

# Fruitful Practices in Sub-Saharan Muslim Africa: Some Recent Research Findings

by Gene Daniels

## Introduction

Since 2007, the Fruitful Practices Research team has studied the efforts of church planters<sup>1</sup> across the Muslim world. We have used a mixed-methods research approach, surveys complemented by in-depth interviews, to discern the practices of workers which promote the emergence, vitality, and multiplication of fellowships of Jesus followers in a Muslim context. Initially, we focused on understanding this data set as a whole. However, due to the widely recognized regional differences in the Muslim world, we are now doing focused analysis of subgroups of that data. This article will present findings specifically from church planters working in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

One of the primary ways our team has organized our research findings is a list of sixty-eight “Fruitful Practices” which were described in an article in this journal (Allen, et al. 2009). These were gleaned from the data in our first round of research, conducted in 2007–2009. Then, in 2010–2012, we conducted a second round of research that built on the previous one. In this second study, we very intentionally sought to include a significant number of workers from Asian and African mission agencies because these had been underrepresented the first time around. In addition to that, we had two primary reasons for this second study:

1. to validate (or invalidate if needed) the Fruitful Practice statements from the first round of research, and
2. to search for possible new Fruitful Practices that were not yet identified.

In practice, we found it very challenging to draw participation from our non-Western colleagues as they are even less inclined to fill out surveys than their Western co-laborers.<sup>2</sup> It is not that they were uninterested in the project; rather, we realized that impersonal quantitative instruments are not their preferred means of participation. In the end we were able to focus on collecting interviews from non-Western workers for the qualitative side of the study to make-up for this and achieve a good mix of study participants.<sup>3</sup> This was particularly so in

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certain regions of the Muslim world such as the one this study will focus on, sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>4</sup>

In this region, 97% of those who responded to the survey were expatriate workers; however, over 60% of the church planters we interviewed were themselves African.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, while we have striven for balance, if anything these findings may be slightly “Afrocentric,” something we believe is actually quite fitting. The commonly held narrative of devoted, self-sacrificing white missionaries in Africa needs to be revised by a much lesser known story,

that of the black evangelists who were [and still are] mainly responsible for spreading the Gospel throughout sub-Saharan Africa. (Killingray, 2005)

Our research affirms Killingray’s words are equally true in the spread of the gospel among Muslims in this region.

## Major findings

### 1. Fruitful Practices Affirmed

The first, and perhaps most significant, finding we have to report is that the vast majority of the sixty-eight Fruitful Practices described in the original study were affirmed by workers in sub-Saharan Africa, either through the survey or by the in-depth interviews. This indicates there are abundant commonalities in ministry across the breadth of the Muslim world.

Only nine of the original sixty-eight statements were *not* affirmed in any significant way by workers in the sub-Saharan Africa study.

- Fruitful workers begin discipling seekers as part of the process of coming to faith.
- Fruitful workers disciple in locally appropriate and reproducible ways.
- Fruitful workers disciple others in settings that fit the situation.

