Describing Fruitful Practices: Communication Methods

by L. R. Burke

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 second in a series that will provide further detail about each section of the Fruitful Practices Descriptive List.[1]

God's Word is powerful. Communicating it effectively, however, can be a challenge. The challenge is facilitating a process whereby people hear God speak in a way that will profoundly influence the way they view the world around them.[2] Important considerations include not only the choice of language, but the choice of medium as well. Although face-to-face interaction may still be the best method of communication, a wide variety of electronic media are also available, including radio, television, DVD, MP3, Internet, and cell phone technology. This wide range of options can make it difficult to decide on the best communication strategy in a given context. Research in fruitful practices can provide some help—giving insight into those methods that are proving to be the most effective in communicating the gospel throughout the Muslim world.

Communication Methods 1: Fruitful workers use culturally appropriate Bible passages to communicate God's message.

The Bible is central in the communication of God's message, but using it effectively requires cultural insight. Fruitful workers help seekers find the passages that address the issues most relevant to them. The ability to effectively apply biblical truth to the issues of life requires a thorough knowledge of God's word and an ongoing dependence on wisdom from God.

According to Shaw and Van Engen, "Communicating the Gospel is about establishing relationships between culturally conditioned human beings and the culture-free God who created all things" (Shaw 2003:42). Because all people

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are culturally conditioned, effective communication requires insight into the local culture. It requires knowing the audience. What are their fears? What are their needs and desires? What are their ultimate questions and concerns?[3] The answers to these questions can provide cultural insight leading to important inroads for communicating the relevance of the gospel message.

One team working in Southeast Asia was deeply aware of the need to help people understand the relevance of the Bible to their daily lives. A team member tells that their team started out just spending time with the local people, practicing what they called "strategic hanging out." As they met with people, they would talk about anything and everything, then "as the Lord would bring up felt needs, there would be a story from scripture." On one occasion, team members were visiting with some neighbors when they were approached by a group of women. The women brought a new-born baby and handed the baby to the team member. The women told how the mother had died in childbirth and the father had decided that he did not want to be burdened with the child. As the woman tells the story,

> And I'm holding this baby. [I asked them,] "How old is this preemie?" And they said, "Well, it was 28 weeks in the mom's womb." And I'm holding this baby and looking…and I told them, "You know, I'm not a witch doctor. I do not have supernatural power on my own, okay? I am not a medical doctor. But I know the Physician who is all-powerful. Can I tell you some stories about His desire to heal?" And then I [told] them some stories about when Jesus healed… [then] we prayed for healing and we talked about the power of the Lord and the authority of Christ. (GTFP, Interview 30. 2007)

In this instance, the little girl was indeed healed and at the time the team member was interviewed, the child was six years old! Given this real and tangible need, God had used a combination of Bible stories and prayers for healing to honor his name. The team members had taken the time to learn stories in the local language. Then, based upon the relationships that they had formed, God gave them wisdom to use the stories in a way that connected with the needs of the people.

Knowing what portion of scripture might be most relevant in a given setting can be learned through trial and error, but it is also possible to learn from others. One benefit of Fruitful Practice research is that it can help teams to learn from others' experience. In discipling a new group of believers,

> *What passages of Scripture would be the best place to start?*
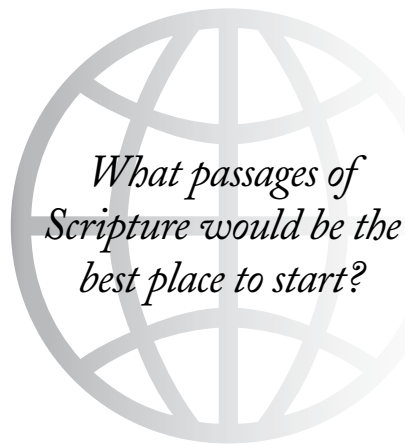
for example, what passage of scripture might be the best place to start? While many might be inclined to think that the best place would be the book of Acts or another book of the New Testament, one worker in sub-Saharan African found it helpful to begin with the creation story. Although the group of new believers he was working with already knew the basic outline of the story from their Muslim background, he found that as they reflected on the biblical account of the story, they realized that there were things that they had completely missed. In particular, as they thought about what it might mean to be "made in God's image" and "to subdue the world and rule over it," they began to gain new insight into "the basic way that God made them to be and the basic things that God made them to do" (GTFP, *Interview 79*. 2007). In the process, their focus began to shift from being primarily concerned with how other people saw them to being more focused on what God might expect of his people. The interviewee reports that this process profoundly impacted their world view and became the foundation of their new walk with Christ.

God's Word is powerful. Applying it effectively, however, requires God-given insight. Those who are fruitful in ministry have learned through experience how to effectively use scripture to confront cultural expectations and to respond to the needs around them.

