

Discoveries on the Way to Discovery Groups

by L.D. Waterman

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In the last issue of Seedbed, we saw lively interaction on the subject of Exponential Disciple-Making—the ‘Discovery Model’ approach to launching church planting movements. Among the key elements in the approach are ‘living out loud’ as a spiritual person, casting a net widely for those people in whom God is already doing something uniquely positive (a ‘person of peace’ or POP) and aiming to win families (the *oikos*² or group of reference of the POP) through a process of chronological Bible study (Discovery Groups). These groups are designed to become house fellowships as together they come to understand who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

We can read stories about the amazing fruit being produced by God through this approach in publications like *Miraculous Movements* by Jerry Trousdale or recent articles in *Mission Frontiers* (for example, in the July-August 2012 and September-October 2012 issues). But some of us may wonder, ‘What does the fruit of the Discovery model look like for those who are not yet seeing church planting movements come out of implementing this approach?’

I recently conducted a small survey of those who have been through a one-week training in the Discovery approach to catalyzing church planting movements, or CPMs. I asked them about the impact that the training has had on them (see more on the survey below). For many, the Discovery approach has given a fresh spiritual energy and clarity of purpose in ministry. One said, ‘There has been an incredible impact on my relationship with God. That relationship seems to grow ever sweeter and joyful. And I sense that He is giving more and more of His eyes to see people around and His compassion as I pass them or interact with them and more of a burden for their salvation.’ Another explained, ‘For a long time I talked about service as if it was something that I did; I felt responsible for speaking to cause other people to change their way of thinking. It has been a release to search for leaders that he has already prepared. This simple truth has released me from guilt and a sense of failure.’

Some respondents to the survey testify of how the Discovery approach has touched their family, with one saying it has ‘increased our hospitality and opened our home for more visitors.’ Another wrote, ‘We spend our time differently. A trip to the store is an opportunity to find someone whose heart has been prepared. We pray more because we have something specific to ask for.’

2. NT Greek, usually translated ‘household’ or ‘house,’ found in texts such as Matthew 10:12-14 and Luke 9:4; 10:5,7. In NT times, this usually included the extended family and workers. In modern contexts, this term is sometimes applied to a person’s sphere of close relational influence.

Stories abound of how this approach has positively influenced workers' ministries. Participants have named benefits including:

- increased boldness and directness
- a stronger dedication to remain in their community
- renewed purpose and desire to implement CPM whole heartedly
- renewed hope
- lessened pressure
- a better focus and a better way to do ministry.

After the training, one house church leader changed the focus of his ministry to obedience and becoming a disciple. He has not only trained his own church but is already training the leaders in a second house church in the Discovery approach to CPM. Another survey respondent said,

I am much more likely to start spiritual conversations with new contacts. I've used the cousin focus principles on several occasions and have seen doors remain open for further relationship and dialogue. In the past, I often was led down dead-end trails by answering questions the traditional way, resulting in closed doors. Since applying these principles I cannot say I've found a POP or brought anyone to faith, yet I can say that I've never had the door closed outright either.

One other respondent shared,

The thing that has most affected me has been the freedom of what it means to 'live out loud'. I've had a difficult and discouraging time before trying to fit into a 'box' of evangelistic methods, especially trying to share the whole gospel all at once with someone I hardly know. However, walking with the Spirit, doing *Shema*³ and seeking POPs brings a lot of freedom from sticking to a prescribed method.

One of the key elements of the Discovery model is finding a POP (person of peace). Without a POP, there is no Discovery Group.⁴ Thus, finding a POP is a primary activity for those seeking to catalyze a CPM using the Discovery model. This seeking for a POP may be the worker's primary activity for months or even years.

As an example, take the well-documented movement among the Bhojpuri of North India (Watson and Watson 2009, ¶697-700)¶. What some readers might

3. *Shema* is the first Hebrew word in Deut. 6:4. It means 'hear and obey'. *Shema* statements and actions show that we are spiritual people who love God and obey Him.

4. An effective Discovery *Bible Study* could be done by believers, and there could be various forms of one-on-one discipleship studies without a person of peace. But we're defining a Discovery Group as 'a group of *two or more pre-believers* that has been gathered by a POP (or an interested seeker) and is working through a list of Bible stories chronologically, leading them to become obedient disciples of Christ'.

not have heard is that David Watson looked for a POP for a number of years before actually finding one. He has written, "The mission organization I worked for threatened to fire me each year during my annual review. "You're not doing your job," they said. "Give me time," I said. "We're trying something new. Trust

me." And for some reason, they did. All of a sudden, we saw eight churches planted in one year' (698).

