

The Growth Challenge: Do We Dare to Take an Honest Look?

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EMQ, Volume 55 Issue 1

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I had been serving among a Muslim UPG for more than 15 years. During some of those years I had led a team of over 30 adult missionaries, pursuing a carefully-crafted strategy to launch a movement among that group. I had personally been involved in working with a team of national partners to plant a contextual church with local leadership. Our expatriate team had been involved in planting other contextual churches among this group and establishing indigenous ministries focused on “leavening” this group’s culture with contextually sensitive elements of biblical truth. Then a confluence of factors challenged me to ask myself: “Do I dare to take an honest look at whether the things I’m doing are really God’s best?”

Hints of needed change

When I read David Garrison’s book *Church Planting Movements*, I realized that in the process of planting a contextual church, my national coworkers and I had taken some steps that probably hindered the reproduction for which we were hoping. My new watchword became “reproducible.” Month after month as my national coworkers and I discussed the ups and downs of ministry and brainstormed new plans, I found myself saying over and over: “Will that be reproducible? We need to commit to only doing those things that will reproduce without outside money and outside assistance.”

After about a year I realized that in essence I was pushing to change the DNA of what we had agreed to do a few years earlier. My national colleagues resisted, and I concluded it was more important that local leaders “own” the ministry than that it be done the way I (as a foreigner) was now convinced was best. I gradually phased out of involvement with the congregation and local team. I blessed them and remained their friend. That little group still exists, worshiping in the local language. But it has never grown significantly or multiplied.

In 2009 I took part in a Scenario Planningⁱ process, involving our organization’s leaders in Muslim ministry from around the world. At the end of the process we came up with three scenarios – not predictions, but “what if’s” that enabled us to prepare for various possible futures. My subgroup was tasked with developing the most positive of the three scenarios. *What if* some event suddenly triggered a massive openness among Muslims worldwide? What if a movement began such as (or even larger than) happened in the mid to late 1960’s among Muslims in Java, Indonesia? Would we be ready?

Our conclusion was that if God permitted such a massive receptivity among Muslims, we would be woefully unprepared. We would be caught flat-footed – running ourselves ragged while most of the harvest rotted on the vine. Out of that realization came a recommendation for the organization I was part of at that time. We needed a rapidly reproducible pattern of evangelism and discipleship. So reproducible that if God were to bring sudden and widespread openness in the Muslim world, we could help that

openness result in large numbers of Muslims coming to faith and indigenous churches being planted. I began a search for an approach that could potentially fill that role.

An eye-opener

Soon after that, in 2010, I attended a consultation that included a talk entitled “*How are we Doing?*” I sensed God’s Spirit challenging me with one question as it was presented – not only for the church globally, but for us in our organization: “If we keep doing what we’re doing now, are we going to reach the goal?”

The presenter pointed out that we might be making some progress in ministry, enough to share some good stories in prayer letters, and yet in fact be leaving a group just as unreached as they were *before we arrived*. He gave an illustration of a fictitious family, which powerfully brought the point home:

“The Renaldo family went to Ethiopia in 2009 to join a small team working among Sudanese Arabs. They spent their first two years learning the language and they did a good job. While in language learning, they also learned the following:

There are about 152,000 Sudanese Arabs in Ethiopia, and their population is growing at 2.51% per year. There are about 750 evangelicals in the people group (0.5%)

Roberto and Maria began to witness using a fast track storying approach they had learned as language students. In their first year, they won 15 people to Christ, making 765 total believers by the end of the year. 15 new believers for 750 gives them a harvest index of 2 per 100.

Now, let’s plug the numbers in and look at the results, using a tool we call “Harvest Fun.”