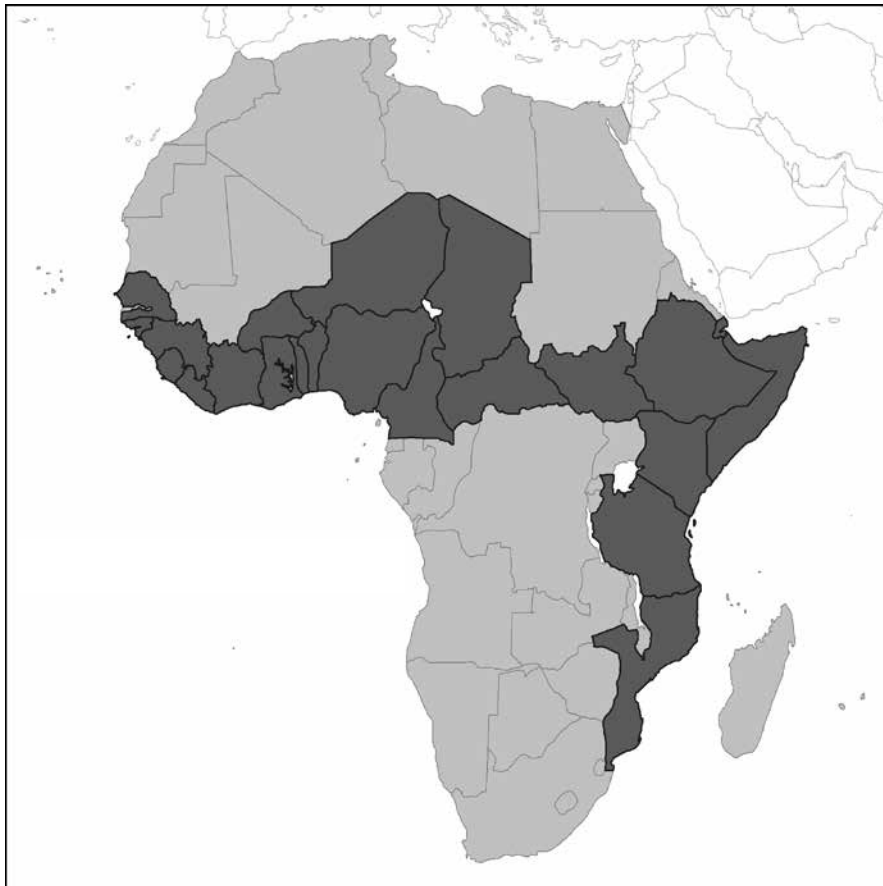
- Fruitful workers help believers find ways to remain within their social network.
- Fruitful workers prepare believers to explain why they believe.
- Fruitful workers use various approaches in discipling.
- Fruitful workers mentor leaders who in turn mentor others.
- Fruitful workers use Bible study as a means of sharing the gospel.
- Fruitful workers use the Qur’an as a bridge to sharing the biblical gospel.

Since the study focused on learning *what* workers are doing, rather than on *why* they are doing or not doing certain things, it is impossible to state with any certainty why these nine Fruitful Practices are not widely practiced in sub-Saharan Africa. However, since research is in part the task of theorizing, we propose two possible explanations for this discrepancy.

The first one is the most obvious—context. Certainly church planting among Muslims is, on one level, a context all its own, thus needing to be considered separately from other mission efforts. This is one of the fundamental presuppositions behind the entire Fruitful Practice research project. However, on another level, the regional contexts within the Islamic world vary, so that they impact what is, and is not, fruitful in ministry in those different contexts.

The second explanation for the difference in practice is the workers themselves. As noted above, the study pool for the sub-Saharan Africa data set is quite different than for our first study. Whereas the participants in the first study were predominately Western expatriates, the majority of the participants in the sub-Saharan Africa data set are themselves African. Since both the first and second studies were mixed methods research (quantitative and qualitative), strict statistical comparison is not possible. However, the data strongly indicates that the Fruitful Practices which were not affirmed in

Figure 1. Sub-Saharan Muslim Africa (Global Mapping International)



this study probably reflect the difference of practice between fruitful African workers and their expatriate colleagues. This has important implications.

Our findings in this data sub-set suggest that while some Fruitful Practices are nearly “universal,” the background of the practitioner may be more important than previously recognized. Expatriates involved in Africa need to remember that their local brothers and sisters can be very fruitful without following our patterns of ministry. Perhaps Westerners might be more fruitful in Africa if they learned from the patterns of fruitful African workers? With this in mind, let us turn to some of the possible new Fruitful Practices we encountered in sub-Saharan Africa.

## 2. Suggested New Fruitful Practices and a Revision of Another

Another purpose of this round of research was to look for possible new Fruitful Practices to be added to the existing list. This was primarily a function of the in-depth interviews. There were several candidates for possible new Fruitful Practices, but only two were widespread enough in the data to set them apart as truly significant, both of which would fall into the Fruitful Practice category of “Relating to Believers:”

- Fruitful workers prepare new believers for persecution and suffering.
- Fruitful workers recognize time and process as crucial elements in people coming to know and grow in faith.

It is still to be decided if there is strong enough support in the overall data for us to add these to the Fruitful Practices list. However, based on an abundance of new data from both sub-Saharan Africa and our on-going studies of other regions, we have decided that it is appropriate to revise one of the more controversial Fruitful Practice statements. Originally we had stated:

- Fruitful workers use the Qur’an as a bridge to sharing the biblical gospel.