To get some idea of the approaches being used and the response to those approaches, two surveys were done among workers who had attended one-week training in the Discovery CPM approach. One survey was conducted verbally at an area retreat among workers in a specific part of the Middle East. The other survey was conducted through email and sent to those who work among Muslims in a wide variety of places around the globe.

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The original list of activities was entitled 'Top 10 Steps for Finding POPs,' but counting subdivisions and sub-subdivisions, the actual number of items in the survey was twenty-five. The survey included instructions to 'mark any approach you have used and any approach you do not plan to use again.' Very few respondents reported receiving negative responses when using any of these approaches. Those few will be noted in the comments below.

The results of each survey were tabulated and ranked according to the frequency with which they were used. The first column in the table below contains data from seventeen respondents working in the Middle East (ME); the second column contains data from thirty-one respondents working among Muslims around the world. The results of the two surveys are on the next page.

A few observations are worth making about the results of these surveys. In both surveys, all respondents have included *Shema* statements and actions as a part of their everyday life. While some shema-type activities may have been a part of workers' lifestyle prior to the training, many have reported a new attitude and more intentionality and frequency in 'salting' their everyday conversations and interactions with verbal and visual evidence that they are a spiritual person. For some, this has been a significant shift from prior efforts to maintain an almost secular persona for security reasons.

Approaches Used in Starting Conversations

ME	World	Approach
100%	100%	Use <i>Sbema</i>
100%	97%	Use self-descriptions other than 'Christian'
88%	55%	When meeting someone, ask about the meaning of their name
82%	55%	Share the story of how you came to faith
76%	74%	Use stories of the prophets or parables of Jesus (<i>Isa</i>)
76%	81%	Figure out ways to 'be a blessing' – e.g., community health, teaching, sharing, inviting, etc. – not necessarily 'spiritual things' but helping with felt needs, being a good neighbour, etc.
65%	58%	Respond to, 'All religions are the same, yes?'
59%	61%	Ask, 'Have you ever had a dream you believe came from God?'
59%	29%	Take prayer trips (near or far) to pray for resistant areas through prayer walking <i>and</i> use the 'Can I pray for you?' tool
59%	84%	Use a prayer of blessing
59%	68%	Use the truth about Jesus that is in the Qur'an
59%	26%	Share a story of a healing
47%	61%	Join a coaching or accountability group focused on the Discovery CPM approach
41%	52%	Simply and courageously, ask the question: 'Instead of us talking about our opinions, how about we study together the Holy Books that God has given us?' (or variation of it)
35%	23%	Share a story of good fellowship
29%	26%	Share a story of an experience of grace
29%	19%	Share a story of worship
18%	19%	Share a story of resolved conflict
12%	13%	Use the sentence, 'There's just something I need to say!'
12%	6%	Follow up contacts from radio, TV, internet, and other mass media ministry
12%	29%	Share story of some other miracle
12%	23%	Host an English club where the texts are Bible stories
6%	74%	Get to know neighbours, networks and clubs to find POPs
6%	55%	Go to places where spiritual people hang out – mosques, graves, religious schools, banyan trees, shaman's homes, etc. – to meet people who are spiritually seeking
0%	58%	Start a Discovery Group with your team and/or national partners then challenge each member of the group to find a group to do the same with people they know

In both surveys, all or almost all respondents have used **self-descriptions other than ‘Christian’** in their interaction with focus people. Out of all respondents, only one has chosen not to continue the practice. One worker reported:

This has been something our team has been experimenting with since moving to our city in January. In June, while my wife and her teammate were prayer walking, a woman riding an electric scooter stopped abruptly to ask about our children. She was shocked that we had four kids (most families here only have one or two) and that my wife considered them to be a blessing from Allah. This conversation ensued:

‘Do you have faith? Are you a Muslim?’ came the excited reply.

‘I follow Isa al-Masih.’ [Note, he didn’t say, ‘No, I am a Christian]

‘Who is Jesus the Messiah?’

My wife then blurted out, ‘He’s God’s Son!’

We don’t often go there on first meetings, but she felt led to say that by the Spirit. The woman’s response was total curiosity: ‘I want to know more about that!’ They exchanged numbers and she has been coming over to our house (with her nephew) at least once a week ever since. She has also since been having dreams (which are about our family). We are praying that they will be about Jesus too!

A significant number in both surveys (59% and 68%, respectively) have used **‘the truth about Jesus that is in the Qur’an’**. A trainee of one respondent shared this testimony:

In one village, we met a man who was known in the community to have power to heal and give physical strength. As we talked with him, he said, ‘There’s only one disease that has no cure. That’s death, because no one can be freed from death.’

