

# Our Story in His Story

*A Case Study on the Use of Mixed Methods Research to Equip Workers for Engaging Muslims*

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## Abstract

*Given the many contexts of ministry among Muslims, which practices tend to impact the emergence, vitality, and reproduction of fellowships among Muslim background disciples of Jesus Christ? This paper describes the use of a mixed methods approach to address this question among a network of cross-cultural workers focusing on the Muslim world. We focus on activities and results since reporting on this project at the Fifth Lausanne Researchers International Network Conference in 2008 (D. B. Allen 2008, Fish 2008, Greenlee 2008). In addition to describing the methods and the process, we will also describe the current phase of the project and several lessons that we have learned. Finally, we explain some of our findings and actionable resources for field workers.*

After several years labouring in their Uzbek village to share the good news of Jesus, Richard and his wife wanted to involve their neighbours in his birthday party. In typical Uzbek fashion, they loaded their table with meats and delicacies that they knew their friends would enjoy. And since their friends typically turn on the television while entertaining guests, Richard and Lucy turned on their VCR and inserted a video of the life of Jesus that is narrated in their local language. Since it is rare for programs to have their language, their neighbours were deeply engaged in the program. Until one moment late in the movie. That was the moment when the editors used a Russian word for “God” instead of an Uzbek word for “God.” As soon as the viewers heard this name, one of the guests got up, walked over to the TV, and turned it off, saying: “This is a foreign message. It is not for us.”

Richard and Lucy learned a valuable lesson about the impact and meaning of words in the local language. They learned that it’s better to use the heart language of the Uzbeks rather than the trade language to present a spiritual message. But if they moved somewhere else, would it be fruitful to follow the same practice? Furthermore, should they pass what they had learned along to their colleagues who work among

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Allen presented this paper as part of the proceedings of the Sixth Lausanne Researchers International Network Conference. Sao Paulo, Brazil, April, 2010. For a related paper from that conference, see Daniels and Martin, “Tell Me a Story,” available at <https://www.fruitfulpractice.org/publications>.

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Muslims elsewhere? Would their observation about local language use be valid? And if they had learned that it's important to use the heart language of Uzbeks, what had their colleagues elsewhere learned that might be helpful for them to know? How could they confirm and exchange this knowledge with others?

These are the types of questions that prompted the formation of Fruitful Practice Research and drive our primary research question.

## Including Muslims in God's redemptive plan through fruitful practice research

Muslims are not excluded from God's promise that history will culminate in the gathering of peoples from every nation, tribe, and language before his throne (Revelation 7:9.) As Christ draws Muslims to himself, our generation is privileged to witness increasing numbers of churches (*ekklesia*) among disciples of Jesus from a Muslim background.

In recent years, a number of like-minded agencies formed a network that aims to increase our effectiveness in making disciples and planting churches in the Muslim world.

In the process of evaluating the progress of the gospel in the Muslim world, the network partners inquired whether it is possible to learn from those who have already effectively planted fellowships or churches. What if we could discover and apply the most fruitful practices of effective field teams across the Muslim world?

The Fruitful Practices Research team explores that question. Comprising the Fruitful Practice Research (FPR) team are researchers and missiologists serving with several agencies in the network. Most of the FPR team have lived or are living in Muslim-majority settings. Various members of the team focus on conducting primary research, analysing the research, creating tools to help field teams benefit from the research, developing materials to train field teams in reflective practice, or writing and producing materials to make the research accessible to others.

## How mixed methods help to answer the research question

Our research question is, "***What are the practices and factors that impact the emergence, vitality, and reproduction of Jesus-following faith communities among Muslims?***" These practices can be breakthroughs of innovation, or they can be intentional disciplines that are faithfully applied over long periods of time. We call these "fruitful practices," in reference to Jesus's description in John 15, where he describes that God is glorified when we bear *much* fruit. Church-planting teams bear much fruit when they contribute to the emergence of reproducing churches.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we study the fruitful practices of effective teams in order to discover those transferable practices and processes that other teams can apply to their own contexts.

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<sup>2</sup>Among the partners, there is currently no standard or widespread definition of 'church.' Therefore, in our research, we allow workers to make this definition for themselves. Admittedly, this increases the challenge of making definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, we simply attempt to describe these groups and do not imply a particular method or model of church planting.

In this process, we solicit stories of effective work from those who are on the ground. Some workers lament that statistically-based research does not sufficiently take their unique circumstances into account—in other words, what works in Tirana may be different than in Tashkent. Yet we believe that those in Tashkent may be able to learn from those in Tirana, and vice versa. Would it not be helpful to discover broad principles about how God is building his church, and then reflect on the best way to apply these practices in specific contexts?

