

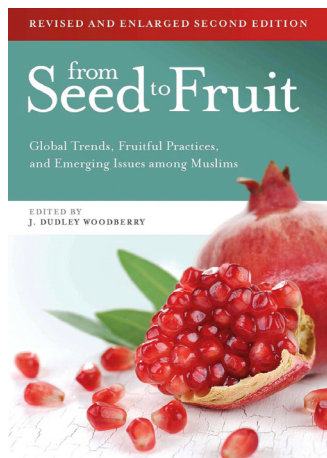
From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims

Edited by J. Dudley Woodberry.

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How do we become fruitful in ministry among Muslims? This is the question that drives *From Seed to Fruit*, a book which has significantly influenced ministry strategy among Muslims in the last decade. Edited by Dudley Woodberry with contributions from dozens of authors, the book is built on the large-scale collaboration of mission agencies and mission practitioners.

Beginning in 2003, a survey was distributed to mission agencies, seeking to elicit fruitful practices in ministry among Muslims from practitioners. The fruitful practices identified by the survey were then evaluated and discussed by many of those practitioners in a consultation in 2007. The participants, a majority of whom were Americans, completed

another survey and participated in recorded interviews and group discussions. Afterwards, a number of authors contributed chapters—based on the surveys and discussions—to the first edition of the book, which appeared in 2008. It discussed emerging trends in ministry among Muslims, identified fruitful practices from survey data, and provided multiple chapters of discussion of those trends and practices.

In the years following, the data from the survey taken at the consultation was studied in-depth, leading to the second (2011) edition with additional chapters based on further analysis and reflection on the data. The consultation also led to follow up works such as *Where There Was No Church: Postcards from Followers of Jesus in the Muslim World* (Martin et al. 2010), *Where There Is Now a Church: Dispatches from Christian Workers in the Muslim World* (Neelson 2015), and *Fruit to Harvest* (Daniels et al. 2019).

The thesis of *Seed to Fruit* could be stated like this: effective practitioners (measured by churches planted) engage in a set of “fruitful practices” which are more likely to result in effective ministry among Muslims. The assumption is that these fruitful practices can be identified through studying effective practitioners and what they do. While the book reminds the reader that copying these practices does not guarantee success, the authors argue that these fruitful practices should be adopted because they increase the likelihood of fruitful ministry. Secondly, the book identifies emerging trends in ministry among Muslims, arguing that practitioners should be aware of these trends and allow them to inform their ministry.

While a book containing chapters by over thirty authors will unavoidably contain a variety of styles and points of emphasis, the authors are united in a desire to impart wisdom that leads to effective ministry. In chapter eight, for example, Don Allen introduces the section on fruitful practices with a story. Allen invites the reader to imagine a desperate worker who approaches a wise, fruitful worker about his ministry. “Tell me the secret,” he begs, trying to keep the despair from his voice. “What

is happening here?" (chap. 8, "Conclusion"). This imagined story sets the stage for the discussion of fruitful practices and governs how they are intended to be applied. The authors are united in this goal: to reveal the practices and gathered wisdom of effective practitioners so that other workers can become more effective.

The book certainly accomplishes its goal of sharing practices and wisdom. Here are thirty-one chapters (and a lengthy appendix) from experienced, respected practitioners writing on the topics regarded as most important for fruitful ministry among Muslims. The authors vary widely in style, emphasis, and topic, so readers may be best served choosing chapters based on their interests and needs. There is much to commend. For this reader, chapter 19, "Expatriates Empowering Indigenous Leaders," provoked a stimulating team conversation on our team's role in a local house church in our city, and chapter thirty, "Recapturing the Role of Suffering," was a stirring call to discipleship and communion with Jesus in the midst of trials.

Part two, which introduces the fruitful practices, is where *many* readers will want to begin. However, I found the presentation of the fruitful practices to be somewhat confusing. First, there were many fruitful practices listed. Chapters eight through thirteen summarize fifty-four fruitful practices. Chapter fourteen then restates the fruitful practices using different categories but totals sixty-eight fruitful practices. There was quite a bit of redundancy in this chapter, and for some of the additional practices listed in the chapter, no survey data was given to justify their inclusion. Readers may find such lists overwhelming, the overlapping lists confusing, and the underlying methodology unclear.

It seems that methodology is one reason why so many fruitful practices were listed. According to chapter eight, the fruitful practices elicited in the pre-consultation survey formed the basis of a second survey taken at the consultation. In it, practitioners—invited to the consultation because they were considered effective—marked the practices given in the survey by 1) whether they engaged in the practice, and 2)

how important they thought it to be. It seems that this data then formed the basis of the lists in chapters eight through thirteen.

It is important to note that these chapters did not compare the practices of those who are more effective to those less effective, but only whether it was practiced and thought to be important. This methodology resulted in long lists of good works that effective workers deemed important. But crucially, the results in this section give no evidence that each of these practices are *actually* related to effectiveness (as measured by churches planted). For example, “Beginning discipleship before conversion” was considered important by 55% of respondents and practiced by 76% (chap. 10, “Belonging Before Believing”). It is notable that such a high percentage of effective workers at this consultation engaged in this practice. But we don’t have evidence that it directly leads to fruitfulness in terms of churches planted. These lists, then, are probably best used as diagnostic checklists and idea generators to get conversations started on a team. A handy assessment tool in the appendix is designed to guide a team through just such a process.