So we asked him to give us a Qur’an so we could show him this man. We turned to Ali Imran (3) 49 and showed him that Isa Al-Masih can raise the dead. After discussing these verses about the greatness of Isa, we asked what he thought of these verses. He was dumbfounded. So we asked if he would like to know more about who Isa really is, and he said ‘Absolutely!’ So we prayed and ended that visit.

We answered that we know a man who can ‘cure’ and overcome death. He said, ‘That’s impossible!’ So we asked if would like us to introduce him to this man. He eagerly said, ‘Yes!’ So we asked him to give us a Qur’an so we could show him this man. We turned to Ali Imran (3) 49 and showed him that *Isa Al-Masih* can raise the dead. After discussing these verses about the greatness of Isa, we asked what he thought of these verses. He was dumbfounded. So we asked if he would

like to know more about who Isa really is, and he said ‘Absolutely!’ So we prayed and ended that visit. Ten days later, we visited him again. We do not know yet if he is a person of peace, but I love this man and am praying that the Lord will save

him and his family.

A higher percentage of respondents in the Middle East (88% as opposed to 55%) have **asked someone their name and its meaning**, perhaps because in that context a higher percentage of people's names would likely have a spiritual meaning. Here is a sample from West Asia:

While buying rotisserie chicken for dinner, I learned that the seller's name is Abdullah. "That means "servant of God," I said. He went on to recommend I become a Muslim so that I could have 70 million local Muslims as brothers. I replied that I have God as my Father and that is more important. The conversation didn't go any further, but he and his employees now know that there is a Christian in town. They've probably never met one before.

In a story from SE Asia, asking about the meaning of peoples' names apparently didn't open a door, but the (national) worker still created an effective 'window' of opportunity. Here is his story:

Alhamdulillah, after Idul Fitri I returned to a village that I had been to before, arriving just after the magrib prayer time in early evening, I entered a little coffee shop and drank coffee while resting after my tiring trip. There were three men in the coffee shop and a woman tending the shop.

After getting to know each other a bit, I directed the conversation to spiritual things and they were quite interested, because they were obedient followers of their religion. First, I asked the meaning of each of their names. Then I asked them, 'Do you know of someone whose name came from God?' None of them had an answer, and they were very interested to know. However, the conversation didn't continue because they all had to go to a village event. But before leaving, they invited me to come again to their village, and they pointed out where each of their houses was. Please pray that I can visit them once a week and share the word of the Lord with these men who seem very open.

A large percentage of workers in both surveys have used a **prayer of blessing** as a door opener. A worker in Asia reported:

I went to visit a person who had just started a factory. When he talked about the struggles he is facing with different responsibilities, I shared about start-up of our factory years ago, and that it was not my struggle or hard work that make is happen, but it was God's grace and mercy. I then prayed for God's blessing on his factory. That week he told me that he downloaded a Bible in [his local language adaptation] from the internet. I asked him to bring his circle of influence together, but he has not done so yet.

This testimony comes from a Muslim-focused worker in Europe:

I talked to the teller at my bank about her job. She was not happy. So I told

her I'd pray for her that it would be better in some way. Later I ran into her at another branch. She had a new job and remembered I had prayed for her. She asked me to continue praying for her. We are in dialogue and I gave her a NT with a few passages marked regarding some personal issues.

Many workers in both surveys (76% and 81%, respectively) have figured out **ways to be a blessing, serving felt needs of the focus group**. One sample account is this:

We have experienced many scenarios where community health is a great help in planting churches. Last week we were able to visit an example of this in a very far-flung island chain that is completely unreached. There, the church planters are using the basic dental health training we provided them last spring to reach out to their community. Now that they have established a dental health and nursing outreach they say, 'the very people who didn't trust us at first are the ones who call on us for healing and prayer in their homes (when they are sick)!'. The community health outreach seems to build trust with the community and helps the church planters gain acceptance. In our experience, community-level disease is something that is easy to address with basic education and prevention, but has huge felt impact. People see health changes immediately and this demonstrates God's power to them. They become more open to us. When incorporated into a church-planting strategy it seems the potential for transformation, physically and spiritually, is tremendous.

A significantly higher percent of respondents in the Middle East (59%, compared to 29% globally) have taken **prayer trips (near or far) to pray for resistant areas** and asked 'Can I pray for you?' One respondent in SE Asia shared:

We took an extended 'fishing trip' of three nights and four days. On the first day, the three young guys with me on the trip felt led to stop and play soccer with some local kids at a simple park associated with supposed ancient ruins of a kingdom that once existed in the area. While I looked on, I got into conversation with some local people. As we were having a very typical discussion about agriculture in their area, one of the men asked us a completely unrelated question, 'Can you help people who have stress?' (Stress is often a term

This led to being ushered to a nearby home where a 17-year-old boy was inside a wooden cage, an effort to protect him and others from the dangerous and out-of-control behaviour he had manifested for the previous two days. This led to us spending the evening and next morning praying with the boy and the family and bringing the news about Jesus as the one who alone can defeat Satan and his influences.