A mixed methods approach seems to be the wisest way to address these questions. Mixed methods research is an interdisciplinary approach “... in which the investigator collects, analyses, mixes, and draws inferences from both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or program of inquiry (Creswell and Tashakkori, 2007).” Tashakkori summarizes the value of mixed methods research:

*The central premise of the [mixed methods] definition is that the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. ... it provides strengths that offset the weaknesses of [either one] ... provides more comprehensive evidence ... helps answer questions that cannot be answered by qualitative or quantitative approaches alone ... encourages researchers to collaborate ... encourages the use of multiple worldviews or paradigms ... [and it] is “practical” and “natural” to use multiple methods to approach a research problem (Creswell 2006, 9).<sup>3</sup>*

## **Collecting and analysing data from the GTFP Conference (2007-2008)**

Our first major effort to address our research question occurred with a 2007 consultation in Thailand that gathered 300 intercultural workers from across the Muslim world (including near-culture workers as well as far-culture workers). During the consultation, the FPR team collected data on topics that explored how Muslims come to faith in Christ, how they gather into churches, and how they develop as leaders. We also conducted more than 100 interviews from these participants, which further developed these topics.

Throughout 2007 and 2008, the research team employed standard statistical approaches (such as logistic regression) to the quantitative data, including 19 variables related to social groupings and social contexts. At the same time, we analysed the qualitative data to strengthen, illustrate, or qualify the quantitative analysis.

The team then compiled a list of fruitful practices, which represented the results of the analysis and provided a benchmark for teams to help teams assess their fruitfulness (Allen, et al. 2009).

The FPR team also reported results in several articles (Gray and Gray 2009; Gray, Gray and Fish, et al. 2010; Brown, et al. 2009; Adams, Allen and Fish 2009) as well as in the books *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Woodberry 2011) and *Where There Was No Church: Postcards from Followers of Jesus in the Muslim World* (Martin 2010). We report some findings from these papers on pp. 5-6 below.

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<sup>3</sup> We explored the strengths and weaknesses of both methods of inquiry and concluded that a mixed methods approach affords a number of benefits. For example, we can corroborate the data, build on the strengths of each approach while minimizing their weaknesses, allow for the possibility of surprise in our findings, and enable a nuanced interpretation of our findings. Further, the results would be more useful for church planters. This enables us both to triangulate similar data as well as to complement the results from each method of analysis.

## Course correction through peer review (2008)

During this time, an outside panel of research professionals with expertise in quantitative and qualitative methods conducted a peer review of the research. While commending the work that had been done so far, the panel recommended that the team conduct a new round of research. The panel suggested numerous improvements to strengthen the method and data analysis and urged three major changes.<sup>4</sup> First, the team should strengthen its interview protocols. Second, the team should develop a sufficient representative sample for both the quantitative and the qualitative parts of the research. This would allow us to analyse data that represents the range of contexts in the fields where teams are located and would represent the entire workforce of the network, which by now comprises more than 10,000 workers (including many from the Global South). And, third, the surveys and interviews should be translated into several major languages, including Spanish, French, and Arabic.

In order to make these improvements, we needed a larger and more representative sample of church planters in the Muslim world. While the March 2007 event was one of the largest ever gatherings of its type and which yielded more data than any previous event, we did not have enough data to discern differences among demographic groups, affinity blocs, ethnic blocs, or other significant variables.

We believe that many of our results have global implications and thus are useful to workers in various locations. But it is likely that there are differences in some fruitful practices among them, and there are almost assuredly differences in how these practices are implemented. In order to answer those types of questions, we needed a larger sample that would represent all the relevant categories for analysis.

## A new cycle of research (2009-2011)

As a result of the peer review, the team spent the next 18 months incorporating the recommendations of the panel. Polling the network partners for information on key demographics that describe their church planters among Muslims, we identified a population of approximately 10,000 workers within the network. They are located in six regions and in various contexts related to team size, socioeconomic levels, urban vs rural, etc. With this information, we developed a sample that would allow our data to represent the entire partnership and for which we can make generalizations by key demographic groupings, such as gender.

The team also developed new survey and interview instruments for this round of data gathering. The aims of the research are to identify the activities and contextual factors of those engaged in witness that impact the emergence, vitality, and multiplication of churches among Muslims. For this phase of the research cycle, the research team has two instruments: an online quantitative survey (121 items, using a nine-point Likert scale) and an onsite interview survey (a semi-structured interview).

The quantitative survey is posted on a secure, password-accessible website. As of 1 April 2011, we have gathered approximately 400 responses. The survey is designed to enable comparison of reported fruitfulness, the perception and practice of the published fruitful practices, and various demographic

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<sup>4</sup> While commending our efforts, the panel expressed concern that our data was based on a self-selected sample, which is not accepted practice. In addition, the panel advised that because our work depends on self-reporting of its subjects, we should describe our conclusions as descriptive, not prescriptive or predictive. Finally, the panel pointed out that the bulk of our data subjects were English-speaking workers from western countries and that we should expand our subjects to include non-western and non-English speaking workers.

variables. We will use multivariate statistical analysis to identify significant trends and patterns, while avoiding prediction. This survey was reviewed by outside professional researchers and field-tested with a group whose mother tongue is not English. It is available in seven languages.

