

PART I: SOCIAL MEDIA MINISTRY

Using Media to Accelerate Church planting

by Frank Preston, PhD

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One of the challenges that we have in missions is going into a place where the gospel has not been established and seeing reproducing fruit from our work. Our friends Ron and Ann arrived in Southeast Asia with hopes of seeing the gospel established in a major city. They moved into a neighbourhood, and spent significant time living among their neighbours, going to neighbourhood activities, participating in local religious rituals – things they felt were salt and light in an incarnational approach to ministry. After nearly twenty years, Ron commented to me that even though he did the ‘right things’ it seemed to him that the people in the four-block radius were simply not interested in Christ, though they personally liked Ron and Ann and cried when they returned to their home country.

The purpose of this article is to discuss how using media can identify pockets of people who are truly interested in the gospel. By using media to help identify people who are open to spiritual change, we can cultivate the emergence of disciple-making movements. As Robert Coleman notes in *Master Plan of Evangelism* (Coleman 2006), an important step in training up leaders who can spark a church planting movement involves finding people in whom we can invest. To do this, we need to find people from an unreached population who are spiritually open.

The article ‘2 ½ percent: Church planting movements from the periphery to the center’ (McGuire 2010)² observes that at least 2 ½ percent of any population is open to religious change. This is based on the principle of anomalies and is considered foundational in understanding social movements (Rogers, 1995). People converting from one religion to another while residing in the majority religion context are considered social anomalies. Though in one sense having 2 ½ percent of the population open to religious change can be heartening, many of us can attest

² The article 2 ½ percent can be obtained here: <https://media2movements.org>

that the antithesis of this calculation is that we have a 97.5 percent chance of spending time with people who are not open to conversion. Key to proper selection is finding the *right kinds* of people who will be open to religious change and will become those who contribute to a movement.

As we observe Paul's ministry, we make an intriguing discovery. Paul was called to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. In Acts 13:46 Paul makes it clear to Jewish leaders of a synagogue that since they rejected the Gospel message, he and Barnabas were turning their attention to the Gentiles. But as we scan to Act 17, we read in verse 2 that 'as was his custom' Paul and Barnabas were back in the synagogue reasoning with those who had gathered. Why would Paul in chapter 13 disavow Jews and turn his attention to the Gentiles and then in chapter 17 make it his *modus operandi* to go the synagogue? The answer lies in the outcome. 'A large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women' followed Paul (verse 4). Instead of preaching to the masses in the Roman bathhouses, Paul felt the place to identify people who had the best potential for spiritual reproduction would be among the God-fearing Gentiles in the Jewish synagogue.

This principle was codified in research done by Martin Fishbein (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975) where he states that the best predictor of people being willing to adopt a new behaviour such as conversion is past behaviour. In other words, Greeks attending the synagogue were more likely to become Christians than the Greeks attending bath houses. In terms of persuasion, Paul looked for people who were predisposed to persuasion by the gospel message as compared to people who did not demonstrate receptive behaviour. Paul felt he had a greater chance of finding those who were open to religious change in the synagogue than in the bath houses.

John Wesley taught that since prevenient grace exists for those in the conversion process, God is involved in heart change that leads to salvation (Cox, 1969). Jesus states in John 6:44, 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them'. According to Wesley and, by extension, Fishbein, people who are being drawn to God will demonstrate conversion behaviour. We in missions often refer to this as 'someone being open to the gospel'. In Disciple Making Movement (DMM) training, we encouraged people to make Shema statements (*statements about God that we hope will identify seekers*) with people we were around in order to see who responded with interest to such statements. Such responses could indicate someone's openness to discuss aspects of the gospel.

Spiritual Pathways

In the gospel of John, we observe at least two spiritual pathways that people followed in embracing a 'righteousness by faith'. Though these are not exhaustive, they do offer a pattern. The first is Nicodemus in John 3. This member of the ruling council had theological questions for Jesus regarding (re)birth from above as

opposed to salvation by birth right, which was a common position of the Sanhedrin. Jesus directed him to correctly understand that birth by the Spirit is not dependent on one's lineage. Nicodemus' spiritual journey was through a theological pathway.

The second example is found in John 4 when Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well. This woman was coming to Jesus through her issues of shame. She had had five husbands and the man she was with now was not a husband. Since it was not the custom for a woman to be an initiator of marriage or divorce, and since the law and customs stated that the punishment for adultery was stoning, clearly this woman's multiple marriages were the result of something other than bad choices or immorality. Some scholars have surmised, based upon the context of her culture, that perhaps her barrenness led to multiple divorces. Jesus' illumination of her marital history was not, as some have suggested, to point out sin, but rather to speak to a core identity issue (barrenness), an issue of shame in that culture. The passage notes (v. 6) that the well from which she was drawing water was Jacob's well, on the land he had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's wife Rachel had been barren (Genesis 30). This hints that the woman may have been there to obtain some sort of *Barakah*, a special blessing or power normally obtained from objects, to overcome her shame. Hence, Jesus discusses with her the ability to receive 'living water' to satisfy her brokenness.