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defeat Satan and his influences. Last week we visited the community again, and though the boy had been out and 'well' for a few weeks, he was again back in the wooden cage. We did not have time to pray as needed and look to return soon for more extended prayer and sharing that this captive might be set free through Christ.

From Europe comes this report:

Recently when my wife and I were out walking and praying, we met a man working at an isolated location and he asked what we were doing. I said we were out praying for this city and its people, that God would bless them. He appreciated that and we talked about spiritual things for fifteen minutes. Then, in answer to prayer, I ran into him at a restaurant a few days ago, and he invited me to return and talk some more.

Roughly the same percentage of respondents (59% and 61%) have asked focus people, **'Have you ever had a dream you believe came from God?'** One worker shared this story:

While on home assignment, I was with a guy who wanted to serve in North Africa. So I said, 'Let's go find some Muslims to witness to!' He thought I was crazy. We went to a carpet store, and the tall man working there did not look very friendly. I asked where he was from and he said, 'Iran.' I said, 'I like to talk to immigrants about their journey.' I asked a few general questions then said, 'I also like to ask about dreams. I've heard that many people have had dreams they feel came from God.' He looked at me as if he wanted to kill me, then he invited me to come to the back of the store.

He said, 'Eighteen years ago when I first came to America, I had a dream that I haven't told anybody about since then. I was in high school and my sister was in elementary school, and I was really into Christmas trees. I thought they were just so beautiful. So I asked my parents if we could get one. They said, "No! That's a Christian thing. We're Muslims!" But my sister really liked Christmas trees too. So one day I went out and bought a Christmas tree for my sister. I bought lights and decorated it beautifully. When my sister home from school, she thought it was so cool! My parents didn't have the heart to make me take it down.

'One night I was just staring at the lights and I fell asleep. I had a vision of a star above the tree that seemed to be calling me. It came closer and closer, and I saw it was the face of a man; then I realized it was Jesus. I woke up and ran up and told my parents, who said it was all nonsense.'

'But I wanted to know more about this. So the next day I went out into the city to try to find some Christians. The first place I found was a Roman Catholic church. The priest there asked if I knew the meaning of the dream. I said, 'No.' The priest said, 'It means you need to become a Catholic.' I was horrified! I ran

out of the church, and never mentioned that dream to anyone again until just now when you asked about it.’

I then shared some of the good news with the man, but by that point, he had become a secular person and was no longer interested in the gospel. His secret dream was a God-given door opener, but the gospel answer arrived fifteen years too late.

Of all the approaches in the survey, the least popular was using the sentence, **‘There’s just something I need to say!’** A very low percentage of respondents (12% and 13%, respectively) have ever tried the approach, and in the global survey, half of those who tried it would not use it again. Readers may draw their own inferences about possible reasons for this (cultural or otherwise) and implications for use or non-use of this approach.

It may be noteworthy that one respondent noted five different approaches that he would not use again (more than half of the total such approaches in the global survey), and of those five, two contained a supernatural element: sharing a story of a healing or a story of some other miracle. This person is serving in a more secularized European context where the supernatural may be more an obstacle than a door opener. He comments, ‘I would not say that I will never use them again, but I do think that the other ones work better in my context.’

A moderate number of respondents (47% and 61%, respectively) have been in a **coaching/accountability group**. One worker shared: ‘I think we really have this with our local CPM focused team. We share a high level of commitment to do all these things, and to teach and model them to others. It’s been great to model it for those we are casting vision with, and for our local co-worker to be encouraged by our attempts.’

One approach has been notably more widely used in other parts of the world than in the Middle East, namely **getting to know neighbours, networks, clubs, etc.** In the global survey, 74% had done this, whereas in the Middle East only 6% had! A respondent in Asia wrote:

Thanks to Google maps, I was able to find my way to a gym tucked away in an alley in the Muslim district. It’s run by a coach who’s a bit of a legend – a 60-year-old maintenance man at the mosque, turned certified fitness instructor. I’ve met many other people there at the gym, and had several conversations that have resulted from *shema* statements or simply quoting Scripture. I’m praising the Lord for such an enjoyable way to meet and converse with men of all ages in our community.

