

# Friends of the Bridegroom: The Role of Outside Catalysts in Disciple-Making Movements

By Matthew Miller

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The need for a paradigm shift in the way outsiders relate to inside leaders on the mission fields of the world is being sounded from many corners, both from the historical missions-sending nations and those nations that have traditionally received missionaries. Part of the reason for this is because the distinctions between sending and receiving are beginning to break down as the center of Christianity shifts from the Global North to the Global South. The global mission of the church is being owned by the global church, which is a wonderful development. But the financial resources of the global church are still disproportionately in the hands of churches in the global north. Working out what partnership looks like in a world where more and more of the mission force is coming from the Global South, while the infrastructure of mission still has strong ties to the Global North, is a great challenge. Traditional patterns of ownership and decision making are becoming more difficult to maintain given these new realities.

It was in this context of dynamic change that I began my career as a full-time missionary in Africa more than twenty years ago. After eleven years in Togo, West Africa, I experienced a personal paradigm shift. I moved from an approach that was driven by the vision of an expat missionary to a catalytic role of supporting and encouraging African leaders as partners and peers. When we arrived in Rwanda, we encountered a number of mature Christian leaders who had personally experienced a literal deconstruction of traditional church and mission models. They had witnessed the churches of Rwanda become the graves of tens of thousands of people, cut down as they sheltered in their places of worship. Thus, they knew the models of the past needed to be buried.

We began praying for God to connect us with dissatisfied people who would be open to change, and he brought us into relationship with a team of exceptional leaders, both in Rwanda and throughout East Africa. In an effort to better understand my role as an outside leader in my context, I focused my doctoral research on interviewing key leaders of Disciple-Making Movements (DMMs) in East Africa concerning their experiences with outsiders, and their recommendations on how they can be most effective. The results were both encouraging and challenging. I was encouraged in that my African friends all affirmed that outside leaders still have an important role to play, but challenged by the fact that many of our attitudes and behaviors have caused frustration and need to change. In the following paragraphs, I will share some biblical themes that have shaped my emerging understanding of how catalytic leaders can be effective as well as some key findings from my interviews with East African DMM leaders.

## **Biblical Models of Catalytic Leaders**

For many years, I focused exclusively on apostolic church leaders like Paul or Barnabas in my quest to understand the role of outsiders. Though their examples are important, I experienced a breakthrough of understanding when I looked to the gospels for answers on this topic.

One of the most helpful examples for me has been John the Baptist. After John's disciples complained about Jesus gaining more disciples than him, John replied, "*The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less*" (John 3:29-30, NIV).

At a recent gathering of disciple makers in Rwanda, we discussed the meaning of this passage. I was particularly interested in finding some Rwandan words that we could use to describe the kind of catalytic leadership we are trying to champion in East Africa. The person described as "*the friend of the bridegroom*," to whom John compares himself, is known as *umuranga* in Kinyarwanda, the language of Rwanda. An *umuranga* in Rwandan culture is someone who introduces a bride and groom to each other, kind of like a matchmaker, but with a larger and longer commitment. They also help organize and oversee the wedding, and long afterward continue to help the couple throughout their marriage if they have problems or challenges. In all things, the *umuranga* is focused on developing the relationship of the bride and the bridegroom. This requires that they know their role. Obviously, they are not part of the marriage, yet at the same time they have a deep commitment to its success. One of my Rwandan friends pointed out, "The *umuranga* must know when to step out of the picture. It would not be appropriate for him to follow the couple to the marriage bed!"

What a beautiful picture of the role of a catalytic leader! We are completely focused on introducing and connecting people to Jesus, and we know that he must become the one they are focused on, not ourselves. The picture of the friend of the bridegroom sharing the wedding bed with the bride and groom is shocking and amusing at the same time, but all too often outside leaders make a similar mistake. They do not seem to know when to step out of the way and allow those whom they lead to be connected to Jesus—without them in the middle. The humility of John's beautiful statement must become the cry of the catalytic outside leader's heart, "He must become greater; I must become less." We must stop stealing the intimacy that belongs only to

Jesus by refusing to allow those we serve to become dependent upon us, instead empowering them to be connected directly to the bridegroom. This is my greatest critique of the “incarnational ministry model” because I believe that Jesus still wants to be incarnated into the lives of people himself. The moment that the Word lives in someone, I no longer need to be the Word made flesh for them, rather I should shift to facilitating and encouraging their direct experience of the Word in them.