Communication Methods 2: Fruitful workers communicate the gospel using the heart language, except in situations where it is not appropriate.

In most situations, the heart language is undoubtedly the best way to meaningfully communicate the gospel. However, in areas where more than one language is in common use, established patterns often dictate when one language should be used as opposed to another. Fruitful workers seek to understand local patterns of language use and plan their communication strategies accordingly.

The language of the heart is the language that we laugh and cry in. When we "speak from the heart," we speak honestly and openly. When we have a "heart to heart chat," we talk about things that really matter. Research in fruitful practices has made it clear that there is a strong correlation between use of the heart language and fruitfulness in Muslim ministry.[4] This result is not surprising, given the message that we have to communicate. The gospel message touches not only the intellect, but how we feel about ourselves and others and ultimately how we live out our lives.

It is interesting to note that there can be a connection between the language that is used to communicate the gospel and a person's perception of the gospel message itself. If the gospel is communicated in a foreign language, for example, a person might well conclude that the gospel itself is for foreigners—not for local people. In one location in Central Asia,

for example, a believer from a Muslim background had the opportunity to share his faith with a cousin who was visiting from outside of the city. Both men were fluent in Russian and their local language. They could have communicated in either language. However, as the interviewee reports,

> X could have shared in Russian—he often does with his friends in the city. But he shared in [his heart language]. …his cousin said, "Had you shared this with me in Russian, I would have never put my faith in Isa al-Masih. But because you shared it in…our heart language, I said this message must be for me." (GTFP, Interview 79. 2007)

The person sharing this story could have communicated the gospel to his cousin in Russian. If he had done so, however, his cousin might well have concluded, "This is the foreigner's religion. It may be good for them, but it is not for me." Hearing the message in his mother tongue, however, overcame this obstacle. He realized the message was not just for those from another ethnic group, but was for his own people as well.

The linguistic situation in today's world is complex and often changes rapidly. In fact, it is not unusual for patterns of language usage to change significantly from one generation to the next. It is even possible for members of the same family to have different language preferences. For example, when a family moves from a rural setting to a more urban setting where another language predominates, it is not uncommon for the parents and older children to prefer one language, while the younger siblings prefer another. In order to communicate effectively, workers need to be conscious of shifting patterns of language use in order to make good decisions as to the preferred language of communication.

Another concern for the communicator is situations in which more than one form of a language is used depending on the context. This situation is commonly known as *diglossia*. In the Arab world, for example, there are *high* and

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low forms of the language that are often used side-by-side.[5] The Quran is written in the *high* form of the language; whereas, the vast majority of day-to-day communication takes place in a *low* form of the language (one of the many local Arabic dialects). The problem is that while the *high* form of the language is by far the most prestigious, it is often not well understood. On the other hand, the *low* forms of the language are well understood, but may be judged unworthy for the communication of God's Word. The problem is especially evident in written communication, since the *low* forms of the Arabic language are generally not written. Experience has shown, however, that to a significant degree, the problems of *diglossia* in the Arab world can be overcome by using oral media. Bible stories told in the local dialect, together with dramatized versions of Bible stories distributed on oral media, have proven to be both widely accepted and effective in communicating the gospel message.[6]

Those who are involved in communicating the gospel cross-culturally are keenly interested to ensure that the message is not only being heard, but understood. In general, communicating in the heart language of a given speaker is not only the best way to help him or her understand the message, but it also ensures that the message penetrates to the heart level. In planning communication strategies, however, it is important not to overlook changing patterns of language use and situations where more than one form of a given language is used in day-to-day communication.

Communication Methods 3: Fruitful workers use a variety of approaches in sharing the gospel.

No one method of gospel communication covers every need and will always be the most effective. Often the best approach to sharing the gospel depends on the audience and the situation in question. Fruitful workers learn to use a variety of different approaches and apply them as appropriate to the setting.

Throughout the world, those who have a burden for communicating the gospel in a Muslim context are involved in a wide variety of activities. Some of the activities are geared toward providing for people's physical needs, while others are more focused on sharing about Christ's work on the cross. In one country in the Middle East, for example, a group of workers was involved in a prison ministry among women. They brought food, medicine and other items to the women in prison. On one occasion, one of the team members met a woman who was very sick. She prayed with the woman, and over time the woman was healed. This led to an opportunity to speak to the woman more in depth. After the woman shared her story of how she ended up in prison, the interviewee had a chance to talk to the prisoner about Christ and about the gospel. As she tells the story,

