

Reassessing the Frontiers

Abide, Bear Fruit: Combining the Spiritual, Strategic, and Collaborative Dimensions of Reaching the Muslim World

by Gene Daniels and John Becker

What happens when you gather mission leaders and practitioners from over one hundred passport countries, mix in five days of Bible teaching and prayer, then add strategic thinking about the Muslim world? Just maybe it is a tiny insight into the vision of Revelation 5:9:

⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." (ESV)

This celestial vision is what launched the Vision 5:9 network over fifteen years ago. The same vision compelled a group of almost 1,000 people to gather this past October 2017 in Thailand in a ten-year follow-up to the 2007 consultation in Pattaya that resulted in the well-known book, *Seed to Fruit*. This year's consultation was titled, "Abide, Bear Fruit" (ABF), drawing on Jesus' well known words from John 15:4–5:

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

At the core of this gathering was a desire to practice and model the essential union between the spiritual and strategic dimensions of our joint calling to reach all Muslim people groups. This required more than *talking* about the importance of abiding in Christ. Mark Kim, a Vision 5:9 Steering Team member from South Korea, put it this way, "we *practiced* abiding every day because abiding in Christ can never be understood without practice." This praxis of abiding was woven together with many different threads: exhortation from Scripture, insights from history, private and corporate prayer, and workshops on fruitful practices from around the Muslim world. Speakers and workshop presenters, hailing from two dozen different countries, were a diverse group.

The demographics of those attending this consultation were a beautiful expression of the global nature of mission in the Muslim world, and

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exceeded the expectations of even the planning committee:

- Delegates were from 103 different home countries
- Over 400 organizations and networks were represented
- Global North: 49%
- Global South: 51%
- Muslim Background Believers (MBBs): approximately 25%¹

It was a fairly even mix of workers with regard to field tenure² and region of service,³ as well as a very fruitful group—a remarkable 42% of those in attendance had planted at least one church in the Muslim world.

We rejoiced in the contagious enthusiasm of many who had never before participated in a global consultation. Nine leaders of an indigenous church denomination in Ethiopia—with nine million members and over 5,000 congregations—came bearing gifts. They wanted to express their appreciation for being invited to take part in this historical gathering focused on taking the gospel to the whole Muslim World. Many others shared similar sentiments.

Another highlight was the fellowship that emerged between the 200+ Muslim background delegates. These believers were meeting others from many different nations and contexts, yet were finding common experiences, challenges and vision for reaching the Muslim world in their own context. In the elevator, an elderly MBB gentleman, grey bearded and isolated, said with shining and smiling eyes,

For all these years, I thought I was the only hammer chipping away at a giant mountain. Now I know there are a multitude of other hammers helping me.

Spiritual

Sometimes the mission community projects a false dichotomy between our spiritual calling in Christ and the strategic use of our human, financial, and intellectual resources. The “Abide,

Bear Fruit” consultation strived to do the exact opposite, that is to remind us that all of our practical efforts can and should be expressions of the life of the Vine moving through us, both individually and corporately. Each day participants practiced our connection to Jesus in different ways. Biblical exhortation was a major component of this, and it was expressed from a truly global perspective. Brothers and sisters from Latin America, South Asia, Africa, North America, and others, shared different facets of the common theme of abiding in Christ as the central “work” of mission. This was intended to be, and received as, a gentle corrective to what is sometimes an overemphasis on methodology. One MBB leader



from Central Asia expressed this well when he said of his own ministry,

We really needed to hear this. We have so focused on methodology that we have neglected prayer. We will go back to praying first, then making plans, rather than planning and asking God to bless what we have already decided to do.

Practicing spiritual disciplines at the same time we are discussing strategic actions helps overcome the Western tendency to compartmentalize. Therefore, we believe ABF modeled the idea that strategy and collaboration can be a natural and healthy result of intentionally abiding in Christ.

We were also blessed to have some amazing “old lions”—veterans of

Muslim ministry in their 70’s, 80’s, and one who is 90, Don McCurry. We also had Dudley Woodberry, Stuart Robinson, Safia Mirza (MBB), Farida Saidi (MBB), Victor Hashweh (Jordanian), David Shenk, and Greg Livingstone. They shared, helped us discern what the Holy Spirit was saying to the delegates, but most of all stood among us as examples of being faithful to the call.

Strategic

One of the main ways that mission strategy was engaged at ABF was through a diverse group of workshop offerings. But to be effective, strategic thinking must take place in a context, so we very intentionally offered a historical framework in which our planning could take place. The second half of each day was committed to global trends in mission to Muslims. We broke out into workshops to learn fruitful practices from each other: we looked back to learn from the past in order to inform us for the future. In all, there were forty-two workshops offering a wide range of topics, including titles such as these: Christian Peacemaking, Developing Family Ministries, Honor and Shame, Ministering Amidst Suffering, Media to Movements, Younger Leaders, and many more. For the most part, these were not seminars *per se*; they were designed to be interactive learning experiences. Not only did this model fit adult learners better, but it was also a better fit for a consultation of experienced practitioners. In other words, there was not a single expert speaking from the front, but a room full of experts who were being led by colleagues in sharing and collaborating across geographic regions, cultures, and even languages.