The qualitative instrument consists of interviews with 30 teams engaged in church planting among Muslims, selected to obtain a statistically appropriate spread across regions, agencies involved in the Network, and reported fruitfulness of the team. We are conducting in-depth interviews of teams and individuals which we will analyse to identify key contextual factors, fruitful practices, and relationships between the factors identified and fruitfulness. The interviews will be transcribed for analysis.<sup>5</sup>

After the analysis, we expect to incorporate these results into a revised list of fruitful practices and a revision of the book *From Seed to Fruit*. Additionally, we want to publish the results in various papers and articles that focus especially on regional analysis.

## Some results from the first cycle of research

Even though we are proceeding with a second cycle of research, our results so far have yielded significant insights. While highlighting strong correlations between certain variables, we are careful to avoid prediction.

Throughout 2007 and part of 2008, the team analysed the data and reviewed the results from both the quantitative and qualitative research. We met in the spring of 2008 with several church-planting practitioners to collate the results and seek out common themes and practices. In this process, the team uncovered 68 fruitful practices.

These are divided into eight functional categories (Allen, et al. 2009):

- Relating to Society
- Relating to Believers
- Relating to God
- Relating to Teams
- Relating to Seekers
- Relating to Leaders
- Communication Methods
- Characteristics of Fruitful Faith Communities

Here are some insights that arise from our research:

### The importance of mother-tongue fluency

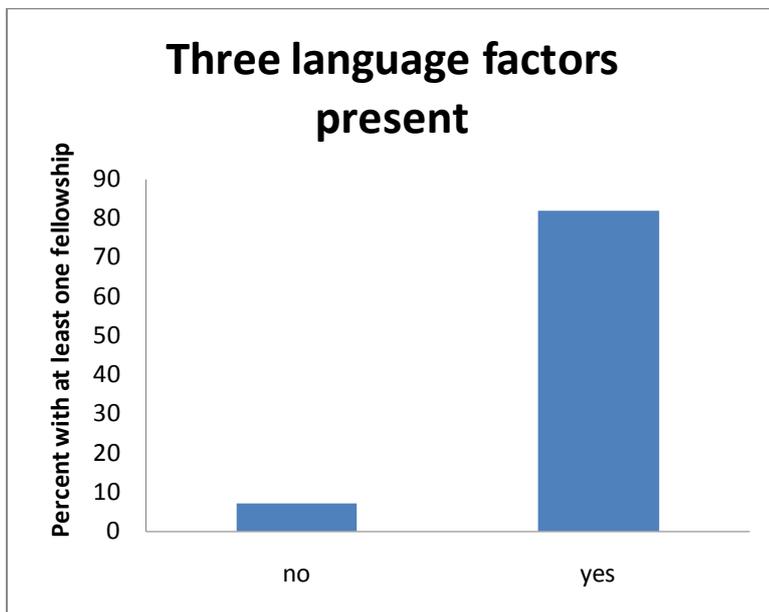
The research indicates a high correlation between fluency and fruitfulness. Our analysis reveals three significant factors to be associated with fruitfulness:

- The team members are working in the local (mother tongue or heart) language.
- Team members are communicating their message in the local learning preference.
- At least one person on the team has a high level of skill in the local language.

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<sup>5</sup> We are still discussing the analysis phase of the interviews. We are considering four main approaches: discourse analysis, grounded theory, case studies, and narrative inquiry (stories of church-planters). It appears likely that we will incorporate all four approaches to some degree.

We discovered that among teams that follow these three practices, 82 percent have planted at least one church, and 41 percent have planted multiple churches. Among teams that do not follow these three practices, only 7 percent have planted a church (Woodberry 2011, Chapter 23). See Figure 1.



*Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of participants who reported the establishment of at least one church or fellowship. “Yes” refers to those who worked in the local language, reflected communication and learning preference in their team strategy, and had one person of high language skill. “No” refers to those who worked in the regional trade language, did not include reflect communication and learning preference in their team strategy, and did not have at least one person of high language skill.*

### **The effectiveness of appropriate communication**

We found a high correlation between fruitfulness and a team’s use of a communication style that closely matches the preferred learning style of the host culture. The research indicates that fruitful teams use written Scriptures among peoples who are used to reading and writing and storying is best for oral cultures. A team in South Asia discarded written Bible studies and Bibles when they took into consideration the oral learning and communication practices of the local community. Seeking the help of local leaders, they began recruiting their neighbours to help craft biblical stories that related to everyday issues such as truth-telling and forgiveness. The neighbours circulated the stories because they could easily retell them to others (GTFP, Interview 3, 2007).