> I just told her about Christ, and about the gospel…. What I said to her was, "I want you to pray that you'll see a dream of Jesus and I'm going to pray [with you]"… And so I prayed. And she told me [she would pray]. And the next time I saw her I asked what she dreamt and she said Jesus stood before her and he put out his hands and said, "I offer you my peace." And so we talked a little more in depth and the next time I saw her I gave her a Bible portion—a book of Luke…. She was hiding it under her mattress and reading it at night. She told me that if her father came for her he was going to kill her. [He would kill her] because she had shamed the family in something she had not done, but she was then given the blame for…. The next time I came…she [told me she] had put her faith in Christ…. The next time I went back [after that], her father had come for her….I never

heard from her again. She may have been killed. It's very likely. But she had eternity to look forward to. (GTFP, Interview 32. 2007)

In this story, God used a variety of means to reach the woman for Christ. The team began by distributing food and medicine. This led to an opportunity for one team member to pray for a woman who was sick. When the woman was healed, it opened the door to begin to talk about the gospel. God then gave the woman a dream and she began to read the copy of the Gospel of Luke. What was most influential in leading this woman to accept the gospel message? It is hard to say. God uses a variety of approaches.

The methods that are most appropriate in any given situation may depend not only on the needs of the individual, but the geopolitical context. The above story took place in what is generally considered to be a closed country. In other contexts, a wider variety of approaches can be used. In one country in Southeast Asia, for example, an interviewee reported that they have a strong focus on helping believers from a Muslim background create an alternate identity as a follower of Christ. To accomplish this, they use a combination of different approaches, including pre-evangelistic magazines, an SMS hotline, and a weekly television program "that shows *X*-Christians living out their life in community as a house church in a village setting" (GTFP, *Interview 81.* 2007). They even have a yearly three-day retreat during which time they invite several hundred local believers. All of these activities have a common goal: to help new disciples clearly see that it is possible to continue as a member of their original community and be a follower of Jesus at the same time.

God is using and will continue to use a variety of methods in bringing people to himself. There is no one method that works every time and in every situation. For this reason, fruitful workers do well to learn a variety of different methods and then seek God's wisdom on how best to apply them on a case by case basis.

Communication Methods 4: Fruitful workers share the gospel using tools or methods that can be locally reproduced.

In order for faith communities to grow without hindrance, the members of the communities must have access to all the tools they need in their local context. For this reason, fruitful workers focus on methods for sharing the gospel that require only tools and resources that are readily available in the local community.

He would tell them, "Start with your wife. Just sit down and tell your wife."
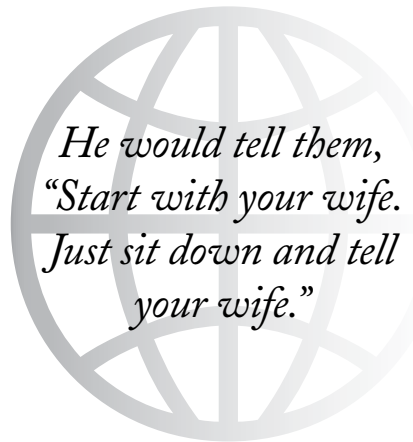
One important factor to consider early on in an outreach program is reproducibility. Not only is it important to choose tools and methods that are reproducible, it is important to build in the concept of reproducing from the very start. The work of a medical doctor working in southern Asia provides a good example of this practice. This doctor reports that he always made it a priority to read the Bible with whoever showed an interest. He would make one condition, however. He would tell people, "I'm giving you my time. And the price of that is you share with a friend or someone else." People would often ask him, "Who do I do it with?" And he would tell them, "Start with your wife. Just sit down and tell your wife what you are learning." The idea was that right from the beginning, the basic concept of "What I learn, I share with someone else" would be built into the learning process. The doctor went on to say,

If you start [sharing] right from the beginning, there's not much penalty.... Early on, anybody can come and talk to me and they just say, "Oh, I'm just asking about his religion."... He can talk with someone else [and say,] "I talked to the doctor about his religion and here's what he told me." That's no big deal. If you start from that point there's not a high price. If you wait until they're clearly identified, then there's a gap that grows between the new believer and the one he is talking to and that becomes an issue. [Another] reason for doing this is that when you pass it on, you learn it yourself. It helps impress [the story] on you.... Once you repeat it to someone else it becomes yours (GTFP, Interview 13. 2007).

The key idea is to build-in the concept of "What I learn, I share with someone else" from the very start, even before a person comes to faith in Christ.

As everyone knows, money can be a great blessing, but it can also be a curse. Teams that want their work to have an ongoing impact have to be careful how they use their financial resources. One worker, also in southern Asia, tells the story of a man they were working with who had been greatly used in evangelism. At one point, God gave the man a vision, telling him that they should begin to use cassettes in order to spread the gospel. As soon as the man received the vision, he went immediately to the cross-cultural worker and said, "Okay, I had a vision…and this is what Jesus wants you, wants us to do.… Let's go out and buy cassettes and let's go buy a duplicator, and let's do this!" When the worker heard this, he was faced with a difficult decision. He could probably find the money and he wanted to help, but even more he wanted the young believer to learn to trust God for the needed resources. As the worker continues the story,

I said, "Hey, I didn't have the vision. You had the vision!"