Year	Evangelicals at Beginning of Year	Harvest Index (Based on 5-Year Average)	Evangelicals added During the Year	Evangelicals at End of Year	Population at Beginning of Year	Average Annual Growth Rate of Population	Population added During the Year	Population at End of Year	% Evangelical
2011	750	2	15	765	152,000	2.5	3,815	155,815	0.49%
2012	765	2	15	780	155,815	2.5	3,911	159,726	0.49%
2013	780	2	16	796	159,726	2.5	4,009	163,735	0.49%
2014	796	2	16	812	163,735	2.5	4,110	167,845	0.48%
2015	812	2	16	828	167,845	2.5	4,213	172,058	0.48%
2016	828	2	17	845	172,058	2.5	4,319	176,377	0.48%
2017	845	2	17	862	176,377	2.5	4,427	180,804	0.48%
2018	862	2	17	879	180,804	2.5	4,538	185,342	0.47%
2019	879	2	18	896	185,342	2.5	4,652	189,994	0.47%
2020	896	2	18	914	189,994	2.5	4,769	194,763	0.47%
2021	914	2	18	933	194,763	2.5	4,889	199,651	0.47%
2022	933	2	19	951	199,651	2.5	5,011	204,663	0.46%
2023	951	2	19	970	204,663	2.5	5,137	209,800	0.46%
2024	970	2	19	990	209,800	2.5	5,266	215,066	0.46%
2025	990	2	20	1,009	215,066	2.5	5,398	220,464	0.46%
2026	1,009	2	20	1,030	220,464	2.5	5,534	225,997	0.46%
2027	1,030	2	21	1,050	225,997	2.5	5,673	231,670	0.45%
2028	1,050	2	21	1,071	231,670	2.5	5,815	237,485	0.45%
2029	1,071	2	21	1,093	237,485	2.5	5,961	243,446	0.45%
2030	1,093	2	22	1,114	243,446	2.5	6,110	249,556	0.45%
2031	1,114	2	22	1,137	249,556	2.5	6,264	255,820	0.44%

They started with 750 and had a harvest index of 2 per 100 (same as 15 per 750). They added 15 evangelical believers making 765 at the end of the year. During that same year, the population grew from

152,000 at a 2.5 Average Growth Rate (adding 3815) to 155,815. The population grew 3815; the evangelical believers grew 15; so by the end of the year, the gap from 0.50% evangelical to 100% evangelical widened by 3800, and the population dropped to 0.49% evangelical.

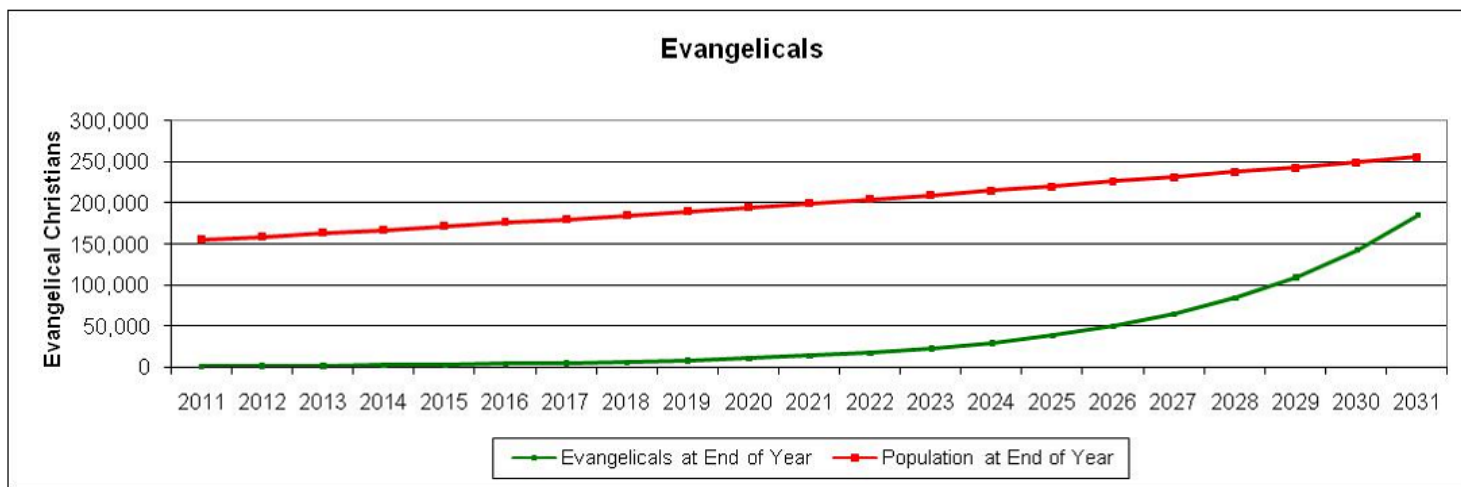
One more thing: look at the top six lines in gray. The average career missionary family stays on the field for 8 years. Only six lines are colored because the family has already spent two years in language learning. So according to the average, they only have an expectancy of six more years among the Sudanese Arabs of Ethiopia.