*In Sub-Saharan Africa the bridge for the gospel may not be the content of the Qur’an as much as the emotional power of familiarity with Islamic culture.*

However, the findings in this second study regarding the above Fruitful Practice were quite conflicted, probably in some ways reflecting the current missiological debate about how, and to what extent, the Qur’an should be used in witness. We were very glad when our data from sub-Saharan Africa brought some clarity to this issue.

Over the past several years, various evangelistic methods have been developed and promoted which attempt to connect certain Surahs in the Qur’an with the biblical gospel, and certainly there are many workers who use these methods. However, what appears to be much more common, at least in sub-Saharan Africa, is a slightly different practice. This raises an important question, “What is actually fruitful? Is it linking the content of Surahs from the Qur’an to the gospel, or is it something different?” Our research suggests that the answer lies closer to the latter than the former. What we have heard workers describing in this second round of interviews has led us to revise the original Fruitful Practice statement in the following way:

- Fruitful workers use Islamic terms and thought patterns as a bridge to sharing the biblical gospel.

Or to expand this just a bit, many workers find it fruitful to draw on common expressions, terminologies and patterns of thought from Muslim cultures. This helps them to clarify ways in which biblical truth parallels, diverges from or completely counters traditional understanding. Fruitful workers may reference Qur’anic passages in order to share the biblical gospel but do not dwell unnecessarily on them. The following excerpt from an interview is insightful:

If you don’t bring this experience [of Islamic culture] it will be a negative

impact in spreading the message of Injil... We have to use their familiar language and rituals. Otherwise it will be difficult to make them receptive of our message.... and it initiates argument, fear, and doubt among them (FPNS, Interview 122-M5, 2011).

Specifically note how this BMB (Believer from a Muslim Background) church planter explained that it is familiarity with terms and behaviors which functions as a bridge, not content from the Qur’an. This was a common sentiment among the workers we interviewed in sub-Saharan Africa, who again, we point out, were mostly Africans. Perhaps it can be explained in the following way:

Our missionary thinking is rooted in verses like Romans 10:17, “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (NIV). Therefore, since we know that faith is linked to “the message,” i.e. the content of the gospel, many Western missionaries unthinkingly see “content” writ large over all things related to a person coming to faith. Therefore, if a worker uses something related to the Qur’an in their witness, they assume that it was the *content* of the Qur’an which functioned as the bridge. But based on our interviews with BMBs and other near-culture workers in sub-Saharan Africa, the bridge for the gospel may not be content as much as the emotional power of familiarity with Islamic culture.

David Greenlee calls this familiarity “congruence” or an intersection between the terms and symbols used to carry the gospel and those in common use by the receptor community. He says that

Congruence refers to the overall fit and the ease of transition between the old and the new, between the former faith and set of values and Christianity. (2006, 56)

In a similar vein, Decker and Injiru have explored the emotional power of using a familiar Arabic script<sup>6</sup> when translating the Bible into African tribal languages for Muslim peoples (2012). Specifically they argue that familiarity with the script and the general sense of holiness associated with all things Arabic produce a powerful bridge for the gospel. Both of these point toward familiarity with Muslim symbols, rituals, and language as a powerful, emotional bridge rather than the actual content of the Qur'an.

This is not to say that there is no evidence of workers using specific Qur'anic passages in their witness; there is. But that practice has not been widely affirmed in our second study. So, while the debate continues about using the *content* of the Qur'an as a bridge to the gospel, our latest data suggests a slight reorientation to the use instead of Islamic terms, thoughts and symbols that are familiar to Muslims in that culture.