And he says, "I have to do it?"

And I said, "Yeah…do you have the money?"

[He said,] "No, I don't have the money."

I said, "Well, how are you going to do this?"

And he said, "I don't know."

And I said, "Let's pray."

So we prayed…. [Then] I said, "Let's go home and fast, and we'll figure out how we're going to do this." (GTFP, Interview 75. 2007)

In our eagerness to spread the gospel, we can unintentionally teach new believers that they cannot move forward without outside assistance. This can create a dependency that can seriously hold back the growth of new communities of believers. In the above story, both men prayed and fasted. Eventually the local believer was able to find some money and a visitor gave a gift which permitted them to purchase some cassettes and a radio cassette player from the local market which was capable of making copies. As a result, they were able to produce the cassettes as needed and in the process the new believer had learned to trust God to meet their needs.

From the research in fruitful practices, it is evident that another significant factor that can influence reproducibility and sustainability involves the location of worship. One worker who works in North Africa, for example, reports that in their context they have seen numerous examples of seemingly thriving fellowships of new believers completely disappear in a short period of time. In each case, the fellowships were meeting in the homes of expatriate workers. When the expatriates left the country, however, the believers did not know what to do. Some of the groups stopped meeting immediately and others died out over a short period of time.

Faced with this reality, the team struggled to know what to do with the new fellowship that was meeting in their home. It was a very difficult decision for their team. Eventually, however, they decided to encourage the local believers to begin meeting on their own—at least part of the time.

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A couple of the believers agreed to take them up on this, and they began to meet together in an olive garden outside the city. The worker noted that when new believers only meet with foreigners, it is like they are in a "greenhouse." He continues,

You can obviously play around with the conditions in a greenhouse…. if you plant a plant in a greenhouse and you water it the right way, and you get the light and the temperature right, it shoots up and looks great. But as soon as you come to transfer that plant from the greenhouse into the open soil, very often it doesn't handle that transition. So what we were trying to say to them was that they needed to be growing in the open soil, where the conditions are harsh…. They needed to find ways of doing that…. [At first] it felt like pushing them out, but the impact was tangible and it was very exciting. (GTFP, Interview 37. 2007)

In order for faith communities to grow without hindrance, the members of the communities must have access to all that they need in their local context. For this reason, from the very start, fruitful workers focus on methods for sharing the gospel that only require tools and resources that are readily available to the local community.

Communication Methods 5: Fruitful workers sow broadly.

It is not possible to know in advance which ground will bear the most fruit. Fruitful workers sow broadly and pray for wisdom to know where to invest time in personal relationships. They maintain an ongoing balance between the broad sowing of God's word and the time spent developing individual relationships.

In order for seed to grow, it first has to be planted in the soil. Developing a platform for ministry, building relationships, and seeking to meet people's physical needs are all important activities. However, having the courage and wisdom to effectively plant the seed of the gospel is crucial. One worker in Sub-Saharan Africa reports,

In the past, protecting [our] platform was placed as a priority [over] spreading the gospel. [But] we really desire to sow the seed. We must sow the seed to win people. We have local believers involved with our team in evangelism…. Everyone…is expected to get the message out." (GTFP, Small Group 10. 2007)

Another worker reported that their team has often been surprised at the degree to which believers from a Muslim background are willing to follow the Lord in obedience to scripture. He has found that, "Once that they get it, they want to do something about it." He was determined not to be the one to instill fear in the new believers. He reports that in one instance the local believers came to a weekly prayer meeting and the leader of the young believers told them,

"Okay, we want you to pray because we are going to this city that is under the control of X. There is no church there and no one who knows the gospel that we know of. We want to go there and plant a church and so they will know about Jesus too." (GTFP, Interview 83. 2007)

When the worker heard this, he was very concerned. He thought to himself, "Oh no, you had to choose that city!" However, he swallowed his fear, because their team had made a commitment before God that they "were not going to be the ones instilling fear." So they prayed for the young believers and released them to follow God's leading. As it was, when the men got to the city, they found that people were hungry for God's Word. In no time, they had distributed all of the portions of scripture that they

had brought with them. They were able to follow-up and within one year, a church of 100 people had formed. Overcoming fear and sowing God's Word broadly had produced fruit for the Kingdom.

