects:

One of the elders of the community works in the literacy [section of our NGO], and he’s learned to read. And he’s been working there for many years. He’s been watching the lives of the believers who are working there (GTFP, Interview 72, 2007).

The result of this attempt to respect local authority is a wonderful snapshot of the way that fruitful practices are usually experienced—in combination. In this case we see two fruitful practices, relating to local leaders and prayer, working together:

One of the things the workers at our NGO do every morning, at the beginning of their morning, is the whole team prays together. And they have a flip chart, a paper flip chart on which they write down the prayer requests. And every morning, they pray for those requests, and they add any new ones and strike through any that have been answered. ... this is of course, totally outside the experience

of this ... Muslim gentleman. This idea of really praying for things and really expecting God to intervene in at least some cases. It was then he considered, began looking at all the flipped pages, looking over all of the prayer requests that had been answered, he realized, "These people... these 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" (ibid).

The village elder in the story went on to lead his whole family to Christ and help start several groups of Muslim background believers in the area.

Another way that workers fruitfully reach out to local holders of power is by intentionally engaging them *in their religious context*. One team, a mixture of local MBBs and foreign expatriates, held Bible discussions at the neighborhood mosque, under the authority of the local shaykh. Later, when the potential for trouble arose:

The shaykh himself stood up and said, "No, if these people were trying to [destroy Islam], I would have stopped them." And so he was actually was defending and promoting what was going on there. [Because of this,] the local people have been released to express following Christ entirely in their own way as long as it lines up with Scripture (GTFP, Interview 52, 2007).

Our research clearly showed that when workers intentionally engage local authorities in different ways—sometimes personally, sometimes through their work, sometimes religiously—it bears lasting spiritual fruit.

Conclusion

Fruitfully relating to a Muslim society can take many forms. One of the main concerns common to them all is to give respect. Some of the fruitful practices include the word *respect*: "Society 3: Fruitful workers related to people in ways that respect gender roles in the local culture." But in reality, respect is at the core of all of these fruitful practices, because everything workers do in relating to a society sends messages about

their attitude toward those they are trying to reach with the gospel. Workers who find ways to openly demonstrate respect for people and their society are likely to be most fruitful.

Even the practices that seem unrelated to the issue of respect, such as meeting tangible needs, are actually means of communicating a deep appreciation for people as humans (not projects), which sends a strong message of respect. Unfortunately, goal-oriented Westerners can easily neglect this. One young Muslim background believer commented, "I've been a 'project' to many foreigners" (Daniels 2005). Any means by which workers openly demonstrate respect for people and their society is likely to be fruitful.

One of the key features of this research project is that it focuses on the concrete—practices that are derived from the study of cross-cultural Christian workers in real settings. We stress that field workers must discern how to apply fruitful practices in their own contexts rather than simply copying what others have done; however, we hope that encountering these practices as they are described in others' situations will help in that process. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

¹ The data sources, research methodology, and references to related articles on Fruitful Practices are described in (Adams, Allen and Fish 2009) (Allen, et al. 2009) (Woodberry 2008).

² Many of the study participants were not native English speakers. Quotations have not been edited for grammar.

³ These aspects of prayer are to be covered in future articles in this series: "Practices Related to Seekers" and "Practices Related to God."

⁴ Of those who answered "important," 50 percent had planted multiple churches. Only 28 percent of those who answered "very important" had planted multiple churches. Thanks to Bob Fish for his statistical analysis of this problem.

⁵ For simplicity and clarity, in this article we have grouped several different concepts together under the term "storying." A more precise description would be "strategies for dealing with oral learners." In the interview data, this included: communicating Bible stories orally, using local proverbs to bridge to biblical truth, and using other oral communication patterns such as chanting and antiphonal recitation.