### 3. Worker Boldness and Prayer

The data showed an interesting connection between a worker's boldness in witness and his or her practice of prayer. This is best explained in two steps, the first of which concerns the following two Fruitful Practices:

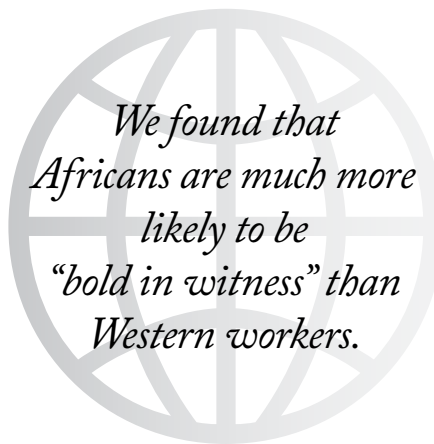
- Fruitful workers are bold in witness.
- Fruitful workers pray for the needs of their friends in their presence.

We found that Africans are much more likely to be "bold in witness" than Western workers, and that non-Westerners in general tend to "pray for the needs of their friends in their presence" more than their Western colleagues.<sup>7</sup> This implies that whenever workers are bold in witness they are more likely to pray face-to-face with Muslim friends. Taken alone this is only suggestive, but when coupled with results from the following pair of Fruitful Practices it forms a clearer picture:

- Fruitful workers mobilize extensive, intentional, and focused prayer.
- Fruitful teams<sup>8</sup> engage in corporate prayer and fasting.

While participants in the overall quantitative survey "highly affirmed" these practices, they were very seldom mentioned in the SSA qualitative interviews, even though we specifically asked about the role that prayer plays in their work. In other words, Western expatriates are more likely to *organize* for, and pray *with*, other Christians, or their teammates (generally expatriate church planters), yet less likely to pray face-to-face with their Muslim friends and neighbors. While conversely, our African colleagues are more likely to enter into something we would call "direct prayer engagement" with the lost.

In the end, all these workers are expressing a spirit-driven impetus to pray, but in different ways. However, we need to



carefully consider the implications. It could be this is simply a demonstration of different kinds of spirituality, and that is probably part of the explanation. However, it is just as possible this has something to do with Western society's aversion to risk. Whatever the reason, the de-emphasis of personal prayer ministry among Western workers is concerning in light of what we know about the animistic echoes and pervasive "fear-power" paradigm in many Muslim cultures. It is important that church planters from the West learn from the practice of their African colleagues so they do not fall back on private forms of Christian intercession as less risky than public expressions of prayer that might initiate public power encounters.

### 4. The "Embedded Worker"

Irrespective of gender, or a worker's country of origin, there were several Fruitful Practices that emerged strongly in the study and seem to be characteristic of a successful church planter among Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, these practices do not appear to be random behaviors, rather they seem to form a taxonomy, or a pattern of relationships. The anchor point of this taxonomy is one particular Fruitful Practice:

- Fruitful workers communicate respect by behaving in culturally appropriate ways.

This Fruitful Practice was very strongly represented in the SSA data. It was highly affirmed in almost every way. Not only that, but we also found that a number of other Fruitful Practices tended to cluster around RSO1 producing an idea we have called the "embedded worker" (see Figure 2 on p. 41).

This archetype of the successful worker in sub-Saharan Africa is a church planter who is highly enculturated<sup>9</sup> into the respondents' culture.<sup>10</sup> From a spiritual perspective, these workers are fruitful because they have a vibrant, expressive relationship with God that in various ways spills over into the lives of those around them. From the sociological standpoint, they are fruitful because *they are themselves* a bridge of congruence between the gospel and the culture they are trying to reach. Also, because these workers are living in harmony with local cultural and social norms to a significant degree, they tend to produce churches that do the same.

### Conclusion

This study offers a focused look at workers planting churches among Muslim peoples in the diverse region of sub-Saharan Africa. The fact that the majority of the original Fruitful Practices were affirmed by workers in this more narrowly focused study speaks of the commonalities which hold