In addition to the more traditional methods of outreach, new high tech methods of outreach are playing an increasing role in making God's Word known throughout the world. Undoubtedly one of the most important new resources is the Internet.[7] Not only does the Internet have a wide geographical reach, but it is also increasingly possible to target a specific audience in a given location.[8] Proponents of using the Internet for evangelism argue that it is not only low cost and low risk, but also highly effective.[9] Indeed, it is clear that not only is the use of the Internet increasing rapidly throughout many Muslim countries,[10] but the number of hits received by evangelical websites is increasing at a comparable rate.[11]
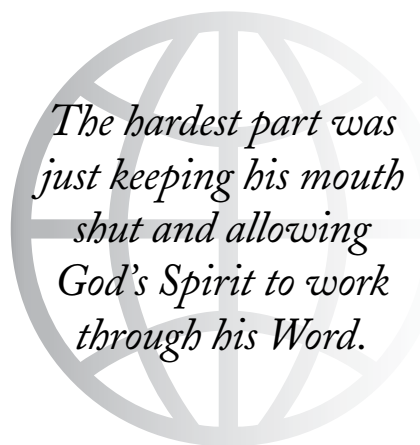
Another technology that is growing at an astonishing rate is that of cell phones.[12] According to the GSM Association, which tracks the mobile communications industry worldwide, the number of global mobile connections surpassed the 5 billion mark in July 2010, just 18 months after the 4 billion connection milestone was reached at the end of 2008.[13] An estimated ninety percent of the world now lives within a mobile reception area.[14] And whereas cell phones were originally intended primarily for oral communication, more and more services are becoming available. Given the rapid advance of this technology, some predict that by the year 2015, a camel driver in the remotest part of Uzbekistan will be able to open up his cell phone, view the *Jesus* film, send a response, and get an answer the same evening.[15] Given their portability, cell phones have amazing potential for sharing the gospel.[16]

Both high tech media and more traditional approaches can be effectively used to sow God's Word. But just as

the wise farmer knows the best time to plant, how deep to plant the seed and what fertilizer is most effective, the fruitful worker will prayerfully seek wisdom from God to know how and when to plant the Word.

Communication Methods 6: Fruitful workers use Bible study as a means of sharing the gospel.

Spending time in the study of God's word allows seekers to discover God's truths for themselves. In some instances, fruitful workers may simply read the

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Bible with a seeker, responding to questions relating to the text as they arise. In other instances, they may tell Bible stories and ask questions to help seekers discover how to apply the stories to their lives.

Effectively sowing God's Word involves allowing seekers to process the truths of God's Word. Research has shown that sometimes the challenge for workers is to step back and allow God's Word to do its work, allowing seekers to discover what God has to teach them directly from his Word. One worker tells the story of how he began reading the Gospel of Luke with a young seeker. They opened the gospel and just began to read. As the worker tells the story,

> I didn't have time to prepare a Bible study. I should have known long before that you don't have to. Just read the scriptures. And as he read, I'd explain some things to him when he had a question. He just accepted

what he read. I was getting excited. I thought I've got to tell this man he's got to pray this prayer. Wait a minute. Why should I tell him to do anything? He's reading God's Word. God's Spirit is working.... He doesn't understand it yet. It took the utmost of discipline to sit there and keep my mouth shut.... So we just read....

In time, they finished reading the Gospel of Luke and began reading the Gospel of John. As the worker continues the story,

> So we just read....I never told him to do anything. But at some point, nearly two years into it, I asked him, "What have you understood? What do you believe?" …
>
> [And he said,] "Jesus died for my sins. I'm a sinner. Jesus died for my sins." So, he just wandered into the kingdom, following Jesus. (GTFP, Interview 13. 2007)

This worker found that the hardest part was just keeping his mouth shut and allowing God's Spirit to work through his Word. He concluded saying, "The power of the scriptures—just getting people into the scriptures. It was an eye opener to me."

Another worker uses a chronological Bible storying approach. He says that the work often goes slowly. He reports that they often spend a year in the Old Testament before they even begin telling stories about Jesus. Their emphasis is on trusting the Holy Spirit to guide seekers and believers even before they come to faith in Jesus. They ask a lot of questions and sometimes give historical background to a passage. Their goal, however, is for the emerging community of believers to develop a contextualized theology—a theology that is at the same time biblical and appropriate to the cultural context. They are convinced that the church will not

> be well-rounded in its theology until we allow each people group to develop a unique theological perspective that arises from the study of scripture from their own viewpoint; because all of our viewpoints are far

more culturally conditioned…than we are…willing to admit.

Their emphasis is not just on trusting the Holy Spirit, but on trusting the new believers.

> One of the principles I've mentioned…is that we need to trust the Holy Spirit and the believers to hear from God through Scripture and so [for example] releasing them to decide whether or not they should be baptized was scary, to be honest with you. I wasn't sure if they would agree, but God came through…. We've actually seen that on every issue so far. They have not developed any kind of weird theology—like any kind of thing that would diverge from much of Christianity. (GTFP, Interview 79. 2007)

This type of approach can take time, however. This interviewee reports that in their instance, it took twelve years before the local community of believers established a clear understanding regarding the deity of Christ.[17] They have found that releasing local believers "to do theology for themselves" is often "scary." But he says they have been relieved to witness how the Holy Spirit has consistently worked. The interviewee's faith has been strengthened as he has seen God work. He concludes, the bottom line is, "If God doesn't show up, nothing happens."