The post-consultation analysis of the surveys, on the other hand, yielded sharper results on what does correlate with greater effectiveness. At the consultation, the participants were asked how many churches they had planted (0, 1, or multiple), and about their progress toward a church-planting movement. This created comparison points between more or less effective workers and allowed researchers to isolate which practices were actually related to effectiveness. Comparisons in this area were then correlated to the fruitful practices engaged in by each worker. In short, this analysis isolated the practices that more effective practitioners do and the less effective workers do not do. Remarkably, only three practices were significantly correlated with effectiveness in church planting: more effective practitioners worked in the local language rather than trade languages, had at least one team member with high language skills in that local language, and incorporated the learning preference of their people group (literate vs. oral) into their team strategy (appendix, “Modeling the Relationship”).

These insights are outstanding—worthy fruit of years of labor. It provides especially strong support for the value of learning local languages to a high level. As a result, this study has contributed to increased commitments to learn local languages and use oral methods. In our region, for example, the long-standing practice of spending time in Europe learning the trade language prior to moving to the ministry site is on the decline, and there has been a marked increase in oral-learner-focused ministry tools. These three practices, and the data supporting them, are explained in chapter twenty-three.

Yet there remain some limits to the data. In the appendix, the authors noted that:

one of the difficulties in a multi-agency research program is that there are different definitions of basic terms. Are the terms church, community, and fellowship synonymous? Our definitions of terms like church impact our answers to questions like “How many churches have you planted? (appen., “Modeling the Relationship”)

Similarly, the survey given at the consultation asked if the practitioner was “seeing signs of a CPM” (appen., “Modeling the Relationship”). But the signs were not defined, so it was up to each individual practitioner what the signs of a CPM were.

Subsequent analysis of that data correlated practitioners “seeing signs of a CPM” with practices termed “transformational” methodology. Based on this connection, “transformational methodology” was understood to be related to greater progress toward a CPM, so two additional chapters were devoted to the topic in the second edition. And yet one wonders: because signs of a CPM weren’t defined, does this data really show us that a transformational methodology is related to progress in CPMs?

All this talk of data proves a unique strength of the book. But strengths often have a “shadow side.” In this book, every practice was

judged on the basis of “fruitfulness,” by the question, “does it work?” Answers came from data and intensive analysis. But this pragmatism sometimes led to questionable conclusions in areas of ecclesiology and contextualization. The authors stated that the “transformational model” was shown to be more effective than an “attractational model,” quoting a consultation participant as follows: “Bringing strangers together and calling them a community is not comprehensible in most contexts” (chap. 15, “Transforming Bonds of Trust”). There is surely wisdom in making disciples along relational lines. But if we eschew forming churches made up of former strangers, we risk a sub-biblical ecclesiology. Large chunks of the New Testament were written to encourage Christians who don’t naturally trust each other to keep being church together (see Ephesians 2-4 and Romans). Perhaps the incomprehensibility of strangers becoming a loving community points to the reality of the gospel.

The focus on effectiveness also pervaded discussions of contextualization. One interview is summarized thusly:

The key lesson we can draw from this interview and several like it is that when the message is contextualized at the level of identity and worldview and is therefore portrayed as something that will strengthen the social network rather than tear it down, it is more likely to be embraced. (chap. 24, “Contextualization as a Key to Transforming”)

But we should be careful about equating effectiveness in contextualization with whether the message is embraced. On an oral Bible storying project in northwest Africa, my teammates and I tended to choose stories for translation that we thought would be most well-received. Noticing this, our translation consultant urged us to include stories that conveyed both the glory and the scandal of the biblical narrative. The experience taught us that effective contextualization takes place when the gospel is accurately understood, and then considered, on the basis of that right understanding.

So how does this book help us as practitioners? I see two ways. First, the standout findings of this study should give all of us—not only those working among Muslims—even more motivation to deeply learn the local language of our focus people and tailor our strategy to their preferred learning and communication style. Are they oral learners? What is the place of various written communication? What's digital media best used for? How are arguments won? What is more persuasive: passionate beliefs or cold, hard facts? What is most compelling: logic, appeal to tradition, a proverb, a text?

Second, a note of caution in pursuing effectiveness: we should also avoid the danger of being ruled by effectiveness. Of course, it is right to deeply desire to bear fruit and bring glory to the one who saved us! But if effectiveness is allowed to be a ruling question, we might lose track of faithfulness. Faithfulness may lead us to do things that seem less effective at the moment. But we can trust that faithfulness will bear fruit in the long run, even if we don't see it ourselves.

In sum, this book is recommended as a tool for those seeking to more effectively plant churches among Muslims. The standout chapters are those that summarize the key findings of the research: chapters eight to thirteen, fifteen, and twenty-three. Of the remaining chapters, practitioners among Muslims are encouraged to pick and choose topics most relevant to their ministries. While I do not recommend every chapter, and the contemporary relevance of some chapters is waning, a book like this is a storehouse of thoughtful reflection on real-life fruitful practices in ministry among Muslims.

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