Are they likely to see this UPG become reached (at least 2% evangelical Christian) if they stay six years after they finish language learning? Look at the last column.

By the time they are likely to leave in 2016 the population will have grown by 24,376 and the number of evangelicals will have grown by 95 (and we are thankful for them) leaving 24,281 more lost people than when they began their ministry.

What can they do? For this team to see their people group become reached, they will need to step up their modest harvest index:

- from 2 to 6 per 100 = 0.6% e (evangelical) after six years; 1.0% e after 20 years
- from 2 to 12 per 100 = 0.84% e after six years; 2.03% e after 15 years
- from 2 to 30 per 100 = 2.05% e after six years. *Note: when you get to this level, there is enough momentum within the people group to continue the task after you're gone. See chart below.*



If you are the average team going to an Arab people group and you are blessed enough to find that they are 0.5% evangelical when you arrive, your strategy will have to include a gap closure plan. Do you want to see your people group have a viable church capable of continuing the task of evangelization without outside help by the time you leave? If so, you need to find a way to ramp up the harvest of the lost in your people group so that they are no longer unreached after six years.”

A needed response

That was just one illustration from the talk “*How are we Doing?*”. I saw that a ministry that sounded pretty good to me, was not only *not* attaining the goal of “reaching” the group, but was bringing a net

result of *negative* progress toward that goal. I came to the horrifying realization that all the ministry effort in which I had been involved for well over a decade was losing ground compared to population growth. More troubling yet, our team's ministry model was being emulated by teams working among other UPGs in our country. I really hated to admit it, but continuing to apply more of the same approach would likely just leave us even *further* behind by the end of my career, whenever that might arrive. I had to ask myself (and later, my coworkers and those I was leading): "Do we *dare* to take an honest look – at our fruit and our projected fruit?"

Lest you think that "Harvest Fun" was the hook for a sales pitch toward human effort and Western engineering, the proposed response was prayer and seeking the Lord. Later in the day we heard case studies from places where God is bringing great numbers of lost people into His family and powerfully blessing Church Planting Movementsⁱⁱ among the unreached. Among them were movements in both Asia and Africa, bathed in prayer and guided through prayer.

That was back in 2010. At that time, the best estimates of the number of Church Planting Movements (CPMs) were not more than 100. Now, eight years later, the work of God's Spirit and the sharing of known data has brought that number to over 650 movements in various parts of the world.

God is doing amazing things in our day, in apparent answer to the prayers of his people. Human intentionality also plays a role in these great things, as do godliness and earnestly seeking the Lord. As Jonathan Edwards pointed out almost four centuries ago, when our sovereign God intends to do a glorious work in this world, he normally chooses to make some use of human means – the means of faithful prayer, testimony and diligent effort by His people. In light of this truth, we do well to ask ourselves: "Am I doing the things most likely to bear maximum fruit for Christ's glory among the nations?"

God's sovereignty is not an excuse for avoiding honest evaluation of our plans and their potential. I finally admitted to myself that unflinching evaluation of strategy was a good and God-honoring step. When that happened, I concluded that I needed to seriously explore a ministry approach with the potential to rapidly reproduce disciples and churches. Then, having explored it, I concluded I needed to embrace it if I wanted to make a serious positive impact toward completing the Great Commission.

A vital distinction

Applying a CPM-oriented strategy doesn't guarantee "success." God is the sovereign Lord of the harvest. He chooses what fruit will grow from our steps of obedience. A person could do everything "right" and never personally be part of launching a movement. But at this point we can undeniably say that some ministry approaches *increase* the likelihood of God bringing forth abundant harvest through a CPM. And some other ministry approaches consistently bring forth little (if any) fruit and actually *hinder* a larger harvest.