Another example of a spiritual pathway is the case of the God-fearing Greeks. Paul was able to identify a Greek subpopulation who broke out of cultural norms and was willing to adopt an alternative religious practice. It is clear from the passage in Acts 17 that Paul made this a ministry model. In Acts 16, when Paul entered Philippi, a Roman military city that banned synagogues, Paul went outside the city by a river to find where Jews could pray. Paul sat down with Lydia, a worshipper of God, who most commentators note was a proselyte or 'God fearing Greek'.

In a blog post at <https://media2movements.org> I discuss these pathways as *persona*, characteristics of people who are most open to embrace 'righteousness by faith'. Each culture has macro, meso and micro conditions that seem to facilitate conversion. *Macro* conditions could be issues like the rise of ISIS that has left many Muslims disillusioned with Islam. *Micro* would be someone getting cancer and asking 'Am I being punished for sin'? A *meso* (Latin for 'middle') condition would be community religious leaders sexually abusing children, and again, making people disillusioned with God. Generally, these can be 'bucketed' into seven personas³,

³ There is nothing magical about seven personas. But I find starting with seven seems to give media ministries the opportunity to think creatively. What we generally find is that focusing on four personas ends up being the most productive and three others are scuttled because they are not impacting the target audience. It is not uncommon that one or two of the four successful ones can be split into one or more as data guides a deeper understanding of who are open. 'Unemployed young men' will be

keeping in mind that this list of seven will shift from culture to culture. For example, divorced women/single mothers may be a persona in the west, whereas in Saudi Arabia a persona may be religiously oppressed women. Recently a media ministry identified Syrian refugees as a population that was open to the gospel and is shaping a media campaign for these displaced populations.

The way we generally identify the seven personas is to begin with data. Who in the past have responded to media messages? In Southeast Asia, we identified 26% of our media respondents who asked questions: 'Does Allah care that I exist?' Another 24% wondered if 'Allah hears our prayers'. We shaped a media campaign called *Care* and *Prayer* which was designed around these two personas, and which resulted in the single largest media response from Muslims that we have experienced. Prior to that most of our materials were apologetics, which we found out from our research was an issue for less than 2%. Focusing on the group that was open was more productive than pushing out an apologetics message that *we* felt was important.

In the absence of research data, we gather testimonies of converts from the past and look for patterns. If there are no converts, we look at near ethnic groups and obtain ideas. I have a friend working in South Asia who hired Hindus to tell gospel stories from the Bible to the people they felt were open. These 'insiders' knew who was open and who was not. Though this practice is not recommended, it does provide an example of being creative in having locals identify what sub-populations are most open and which ones are not.

Media Changing the Calculation of 2 ½ percent

The question that this article is addressing is: if we have a 2 ½ percent chance of finding social anomalies who can become world changers, what can we do to increasing the likelihood that we will identify those who are receptive to spiritual change, as Paul did by going to the synagogue and identifying God-fearing Greeks?

In an observation made in the 2 ½ percent article (McGuire, 2010), it was suggested that a media strategy has the potential to identify a subpopulation of potential candidates. But after conducting significant research on media used in church planting by most of the major media organizations, several observations can be made.

First, media does a poor job of persuading people to become followers of Jesus. Even though a media organization may spend significant resources in developing a great media product, be it a web site, video, or a radio program, if people don't resonate with the message, they will tune it out. The reason for this is explained in the article *Use and Gratifications Model* (Rubin, 2002). Essentially this

different than 'unemployed middle age' and as a result, media strategies can be adjusted to their particular spiritual pathway.

model states that people use media to satisfy their own needs and not the needs of the producer. If a message conflicts with previously held beliefs or values, a person will enter a period of cognitive dissonance and will ‘tune out’ in order to maintain balance (Petty & Priester, 2002). But media can identify pockets of individuals who are open to religious change, much like Paul was able to do in Acts 17.

Second, though media is generally passively consumed, media producers usually include a ‘call to action’ at the end of their product for a person to make a ‘transformational’ decision, which is a very active choice. It is nearly impossible for someone to make such a commitment. People simply are not converted at the end of a broadcast or after reading a website message. But allowing them to go through a conversion process allows them to move from passive consideration to becoming an active seeker. This generally involves having a follow-up plan built into the media project. This follow-up plan should include a way for the person to respond via text or email to the media developer to begin a spiritual conversation.