God can work mightily through his Word. The fruitful practice interviews suggest that evangelism that begins with an apologetical approach[18] more often than not only leads to pointless arguments.[19] Exposing seekers to God's Word and allowing them to discover for themselves the truths within, however, is a proven fruitful practice.

Communication Methods 7: Fruitful workers share the gospel in ways that fit the learning preferences of their audience.

Although people from western countries rely heavily on written media, people in many other parts of the world are accustomed to oral forms of communication. Good communicators understand the learning preferences of their audience and plan their communication strategies accordingly.

One of the most important missiological developments over the past 25 years has been the increased focus on orality and chronological Bible storytelling. Research into fruitful practices has confirmed the importance of oral methods of communication in a broad range of different contexts. This does not mean, however, that written media do not still have their place. Approaches based on both oral and written media have proven records of fruitfulness in Muslim ministry.

The reality is that over the range of interviews that are included in the Fruitful Practice Research database, a wide variety of different approaches are represented. Some people who work in more literate settings find that when they talk to people about scripture, they actually "want to see it." Others find that when people learn to read "black ink on white paper" and interpret it for themselves, it is a very "revolutionary" process. On the other hand, there are those who have found that the same people who refuse a written copy of the Bible will gladly listen to oral Bible stories (GTFP, *Interviews 69, 77, 34.* 2007).

Among those who use oral Bible stories, not everyone uses the same approach. Some primarily use a chronological approach; while others choose stories that respond to felt needs. And where some teams base ministry entirely upon oral stories, others use some combination of oral and written media. There are a wide variety of different approaches. All of them have proven fruitful to one degree or another (GTFP, *Interviews 79, 30, 3, 19, 82, 83.* 2007).

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Given the wide variety of different approaches, it is not easy to determine what they all have in common. One thread that joins the vast majority of the interviews, however, is the highly interactive/relational atmosphere in which the communication takes place. For example, a number of the interviewees reported that there were one or more individuals in their area who were being greatly used of God to bring people to Christ. More often than not, the individuals were women. However, their techniques varied widely. One of the women began a literacy class based on the Gospel of John; another used oral Bible stories to respond to the felt needs of those she was in contact with; yet another used a chronological storying approach, choosing stories that illustrated how women are important in the eyes of God (GTFP, *Interviews 56, 30, 34.* 2007).

The women used different approaches, but all of the women showed significant fruit in their ministry. One thing that the women had in common was that their ministries were all highly relational and interactive. The woman who was teaching the literacy class, "walked with the women [in her class], listened to them, and persevered to explain to them God's character" (GTFP, *Interview 56.* 2007). The other women did not just tell stories, they also spent time listening and interacting, looking for a "connection point" (GTFP, *Interview 34.* 2007) or "a felt need" (GTFP, *Interview 30.* 2007); then they chose stories that addressed the issues that really mattered to the women. After telling the stories, they invited the women to interact with them regarding what they had learned.

In today's world, communicators have a wide range of media to choose from. They not only have the choice between oral Bible stories and written transla-

tions, but also DVDs, MP3s, Internet sites, and SMS messaging, to name just a few. All of these media can be effective. The research in fruitful practices, however, indicates that they are most effective when they are used interactively and/or in a relational context. Internet websites, therefore, are most effective when users have the option of interacting with the website developers. Sending an occasional automated text message will probably not be very effective. Interacting via SMS messaging, however, may well be.

Choosing the best media in any given context is important. Some people who reject a written copy of the Bible will readily accept oral Bible stories. Others really want to see the written text. Regardless of what media is chosen, however, they will be most effective when used interactively.[20] Oral Bible storying has the advantage that it is naturally conducive to this approach. Other methods can be adapted, however, in order to allow interaction between participants.

Communication Methods 8: Fruitful workers use the Quran as a bridge to sharing the biblical gospel.

Certain passages from the Quran can be used effectively in sharing the gospel. Discretion is needed, as inappropriate references to the Quran may validate a seeker's belief in the divine origin of the book. In general, the use of the Quran as a bridge is most advisable when relating to seekers who already know the Quran well. Fruitful workers do not dwell unnecessarily on the Quran, but use various passages as a bridge in order to share the biblical gospel.