### **The impact of social networks**

We also note that fruitful teams tend to understand and encourage the flow of witness through existing social and relational networks. Instead of extracting them from their situation, fruitful church planters encourage new disciples to remain within their contexts and relationships.

Even though she was a young teen with no education, “Alice” was passionate about Jesus Christ and shared her faith with everyone she knew. As a result, her cousin Mohammed became interested in following Jesus. That’s when Aunt Fatima banned Alice from the household, forbidding her from associating with anyone in the family. Soon after, Fatima became ill and near death. Desperate for her life, she consented when Alice asked permission to enter her room to pray in Jesus’ name for her recovery. The next day, Fatima got up, healed of her illness and praising God for the power of Jesus to heal her. The news spread throughout the community, and several neighbours became disciples (GTFP, Interview 22, 2007).

## The significance of reproducing leaders

Fruitful teams are committed to reproducing leadership in the fellowship. Some teams discover that leaders could be bottlenecks or avenues for their community and spend much time training potential leaders of the community of faith, careful to build godly principles into the emerging faith community.

Others empower existing community leaders when they come to faith. Both approaches carry risks and rewards. Both approaches require wise discernment. Recently, 30 sheikhs came to faith in Christ. The team recognized the influence of these local leaders and encouraged them to immediately share their faith with their communities. As a result, several fellowships quickly emerged while these men received discipleship training (GTFP, Interview 19, 2007).

## Resource development as part of the research cycle

From the beginning, the Fruitful Practice Research team wanted to benefit teams, providing them with actionable ways for them to potentially increase their fruitfulness. We believe that these resources are part of the research process. Further, the peer review group strongly recommended that the team regularly publish their findings. Therefore, the team put significant energy into this side of research.

Members of the team published numerous articles in the missiological journals. The book *From Seed to Fruit* includes seven chapters addressing fruitful practices. And *Where There Was No Church* comprises true narratives that illustrate fruitful practices, as well as discussion guides for teams.

To give teams a tool for reflecting on and applying fruitful practices to their context, the research team developed the Assessment Tool for Teams. This resource is designed to foster discussion within a team to help the team assess their progress in church planting. This assessment tool addresses the team's practices and their relationships within the host community. In addition, we developed a secure website for network partners to download relevant articles and helpful resources. Our research is not complete until it benefits our primary audience: those whom we study.

## Remaining challenges

Fruitful Practice Research is privileged to serve a network of agencies with more than 10,000 workers in the Muslim world. Agencies represented are from the Global South as well as Global North. Some partners are small and located in a few regions; others have large numbers of workers across every region. We trust that many will benefit from such cooperation.

Of course, there are numerous challenges to such an effort:

- **Communication.** The research team is a diverse working group from various agencies living across multiple time zones. Communication is a significant issue and face-to-face meetings are rare.
- **Cooperation among and across agencies.** The level of investment varies among the agencies in our cooperating network, and each has its unique structure, which makes communication a challenge and building trust of vital importance.
- **Participation of non-Western groups,** some of whom do not generally communicate in English.
- **Communicating the distinction between correlation and causation,** which is confusing to many who tend to seek practical ways to accelerate their church-planting efforts.
- **Publishing our results without yielding to agendas** to promote one method over another.

## Summary

Like the proverbial blind men describing the elephant, we gain more insight about fruitful practices by using these complementary methods. This combination of analytical methods has uncovered significant contextual factors as well as a complex of related practices that impact fruitfulness. Our results have led to a list of fruitful practices, which serves as a benchmark for teams to evaluate their efforts. The research continues, however; we will revise the list as we gain more insight by the analysis of increasing amounts of data over time, and thereby gain a “successive approximation” of the most fruitful practices for teams working among Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

The critical review and revision of our work to date will allow us to make use of the best available data collection and analysis tools designed for qualitative and quantitative research methods. Our mixed methods approach will allow us to develop a coherent picture not only of what is happening, but why and how it can be practically applied by others. The iterative process of fruitful practices science will truly help us to more clearly watch what the Father is doing and to join him in his work of drawing all Muslim peoples to himself.

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<sup>6</sup> Dave Gray describes successive approximation: "If you wait until your plan is complete – till every contingency is covered – you will never get anywhere. Progress, not perfection, is the goal ... . Build feedback loops into your execution mechanisms, so you can improve as you move ... . (Use) feedback ... to enrich your thinking and improve your understanding of the situation. Feedback is the most important and often neglected piece of the puzzle. When you first contextualize, you are guessing. When you incorporate feedback and use it to re-contextualize, you are improving ... . Success does not come from perfect execution, but from a fast-moving cycle of continuous improvement. The faster you go, the more you learn. The more you learn, the stronger you get" (D. Gray 2008).

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