The one John pointed towards is also the ultimate example of a catalytic leader. In Matthew 22:37-38, Jesus pointed to Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as the greatest command—to love God with heart, soul, and strength. When read in context, however, an important insight is revealed: *“These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me **to teach you to observe** in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that **you, your children and their children after them** may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you”* (Deut. 6:1-2, emphasis added). Bruggeman suggests all of Deuteronomy 6:1-9 should be read as one pivotal covenant command (2001, 82).<sup>1</sup> The structure of these verses as a unified command indicates that Jesus’ Great Command also includes the prior instruction to teach and pass on obedience generationally. I believe it is important to point out this connection in order to mitigate a strong tendency, of those whose theology has been influenced by Western thought, to unwittingly interpret Scripture individualistically.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the entire pericope as a unified command moves obedience to the command to love God from a purely individualistic exercise to a multigenerational, catalytic exercise.

The implications of this foundational passage for those who seek to catalyze disciple-making movements are many. Obeying the command to love God begins with us and is fulfilled as we pass on obedience and

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1 First the introduction (vv. 1-3), then the actual imperative (vv. 4-9). Cf. Bruggeman 2001, 82.

2 For an excellent description of this phenomenon, see Baker (1999). Baker describes the way an individualized lens of theological interpretation by North American evangelical missionaries led to legalistic religion in Honduras.

equipping to others. Though the original context of Deuteronomy 6:1-9 is a physical family, I believe the principle translates to spiritual generations as well. Passing on generational obedience requires understanding the different roles a parent, or disciple maker, must play as new generations emerge. Disciple makers must learn how to make the transition from *teachers* and *mentors* who instruct the second generation, to *coaches* who empower those disciples to pass on love and obedience to God to the next generation. This is the heart of catalytic ministry. As each of these roles is modeled by the disciple maker, the next generation is equipped with all the skills needed to continue to three generations. This vision of the third generation must always be at the forefront of the catalyst's mind. Anything less falls short of obeying the Great Command.

When three generations of obedience are established, it creates a system that has the potential to continue to perpetuate itself. I would argue the moment when Jesus knew his ministry would succeed is when the seventy-two others Jesus appointed returned reporting on reaching another generation of disciples, and Jesus proclaimed: "*I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven*" (Luke 10:17). This same pattern of three generations is reflected in Paul's instructions to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:2). In the Old Testament, language referring to "*your children*" and "*your children's children*" often indicates a perpetual, generational dynamic likely to continue, whether of righteousness or sin.<sup>3</sup>

For too long, we have settled for success in the first two generations of disciple making alone. Those who are able to obey God and lead others to believe have been lauded as successful ministers. But such ministry does not lead to movements, which happen when humble leaders understand their true legacy is not what they accomplish, but

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3 This perpetual system may be why the formula of three generations is sometimes followed by the words "*and forever more*" in Scripture (see Isa. 59:21 and Ezek. 37:25). Second Kings 17:41, on the other hand, uses the "*children*" and "*children's children*" formula to emphasize the generational consequences of passing on sinful behavior. Thus, when Moses commanded the Israelites to pass obedience to their children and their children's children, it indicates that faithfulness to three generations will make it more likely that later generations will be reached as well.

what they equip others to accomplish. This shift requires disciple-making catalysts to grow in the skill of coaching—empowering others to minister without the direct presence of the disciple maker. (Even Jesus did not go with the twelve and the seventy-two on their missions.) It also requires the humility to not be in the spotlight. Only leaders who have released the need to justify themselves through their own accomplishments can become stewards of relationships that lead to generational growth. Those who want to build their own kingdoms will never be entrusted to steward the exponential growth of God’s kingdom.

## My Research

This heart attitude is clearly reflected in the results of my research on the role of outside leaders in East African DMMs. I interviewed fifteen leaders from East Africa concerning their experiences with outsiders and collated the interview responses.<sup>4</sup> Six common themes concerning roles of outside leaders were touched on by everyone interviewed. These themes were: 1) Prayer and Prayer Mobilization, 2) Training and Equipping, 3) Building Relationships and Encouraging, 4) Releasing Control, 5) Developing Collaborative Networks, and 6) Developing and Sustaining Movements.

I saw that the greatest positive influence was from outside leaders who were willing to come alongside inside leaders relationally to support their dreams and help them build their own networks and organizations. Conversely, the greatest frustration local leaders had was the result of those who brought outside organizational structures and control. This frustration seemed to be at its worst when money was used to control, by linking financial partnership to submission to outside structures. One of the key goals of my project was to highlight the voice of East African leaders, so I think it would be most effective for me to share some of their thoughts on each of the above categories.