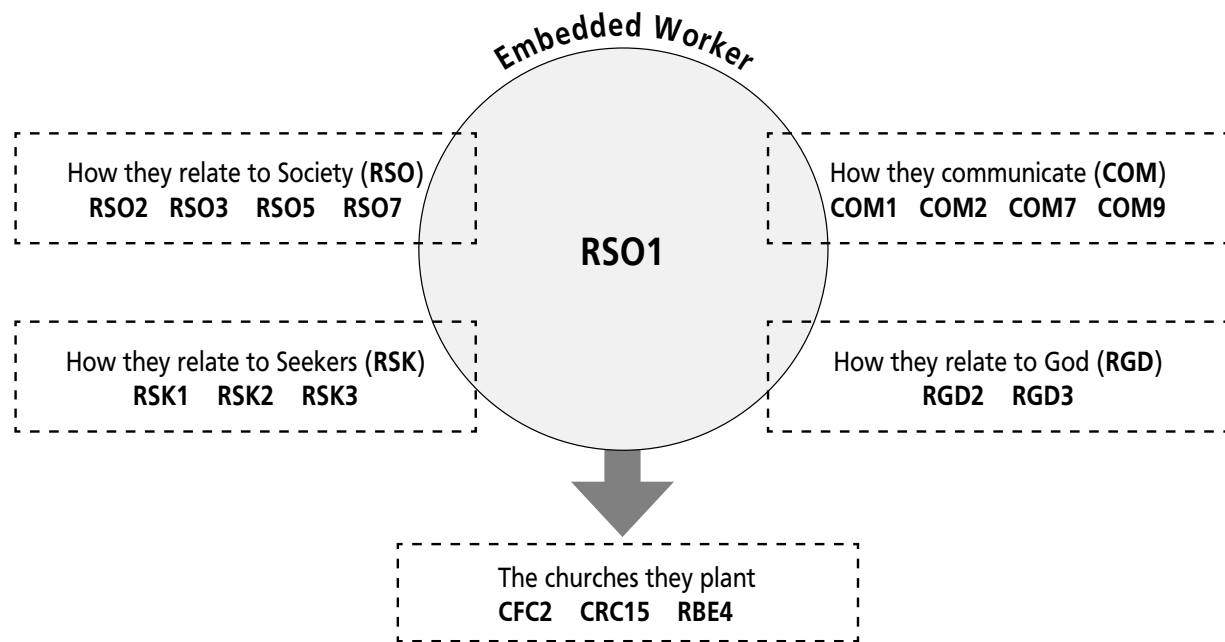
true across the world of Islam. However, our findings also pointed toward some of the ways that ministry in SSA might be different from other regions. In particular, we saw the importance of the church planter being deeply “embedded” in the pattern of his society.

Another highly significant finding was clarification concerning our original Fruitful Practice statement about bridging from the Qur’an. The

qualitative interviews helped us better understand what workers are actually doing. We found that rather than using the Qur’an *per se*, what is widely practiced is that workers are using terms, and thought patterns from the Islamic cultural milieu as a bridge in their presentation of the gospel. This analysis also pointed out differences between Western and non-western workers in the practice of prayer, and how that impacts the boldness of their witness.

As a means of pulling all of our findings together, we looked at a cluster of practices which describe the typical, successful church planter in our study, someone we are calling the “embedded worker.” The anchor point of this “embedded-ness” is one particular Fruitful Practice that was very strongly represented in the SSA data: Fruitful Workers communicate respect by behaving in culturally appropriate ways.

Figure 2. Fruitful Practices associated with the Embedded Worker in sub-Saharan Africa



RSO1	Fruitful workers communicate respect by behaving in culturally appropriate ways.	RSK1	Fruitful workers are bold in witness.	COM1	Fruitful workers use culturally appropriate Bible passages to communicate God’s message.
RSO2	Fruitful workers address tangible needs in their community as an expression of the gospel.	RSK2	Fruitful workers pray for God’s supernatural intervention as a sign that confirms the gospel.	COM2	Fruitful workers communicate the gospel using the heart language, except in situations where it is not appropriate.
RSO3	Fruitful workers relate to people in ways that respect gender roles in the local culture.	RSK3	Fruitful workers pray for the needs of their friends in their presence.	COM7	Fruitful workers share the gospel in ways that fit the learning preferences of their audience.
RSO5	Fruitful workers pursue language proficiency.	RBE4	Fruitful workers help seekers and believers find appropriate ways to identify themselves to their community as followers of Jesus, without imposing their own preferences.	COM9	Fruitful Workers use Islamic terms and thought patterns as a bridge to sharing the biblical gospel.
RSO7	Fruitful workers build positive relationships with local leaders.	RGD2	Fruitful workers engage in regular, frequent prayer.	CFC2	Fruitful churches worship using indigenous forms of expression.
		RGD3	Fruitful workers persevere through difficulty and suffering.	CFC15	Fruitful churches generally meet in homes or other informal settings.