Muslims throughout the world revere the Quran. They accept it unequivocally as the word of God. Often it is central not only to their belief system, but their cultural identity as well. Of course, there are many things in the Quran that are contradictory to the Bible's teaching. Many biblical scholars have noted, however, that this is not true of everything in the Quran. Much of what the Quran has to say about Jesus, for example, is consistent with biblical revelation.[21] Unfortunately, many Muslims do not really know what the Quran teaches about Jesus or other issues which are crucially important.

The fact that there is an overlap in the teaching of the Bible and that of the Quran makes it possible in some instances to use the Quran as a bridge to teach Muslims about the Jesus as revealed in the Christian scriptures.

> *Some people who reject a written copy of the Bible will readily accept oral Bible stories.*
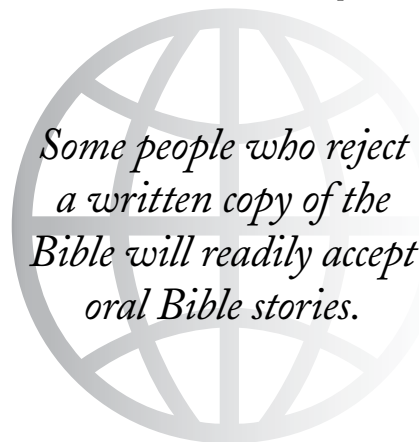
There are many examples in the research on fruitful practices of people who use the Quran in one way or another.[22] Some of the interviewees just use the Quran as a conversation starter. They may not actually open the Quran or quote specific passages. They may refer informally to what the Quran has to say about Jesus or about the "other holy books," and then go on to share their testimony or how God has answered their prayers (GTFP, *Interview 3.* 2007).

Others use an approach like the CAMEL method that draws from one particular passage of the Quran that speaks about Jesus. The CAMEL method establishes that the Quran has a very high view of Jesus and helps "find people who are open and [will] introduce you to others" (GTFP, *Interview 32.* 2007).[23]

Still others have found it fruitful to use the Quran to overcome barriers to the gospel that they encounter in their ministry. For example, one worker reports that the "biggest barrier" they face has been the issue of sin. They found that if people could get over the humiliation of saying "Yes, I am a sinner and that is a problem in my society and that is a problem within me, they would probably go on and…not have too much problem in acknowledging Jesus as savior" (GTFP, *Interview 83.* 2007. When they tried to establish this truth from the Bible, however, they made no progress. As one worker explains,

> If I use…a Bible and open it up, [and read] "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," what happens? I've done this so many times. They argue with me on the point. "Well, no, we're not all that bad. We don't have a sin nature." You lose….[Yet if] I go to Adam's story out of the Quran, all of a sudden they agree we've sinned.

The interviewee continues,

> I'm pulling out verses where I'm saying, "OK, the Quran is saying we need the mercy of God. We all sinned."… [I say,] "You've sinned, right?"
>
> [They say,] "Yeah, well I've sinned."… Because I'm doing it through a Quranic story, they're not defensive….The next time, I don't have a fight when I come back to that issue.
>
> In the future, if they go, "Well wait, but…."
>
> I say "No, [what do you mean] wait, you told me from the Quran that we've all sinned."
>
> [And they say,] "Yeah, you're right" (GTFP, Interview 69. 2007).

The same interviewee goes on to say, when he is discussing the Quran with a Muslim, "I don't tell them what the Quran says, I ask them what it says and they tell me. Once it comes out of their mouth, it's over. I don't have to argue the sin point anymore. They've admitted it. Then I go on…."

There are some who urge caution in using the Quran as a bridge to the

gospel. They argue that referring to the Quran can have the effect of "validating" it or even "elevating" it in an inappropriate fashion. Their note of caution is well-taken. In some instances referring to Quran can undoubtedly be counterproductive. For many Muslims, however, it is hardly possible to elevate the Quran more highly than it is held already in their culture. For these Muslims, using the Quran as a bridge to the gospel has proven to be a fruitful practice in a variety of locations throughout the world.

Conclusion

Christian workers throughout the world long to be able to communicate God's Word meaningfully in a way that responds to peoples' needs whatever they may be. Research into fruitful practices is helping to provide insight into those methods that have a proven record of fruitfulness.

Despite the many new media that are available today, in many ways the old-fashioned methods are still very effective. It is hard to beat face-to-face communication. In the same way, those tools that are the most relational and/or interactive tend to have the best track record for fruitfulness. Bible storying naturally lends itself to this approach, but many other media can be used interactively as well.

The language of communication itself is of utmost importance. At times the linguistic complexity of the world we live in can complicate this issue. However, if we strive to communicate in the language that people normally use among family and friends (their heart language), in the medium that is most familiar to them (often oral), more often than not we will make the best choice.

Insight into culture is crucial for good communication. Prayerfully seeking wisdom to build bridges between the existing culture and biblical teaching has proven fruitful in opening doors to ministry among a broad range of people.