Another shared,

When we first moved to our island of 1.5 million, we strongly sensed the Lord

leading us to drive a circle around the island, stopping at the local small stores and coffee shops to look for a community of peace. As we drove into a vibrant island village scene, we stopped at three different shops; the third was a small seaside coffee shop and beach. We felt the Lord lead us to sit down and drink a hot tea with the only worker there. Slowly people in the community began sitting down to join in the discussion and meet these curious foreigners – none had ever ventured into this area. We introduced ourselves as Americans who had newly moved to this island and wanted to live in a tightly knit community like this instead of an exclusive housing development. They were instantly very open with us and proud to show us around and help us find housing.

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In minutes, we were being led around by our man of peace, Ryan, a 30-year-old soccer-loving construction worker and leader in the community, who instantly hit it off with my husband. Before long, we were sitting with the mayor who was inviting us to purchase land from a newly cleared hill – ‘God’s Land’, they call it. Over the past year, our relationships in the community have grown and we’ve had many opportunities to share truth and statements about God with people in the village. Our land overlooks the heart of the village and the imam’s house, and the slow building process has afforded us a significant amount of time to sow seeds and build relationships there. We are using all local labour for our home and the villagers are quite proud that we are in this together. Our home is not yet built physically, but our spiritual and relational foundations are already firmly laid.

One respondent wrote from Northwest China:

I have found a neat way to meet men (and hopefully, POPs). A few months ago, I started cycling to the mountains every Saturday morning at 7 a.m. I noticed groups of cyclists that mainly contained men and every Saturday I saw at least 50-100 men cycling up the road to the mountain.

Every time I would go, I would meet a different group of men and found that the men who were cycling were essentially an *oikos*. [One] great thing about this *oikos* was that it was inclusive to everyone who was on a bicycle. I also found the demographic (graduated from university and typically working) matched my own quite well... and each Saturday I get to talk to these men for over an hour at a time (sometimes 3 hours). To put this in perspective, it is really difficult to meet Muslim men in our city, especially those not currently in university. For

the time being, I am going to spend the majority of my time praying and attempting to minister to this cycling *oikos*.

I have made some great contacts (Muslim men) from this avenue and am praying that God will naturally expand my contact within this group to those in whom he is working and are seeking and that he would give me wisdom and boldness to be able to disciple them to follow Christ.

In each group, roughly half of respondents have asked the question: **‘Instead of us talking about our opinions, how about we study together the Holy Books that God has given us?’** In addition, one global respondent who has not yet tried it commented, ‘I like this one, and would like to try it.’ Comments such as this one reflect the value of ongoing discussion among workers, asking ‘What have you tried? What has been effective or ineffective in your context?’ Certainly we all need to be led by the creative Spirit of God, and one of the ways the Spirit can guide us is through observation of what God is doing in other places in order to reach groups with a similar worldview and outlook in our area.

Another moderately used approach (12% and 23%, respectively) with some negative evaluation was to **host an English club where the texts are Bible stories**. Out of seven global respondents who have tried this approach, two of them (23% of that total) would not use this approach again. However, one respondent had a positive enough experience with this approach to share a story: ‘After regular ESL classes, we held Bible ESL where a passage is discussed in a modified Discovery Bible Study (DBS) format with ‘I will...’ at the end. Several women wanted to reproduce it in their dorm and our summer teamers and female team member did so. It went well and we hope to resume now that summer is over.’

A notable difference can be seen in the application of the last approach: **Start a Discovery Group with your team and /or national partners, based on Lesson 9**, and then challenge each member of the group to find a group to do the same with people they know. No workers in the Middle East survey had tried this approach, whereas more than half (58%) of global respondents had. A reason for this wide difference is not readily apparent, at least to this writer. One respondent commented: ‘We have started a house fellowship in DBS format but have not YET challenged ourselves to go reproduce it with others.’

The survey also received one write-in suggestion. This respondent liked one approach well enough to add it in, even though write-ins had not been requested: **‘I just read a Bible verse to people sitting on their bench in front of their homes** and ask what they think about it.’ Clearly, this would only work in a context where people commonly sit in front of their homes and welcome interaction with passers-by, but it would be interesting to see what response this approach would bring in other such contexts.

In all these stories and discussions of approaches, we can see the good news

being proclaimed in both word and deed. We can give thanks to the Lord for the variety of ways that connections are being made and light is being carried into the darkness. Clearly the path to a Discovery Group and ultimately toward a church planting movement is neither passive waiting nor applying a ‘cookie cutter’ approach nor frantic human effort. Rather it is a persistent sowing of seed—looking for those in whom the Spirit of God is working and asking God to open the doors of salvation for them and their household.

Work Cited

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