Similar to the second point above, the third observation is that most media developers consider conversion to be binary – one is either in or out, saved or not saved. There are a host of good reasons for thinking conversion is a binary transaction, but one reason is that most Christian media theory was shaped from secular marketing practices where a customer was offered a product that was designed to meet a felt need, and, if the customer felt compelled, they purchased the product. Market researchers call this ‘low-identity decision making’, where a person will add a product to one’s currently held identity structure. Buying a toothpaste generally does not change who you are, but ‘adds to’ one’s identity structure. In contrast, conversion involves what is called ‘high-identity decision making’ which by nature involves ‘stages, steps and processes’ in the decision-making process leading to a transformed identity (Andreasen, 1995). These stages, steps and processes are central to developing a media strategy as compared to developing a media product. The Arab World Media ‘Media to Movements’ team is available to consult with field teams considering developing a media strategy with the unique ‘stages, steps and processes’ of a *high-identity conversion media strategy* that fits their field context.

The last and most significant observation is that most western media products consider conversion as an individualistic process. Does not Romans 10:9-10 lend itself to a personal decision of faith? But when one reads the conversion experiences recorded in the book of Acts, nineteen of the twenty-one conversion stories occur in a group context. For example, in Acts 16 we read of the Philippian jailer:

³¹They said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’. ³²And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. ³³And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. ³⁴And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

Notice the number of times 'household' and 'house' are mentioned. The majority of conversions in Acts involved a group experience.

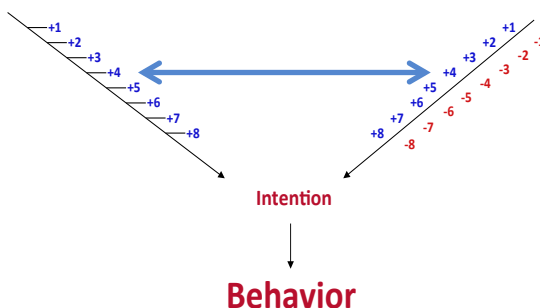
Fishbein gives some insight into this phenomenon (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Fishbein & Cappella 2006). As stated earlier, Fishbein held that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. He calls this *intentionality*. Intentionality is a function of belief. Simply stated, if a person believes that adopting belief X will lead to outcome Y, then they will demonstrate intentionality in behaviour. If a person believes a certain car will meet their needs, they will seek out that car by searching ads or going to a dealer or sales lot. One does not randomly make a wrong turn on the freeway and come upon a car dealership and then buy a car; they *believed* and then *went* to a dealership. As stated earlier, beliefs are not binary; believe or not believe. Rather, they are scaled. One could place weak beliefs at a +1 and then strong beliefs at a +8.

A person's friends and relatives (also called a reference group) also have an opinion about a belief. Some agree with a person's ideas and others do not. Hence a reference group can be scaled, +1 to +8 in support and others will be -1 to -8 in

Theory of Reasoned Action by Martin Fishbein

The individual's beliefs that the behavior leads to certain outcome and certain evaluations of these outcomes

The person's beliefs that the specific individuals or groups think he or she should or should not perform the behavior and his./her motivation to comply with the specific referents



Ajzen I, Fishbein M. Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1980.

resistance.

In high-level decision making, a person will be passive in belief formation at the +1 to +3 zones; they will give only a low amount of cognitive energy to a weak belief and subsequent decisions. As they grow more active in beliefs and decisions at the +4 zones, an interesting dynamic emerges. They begin to ask their reference group their opinions on the issue (Fiske & Goodwin 1994; Stark & Finke 2000). Secondly, if they want to continue in their belief, they will begin to segment their reference group into those 'for' and those 'against'. It is not uncommon for a person to only consult the 'for' when they are growing stronger. This begins to shape a clique. In *The 2 ½ Percent* article (McGuire 2010), he discusses the various roles each member of the clique plays in group decision making. A benefit to clique decision making is the social construct called *entitivity*, which is derived from the word *entity*. Entitivity relates to how a group defines its own identity. One characteristic of entitivity is that individual members of a group will go to greater extremes than individuals themselves (Welbourne 1999). Thomas in John 11:16 was an example of an expression of entitivity. The group provides an environment that fosters faith and commitment in the face of persecution.

Summary

This paper has argued that selection is a key factor in beginning a church planting movement. But selection, by nature, has to have a set of choices from which the church planter can choose. Since a small number of social anomalies are willing to consider a religion other than the majority religion, a media strategy can be used to identify greater numbers than the typical 2 ½ percent.

A misunderstanding of conversion can lead the church planter to be satisfied with 'converts' who are only adopting or adhering to a set of religious teaching. What is necessary to reflect true conversion is life transformation that produces disciples that make disciples. Media strategies need to point toward high-identity decision making where a person will make conversion decisions that follow 'steps, stages and processes' that lead to transformational decision making.

Several weaknesses were noted in most media organizations, namely thinking of persuasion as the end goal, and not identifying people whom God is calling. Associated with this is thinking that decisions are generally binary: believe or not believe. In actuality people will move from passively to actively considering the gospel. Media strategies often consider decision making to be individualistic, but in reality, people often make high-identity decisions as a group. Group decisions can be beneficial since the clique can serve as a support system when individuals experience persecution.

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