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4 These leaders were from countries of Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

### ***On Prayer and Prayer Mobilization:***

“Prayer with us and for us has been central to the relationship for the outside leaders who have influenced me the most.” Samuel, Ethiopia

“Outside leaders must be devoted to prayer, but not just their own cultural understanding of prayer. They must understand what prayer is like in the new culture.” Shemeles, Ethiopia

### ***On Training and Equipping:***

“One of our greatest needs is for more and more training. Outside leaders have had a very powerful role of sharing their experiences and helping us to understand the concepts of how to make disciples. They expose us to new ideas, and we as insiders can take the opportunity to put them into practice.” Justin, Rwanda

“Many movement catalysts are heavy on training, but they should spend more time on coaching and mentoring. Maturity becomes arrested unless a leader can take it to another level. Movement catalysts need to be one step ahead.” Samuel, Ethiopia

### ***On Building Relationships and Encouraging:***

“Something I appreciate about key outside leaders who have been influential in my life is that they have become great friends, like one of the family. They stay with me and I with them. They give encouragement through visits, calls, and e-mails. They don’t force things but help me process ideas and show sides that I do not see. We are friends and I feel equal.” Aila, Kenya

“Our relationships with outsiders should be two-way traffic, like a family. We should respond to each other’s needs. I am sometimes frustrated when outside leaders want to talk about work only.” John, Kenya

“Don’t formalize relationships—use life-on-life mentoring. Show concern for the entire families of leaders you work with. Be concerned for the whole person, not just the job.” Aychi, Ethiopia

### ***On Releasing Control:***

“Most outsiders want to do what they think—their ministry agenda. But first, they should ask in what way they can help. This is a temptation for organizations. If there is room for discussion, there is a lot of room to work together. It is rare to hear “You know the culture and territory; we want to help you.” Mezgebu, Ethiopia

“An outside leader’s organization wanted to put someone on the board of our organization because of their donations. They asked us to either become a branch of their organization or change our name, which was similar to theirs. But our vision is not to be a branch of anyone. We are not Toyota!” Justin, Rwanda

To be a DMM catalyst, come with less organizational intention—have open hands to help the body, not to claim. You must have a Kingdom mindset. Releasing organizational control is essential for movement.” Aychi, Ethiopia

“A paradigm shift that is needed for outside leaders is to realize that they cannot be involved in everything.” Richard, Tanzania

“Helpful organizations come as learners, then they coach and mentor. They understand us and raise our capacity. They insist on the standard they want, and this also raises capacity. They help us manage and trust us. They catalyze—they don’t have to be in the picture.” Joseph, Kenya

### ***On Developing Collaborative Networks:***

“A challenge in East Africa is that we need to build strong networks and collaborations within the countries. Catalysts must ensure that network meetings happen and add value. Movement catalysts ensure that things move in all directions without having reference directly to them. Some



of the roles of catalytic outside leaders are to bring leaders together, build networks, bring in outside resources to train and expose, and some resourcing to teams (not individuals). One of the biggest challenges for the development of movements is that we need to move away from individuals to groups. Networks built around individuals are dangerous. For movements to grow and develop, multiple local movement catalysts need to be developed in every country. People need to experience seeing things in a different way.” Aila, Kenya

### ***On Developing and Sustaining Movements:***

“To go beyond helping to start, we need to be more coaches and mentors than trainers. Training equals Start; Mentoring and Coaching equals Movement Development.” Samuel, Kenya

“Outsiders often have an unrealistic mindset. Movements are not just about spiritual issues. There are financial sustainability issues as well.” Justin, Rwanda

“We need to empower leaders to support themselves rather than depending on outsiders. This will help the sustainability of movements. Things like business, farming, poultry keeping, etc.” John, Kenya

## **Conclusion**

My research on the role of outside leaders in catalyzing Disciple-Making Movements raised an encouraging conclusion—that there is a vital role for us expats to play. We can fruitfully contribute in concrete ways by doing the following:

- cast vision to local partners
- develop authentic relationships
- empower and encourage them in their own ministries
- contribute to their leadership and spiritual development through coaching and mentoring
- connect them to other inside leaders who share a common vision

- facilitate the development of multi-network teams
- network them with trainers and resources from around the globe
- pray with and for them as they mobilize people around the world to join in prayer to expand movements in their neighborhoods, cities, and nations.

The challenge is that our effectiveness in these roles of service depends on a paradigm shift that runs counter to many traditionally established practices of missions. Are we willing to give up positions of authority and control in favor of informal relational influence? Are we willing to give up the fruit of a movement being directly related and connected to our denomination, missions agency, or organization? Are we willing to find our fulfillment not in our own ministry outcomes but in the outcomes of those in whom we are investing relationally, equipping them to multiply generationally? If so, we may find that around the world there are leaders like those I interviewed in East Africa who will find our presence to be a blessing.

## Bibliography

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