And finally, we wish to acknowledge some of the limitations on what we can and cannot say from this research:

1. *Our findings are descriptive, not prescriptive.* By this we mean that our findings should not be viewed as a methodology for church planting, but rather a picture of what God has already been doing. We encourage workers to reflect on their own ministries in light of these findings rather than to simply attempt to repeat the practices of those workers we studied.
2. *The etic versus emic question.*<sup>11</sup> The responses we collected and studied were, for the most part, the perceptions of those who contributed to the church planting process (etic), rather than of those who received the gospel (emic). We understand that the perceptions of these workers and those of the members of churches they helped to plant may be different. Also, our respondents may simply be unaware of, or not fully understand, the social, psychological, spiritual, and other factors that played a role in the formation of the church.
3. *There is always the “God factor.”* We recognize that church planting is ultimately the result of a sovereign God whose ways no research project can fully explain.

We trust this study will contribute to the mission community’s knowledge about how God is working in one of the most hotly contested frontiers of Christian-Muslim interaction. This report is one small part of a much larger collaborative effort and is the first of several focused research reports the Fruitful Practice research team hopes to produce. Although it is not possible to name all of those who contributed, the other primary members of the research team certainly deserve mention: Dr. David Greenlee, Dr. Bob Fish, Mike Baker (all of whom are on the quantitative research module) and James Nelson, my co-leader of the qualitative research module.

Please contact our team at [info@fruitfulpractice.org](mailto:info@fruitfulpractice.org) for updated findings and analysis, or to open the door for an exchange of ideas or ministry applications stemming from this work. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Speaking of “church planters” raises the issue of the term “church.” In our research we generally used the term “fellowship” to describe local expressions of the biblical term *ekklesia*. We did this in order to take into account the range of terms, and many various languages, used by the workers involved in this study. Therefore, in this report the terms “fellowship” and “church” are used interchangeably as needed for clear English syntax, all the while recognizing that some readers do not recognize the terms as fully equivalent.

<sup>2</sup> The overall survey received 433 valid responses from workers hailing from thirty-eight home countries, 59% male and 41% female.

<sup>3</sup> The overall qualitative module included a total 188 workers; seventy-six women (40%) and 112 men (60%).

<sup>4</sup> The SSA specific quantitative data sub-set consisted of seventy-seven valid survey responses and thirty-six interviews.

<sup>5</sup> Ten of these interviews were with expatriates and twenty-six were with near-culture workers. All interviews were done using a standardized protocol, recorded for accuracy, and conducted in the workers native language whenever possible. They were later translated and transcribed for analysis.

<sup>6</sup> Decker and Injiru are clear that they are not arguing for use of the Arabic language in reaching African tribals, only for the “Ajami” script which can be used to express any spoken language.

<sup>7</sup> This observation is drawn from the entire quantitative study, not just the SSA data set.

<sup>8</sup> Teams take many and widely varied forms, particularly as it concerns non-Western mission agencies. Our working definition of a team is “a group of two or more working together to establish multiplying fellowships of Jesus-followers.” Therefore, we asked study participants to think in terms of those whom they worked with intentionally, regularly, and with shared purpose. It could be just people from their own organization, or it might include workers from other groups as well as local believers.

<sup>9</sup> “Enculturation” is normally used to refer to the way children learn the customs, beliefs and practices of their own people. How-

ever, it is used here in the metaphorical sense to describe the way a cross-cultural Christian worker enters a new culture as a learner, and then goes on to modify his own worldview to be more aligned with the host culture.

<sup>10</sup> This is not surprising since so many of the study participants were planting churches in their own, or a nearby, culture. However, since the data set has a combination of expatriates, BMBs, and other near-culture church planters, this picture has both etic and emic perspectives.

<sup>11</sup> Anthropology and other social sciences often use “etic” and “emic” to refer to an important distinction in the way people perceive a given subject. The “emic” viewpoint is that of “insiders” to a culture, whereas an “etic” perspective is that which outside observers use to describe and classify it.

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