*D*espite the many new media that are available today, in many ways the old-fashioned methods are still very effective.

Through research into fruitful practices, we are learning from the experience of others. Of course, each situation is different. This means that the communication strategy in any one situation will not fit perfectly in another. It is necessary to adapt. Understanding the issues involved and some of the options that are available, however, can be helpful in creating an effective strategy. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

[1] The data sources, research methodology, and references to related articles on Fruitful Practices are described in Adams 2009, Allen 2009, Woodberry 2008.

[2] For a discussion of the communication task of communicating the gospel, see Shaw 2003.

[3] These questions are taken from Brown 2001:12), where he states that the "first principle of communication is to be receptor-oriented." See also Søgaard 1995:99.

[4] In summarizing their quantitative research on language use, Bob Fish and Richard Prinz conclude that, "Cross-cultural workers who were fluent in the language they minister in, who worked in the local language, and who had a team strategy that reflected people's communication and learning preferences were, on average, much more fruitful than those who did not" (Fish 2010:1).

[5] See Fasold 1987:36 and Burke 2008a:7-12.

[6] Gray and Gray report that some of the strategies that are particularly successful in Muslim areas include: chronological Bible storying and dramatized audio Bible stories (Gray 2008:54). See also Brown 2001, 2004.

[7] See Burke 2008a:22-25.

[8] For example, it is possible to place web advertisements that will only appear in a certain locality. Although people outside of the target area "may happen" onto the sight, advertisements will specifically target those within the region of interest.

[9] John Edmiston claims that "more Muslims are coming to Christ online than by any other method and Campus Crusade predicts that by 2010 Internet evangelism will be responsible for the majority of its indicated decisions for Christ" (Edmiston 2007:4). For more information, see www.cybermissions.org.

[10] According to Internetworldstats.com, from 2000 to 2010, Internet usage across the world increased by 444.8%. However, during the same time interval Internet usage in the Arab world increased by 2501.2%, by far the biggest increase of any language community.

[11] The webmaster of a Somali language evangelistic web site reports that during the first three years after advertising their site, they had 88,998 visits, making 225,014 page views from 69,841 individuals living in 4,822 cities located in 121 countries. He estimates that 99.9 percent of the visitors are Somali speakers since all of the content on the site is in that language.

[12] See Burke 2008a:25-29.

[13] URL: gsmworld.com/newsroom/press-releases/2010/5265.htm (GSM World 2010). According to their website, the GSM Association (GSMA) unites nearly 800 of the world's mobile phone operators in a global network spanning 219 countries.

[14] URL: www.picturebusinessmag.com/article/mobile-phones-over-90-percent-world-40913/1 (Picture Business & Mobile Lifestyle 2010).

[15] See Edmiston 2007:3.

[16] One concern with all of the high tech methods of evangelism is that they tend to be designed to lead individuals to faith rather than establishing fellowships of believers. More data is needed to determine how effective these methods are in establishing fellowships of believers.

[17] The interviewee states that the early church was "still debating that issue for more than 300 years early on and yet we would like the new community to have this down pat after eight lessons or something' " (GTFP, *Interview 79*. 2007).

[18] For example, one worker reported that he used an apologetical approach for years with no fruit. He was gifted in apologetics and could win all the arguments. However, people would often end up telling him, "I can't answer your questions, but I don't want to. I can't believe that. I'm Muslim" (GTFP, *Interview 69*. 2007). When he switched to a more indirect approach—helping Muslims to encounter Christ directly through scripture—he was amazed to see the difference in the way people responded.

[19] There was no evidence in the narrative portion of the Fruitful Practice research that *beginning* with apologetics is a significant fruitful practice for evangelism among Muslims. There is no question, however, that apologetics has its place. Joseph Cumming, for example, reports that in his interview with Sheikh Fadlala, the sheikh was very open to what he had to say about Jesus, but that he had honest questions about the Trinity and the integrity of the biblical text. Because of his understanding of apologetics, Cumming was able to respond to these questions (Cumming 2008:339). Apologetics definitely has its place, but it may not be the best starting point for evangelism.

[20] According to Burke (2008a:29), the common thread between text messaging, social networking, and traditional group oriented oral cultures is not orality *per se*, but their common relational orientation. It is the relational nature of text messaging, social networking, etc. that has made them such a popular media across the world.

[21] One way to view this is that the truths concerning Jesus in the Quran may be borrowed truths, but they are truths nonetheless.

[22] The fruitfulness of using the Quran as a bridge was especially evident in the narrative studies of the fruitful practice interviews. See Daniels 2008:34-46, Gray 2009:26, Soderberg 2008:29-38 and Burke 2008b:25-27. See also Woodberry 2008:162, 226.

[23] For further information on the CAMEL method, see Greeson 2007.