Collaborative

Providing space for collaboration was an important part of “Abide, Bear Fruit.” From the beginning of the planning process, the organizers anticipated there would be a burst of synergy once the delegates began to interact. To help set a collaborative tone, each morning’s time of corporate abiding was followed by round

table discussions—97 tables in all—in which we drafted a corporate statement of commitment about the orientation of our hearts as we live and minister in the Muslim world. The English version can be found here: https://gallery.mailchimp.com/23a698ce5efe8ebdbdf0d1e52/files/9b0e6904-4f28-4742-803a-8b849706f7ca/Abide_Bear_Fruit_Commitment.pdf; or you may email us (laurie.hawley@vision59.com, subject: Translation of Abide Commitment) for translations into French, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic.

Furthermore, the planning committee not only provided space but also built in specific time dedicated to collaboration—not only longer meal breaks, but also strategic blocks of time that were opened up for spontaneous regional or topical meetings. This was greatly facilitated by a brilliant app created just for the consultation by David Caballero and Eldon Porter. This excellent tool enabled important dynamics such as immediate feedback on plenary content, or connecting with spontaneous interest groups. Many attendees mentioned how helpful this was. For example, one MBB couple from Africa who used the app put it this way,

The best highlight for us was to meet other [MBB] Christian ministry leaders who came from different countries, that we didn't know were coming and never met them before. We made contact with them and agreed to work together to reach out to Muslims [in our country].

Follow-up Initiatives

Following the completion of an event that was two years in the planning, the tendency might be to relax and enjoy the moment. However, the leadership of the Vision 5:9 network is keen to capitalize on the synergy coming out of Chiang Mai. Already two important follow-up initiatives are beginning to take shape.

First, a team of researchers who were present began gathering material for a consultation book that would be a follow-up to the 2007 book, *Seed to Fruit*. With such a wide representation

The “10/10 Initiative” asks people to pray and fast for ten percent of the Muslim world to turn to Christ in the next ten years.

from across the mission world, this was a unique opportunity to learn from the many ways that God is working in the Muslim world today. Therefore, the authors of this new volume will take the material from “Abide, Bear Fruit,” dig deeper, and then make these insights available to the wider mission community. A multi-national team of writers has already begun working on this with the anticipation of a book release sometime in 2018. There are also discussions about how to best make some of the material accessible to workers who are more oriented toward oral learning.

Second, we believe the Lord birthed a vision for a new prayer movement while we were together. The “10/10 Initiative” is quite simple, and asks people to pray and fast for ten percent of the Muslim world to turn to Christ in the next ten years. The consultation steering team recognized the dangers of acting out of triumphalism or naiveté and presented the idea to all the delegates in a plenary session. This was followed by table discussions, feedback, and ultimately a poll in which a strong majority affirmed the idea. Of course, there are always many details to be worked out, but the Vision 5:9 leadership decided to shepherd this vision forward. The particulars can be found at <https://1010prayerandfasting>. Besides these two immediate outcomes, we believe God will birth many other collaborative efforts as practical expressions of the *koinonia* of the Spirit felt by all those in attendance at “Abide, Bear Fruit.”

Legacy

On the last night, Dudley Woodberry shared his story of how he was called into missions as a young man in the 1940s under the preaching of Samuel Zwemer. Dudley shared that in 1951, Zwemer came back to his church to preach but collapsed mid-sermon, had to be carried

out of the church, and never finished the message. Dudley exhorted us that collectively we are the next link in a chain that passes down from the apostles, through a myriad number of missionaries including Zwemer, then to these “old lions,” and now on to us. He ended by asking who would finish Zwemer’s sermon? As we finished concluding our time together, “the elders” were stationed all across the front of the hall, each with a bowl of olive oil. Delegates came forward, as a sign of their commitment to the vision of the consultation, to be prayed for by the elders. It was a beautiful image as these faithful veterans of ministry lavishly anointed the delegates with oil and prayed over each one, blessing them and commissioning them to go back to their field of labor to proclaim Christ among all Muslim peoples. By the time all was said and done, many of the elders literally had oil running down their arms.

The Steering Team for the “Abide, Bear Fruit” consultation believes this was a prophetic image of what the Lord was doing that night, pouring out his Spirit on all those present, for the sake of the Muslim world. And we pray that the entire consultation was a prophetic demonstration that abiding with Jesus, together in mission, will release the strategic and collaborative efforts needed to bring the gospel to every tribe, language and people of the Muslim world. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Because of language barriers, over 100 delegates did not complete the registration survey, thus the exact total of MBBs is not known.

² 1–5 years service: 22%; 6–10 years: 17%; 11–15 years: 14%; 16–10 years: 15%; 20+ years: 29% (3% skipped).

³ Middle East & Turkey: 18%; Sub-Saharan Africa & the Sahel: 23%; North Africa: 10%; Central Asia: 8%; South Asia: 17%; Southeast Asia: 16%; North America: 4%; Europe: 3%.