As Robby Butler has shown in his article "Movements in Every Peoples: How Peoples become Reached,"ⁱⁱⁱ "The One-by-One Method" (starting a *single* congregation where none existed) results in "a foreign, conglomerate church, alienated from the local peoples." The alarming result is that "Extraction evangelism makes peoples more resistant. **Extraction evangelism into conglomerate congregations hinders indigenous movements**" (italics and bold font mine). Reaching numerous *individuals* among a UPG may feel to us like exciting progress, yet it is usually counterproductive. Research shows that this

approach at best usually brings slower growth than population increase and at worst hardens much larger numbers toward the gospel.

David and Paul Watson describe the clear and important distinction between extraction evangelism and disciple-making movements. They write: “Extraction evangelism is ingrained in Western Christian culture. Yet extraction evangelism techniques create too many barriers to the Gospel to result in Disciple-Making Movements. Period. Extraction evangelism techniques even inoculate people against receiving the Gospel. Disciplemaking, on the other hand, is part of catalyzing Disciple-Making Movements around the world. If Disciple-Making Movements are our goal, we have to make the jump from extraction-evangelism thinking to disciple-making thinking.

EXTRACTION-EVANGELISM THINKING	DISCIPLE-MAKING THINKING
Focuses on reaching one person at a time.	Focuses on reaching one family or community at a time.
Reaching one person is a success.	Reaching a family or community is a success.
Removes new believers from their existing community to make them part of a new, branded Christian community.	Encourages discipleship with and within existing families and communities.
Transfers Christian culture to the new believer.	Redeems local culture.
Viewed by non-believers as destructive to community.	Viewed by non-believers as new, but not destructive.
Results in increased levels of persecution in restricted access countries.	Results in normal levels of persecution in restricted-access countries.
Painful for the new believer and his or her family—leaving one community for a new community.	Joyful process—the family discovers Christ together.
Encourages believers to go back to their old communities to find people to bring to the new community.	Encourages believers to live like Christ within their existing community and share the gospel as part of their daily life.

What’s the alternative? We must see individuals as doorways to families... Our strategies must look past the individual to intentionally include his or her family, community, silo, and nation. We need to realize that the minimum unit for disciple-making should be the household (family), affinity group, or community rather than the individual, and that the group wins their community, the community wins the silo, and the silo wins the nation.”^{iv}

Concluding challenge

I would pose a question to every reader committed to obeying the Great Commission among UPGs, making disciples of all nations. “*Are you willing to take an honest look – at your fruit and your projected fruit?*” “Harvest Fun” is one concrete and objective way to do that. The file (formula) that was used to develop the fictitious Renaldo family’s chart and graph can be downloaded for your use at <http://peoplegroups.org/262.aspx>.

I think it’s helpful for us all to consider where we stand in closing the gap for our focus people groups. It’s too easy for us to be involved in good ministry, even good church planting ministry, which will

realistically never accomplish the goal for which we're aiming. We can too easily feel satisfied with progress, not realizing we are actually losing ground. Or worse yet, to be content with good activity rather than substantial fruit.

The movements we seek are the Lord's doing. And our faithfulness can't determine our fruitfulness. But the Lord is pleased to work through those who follow the best path of obedience that our human understanding can discern. In our day, significant research and unflinching evaluation show that Church Planting Movements (Disciple-Making Movements) hold out the best hope we know of for kingdom growth to outpace population growth. This is our best hope for all peoples to hear and receive the good news, and the soon glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

ⁱ See, for example, Ian Wilson and Bill Ralston, *Scenario Planning Handbook: Developing Strategies in Uncertain Times* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2006)

ⁱⁱ "A Church Planting Movement (CPM) is defined as the multiplication of disciples making disciples and leaders developing leaders, resulting in indigenous churches planting churches which begin to spread rapidly through a people group or population segment. These new disciples and churches begin to transform their communities as the new Body of Christ lives out kingdom values.

When consistent (multiple-stream) 4th generation reproduction of churches occurs, church planting has crossed a threshold to becoming a sustainable movement. While it may take years to begin, once a movement starts, we usually see this 4th generation threshold crossed within three to five years." Stan Parks, Curtis Sergeant and Steve Smith, in "Core CPM Distinctives," *Mission Frontiers*, September/October 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Posted at <https://multimove.net/pub/Movements-How-peoples-are-reached.pdf>, 3-4

^{iv} David L. Watson and Paul D. Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 108-110