

Learning Fruitful Practices through Experimentation

By **TREVOR LARSEN**

Trevor Larsen is a seminary teacher and a “come-alongside coach” who is convinced of God’s desire for all peoples. He and his wife live alongside 16 Asian movement catalysts in a “fruitful Band of Brothers.” Trevor’s goal is to help these brothers maximize their fruit as multiplying movements, and through them help other movement catalysts. He tells stories of these movement catalysts and offers biblical materials that support movements in three digital books completed so far at www.FocusOnFruit.org. Trevor started the first team in 1998, which birthed the first believer group in a UPG in 2000. Together they have been learning “fruitful practices” through field experimentation and biblical reflection. They combine community development, inner healing, and multiplication of believer groups while empowering leaders’ groups. Their fruit has multiplied into a family of linked movements in UPGs. They continue to be surprised by God’s grace.

We’ve learned our ministry principles mostly through field experimentation. When we found a little bit of fruit (individuals who came to Christ, groups of believers or other indicators of spiritual growth), we tried to examine: Why was that? What helped us progress? How can we increase those practices that were more fruitful? How can we decrease those practices that were not proving fruitful?

In short, we create experimental conditions, and do quarterly assessment to rigorously promote fruitful practices and extinguish practices that are not fruitful. Of course, we don’t extinguish biblical practices, whether or not they contribute directly to fruitfulness, like helping the poor. We do that too, even though that may or may not create more believer groups, because of God’s commands to help the poor. That’s a different discussion; I’m just talking about those practices that we can modify without violating or ignoring biblical principles.

Our DNA of experimentation has been quite fascinating to people who want to learn from us. When they come, they can hardly believe it, because local movement catalysts are telling us, each quarter: a) new experiments they are doing, b) how far they



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progressed in the three months they were doing an experiment, and c) what they will modify as they go forward in the next three months of the experiment. Our innovation goes forward in small increments each quarter. You can imagine the creative people we’ve attracted and how their creativity has developed. It’s something I’ve really enjoyed: innovating and finding innovative local workers.

It’s not that all the fruitful people I oversee are innovative. But I especially work with the 40% to 50% of them who *are* innovative, because they’re the ones discovering new pathways. The nature of UPG ministry is that there have been no gains for decades. If we keep doing the things other Christians were doing, we can be pretty sure we will still get no gains in the

coming decades. That's why innovation is important in reaching UPGs, especially in areas where there have been no significant fruit gains in the past.

Here's one example of experimental learning through a comparative case study. I would recruit good local evangelists, then watch them work and compare their stories. Comparing different practices of different people and comparing their fruit, is part of my learning and theirs.

Our first team leader started three groups. He seemed to provide the model for the rest of the evangelists to follow. But he never got past three groups. Meanwhile, the other guys were like a turtle in a race against a rabbit. They were far behind but kept working and eventually started one group. The leader already had three groups, then those who had started more slowly developed two groups each, then three groups each. Suddenly the planters who had started more slowly reported four and five groups, because some of their groups had started others. But the leader was still leading three groups personally. Then the three groups reduced to two groups. What was happening?

This comparison of different planters' fruit created a question. "They're all graduates of the same Bible College and had the same coaching, and all were working in the same area where 99.6% of the people are from the majority religion. What is happening differently?" Those who were getting to more groups were not forthcoming to share things in meetings for fear of embarrassing the leader who was getting more frustrated. They were not voicing a straightforward analysis. When I investigated further, I found out that the leader was afraid that if he talked to groups rather than individuals, he would increase the risk for himself and his family. So, he was only talking to individuals. That approach was getting a certain measure of fruitfulness, but it was not being reproduced by local people. Meanwhile, the other planters who had started more slowly, were all talking with natural groupings of people and seldom with individuals.

In our country, you almost never find someone alone. It's so crowded, everybody's always together. Even if you go to the store, or you go running, no matter where you go you see people in groupings.

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They're with their brother and their uncle and their friend: maybe four or five or six people. I don't mean formal groups, but groupings. So those evangelists who started more slowly began to talk to groupings of local people. They adjusted their dialog style to fit into groupings. Initially, the sharing of the gospel in groupings came along more slowly than sharing with individuals. But when the people in the groups began to talk about the gospel with each other, and began to come to faith while supporting one another, those first local groupings of believers were not sterile. They reproduced by imitating the pattern. Individuals who were won to the Lord alone were sterile. They couldn't have babies; they couldn't copy the same process, because in our country, no one talks to an individual alone. If someone did talk to another person one on one, it seemed to signal that something was illegitimate about the topic being discussed. If something had to be hidden, it was probably shameful. "Why do you need to talk to an individual alone? Do you have something to hide?" But when you talk in groupings of people who already know each other, it's a signal that this is something that's good to talk about with others.

The people who came to the Lord in natural groupings, have an experience like the people in an Alcoholics Anonymous group: they give and receive support while they share what they are learning. These are people in Unreached People Groups who are doing something different than all the other people. They need each other for support to seek the Lord together through the Bible. They legitimize each other: "It's okay to open the Bible and discuss it." They provide protection for each other from being attacked by neighbors and friends. They can come to the Lord together and this is something

they can replicate, because the social organization and dynamic supports ongoing interaction. It's like a ping-pong game enjoyed by a group of friends: the ball is being hit back and forth while they laugh with each other. They dialogue back and forth about the Scripture and how to apply it, and the interaction is part of the fun. They're fun-loving people; they like to do it together. So now they're harnessing the social dynamics already present in the culture, and the groups start to multiply.

I shared the previous story as an example of how we learned one of our main principles. We have 15 or 20 fruitful practices. The fruitful practice we learned from this case was "Groups, not Individuals." They made slogans out of each of the fruitful practices, and this is one of them: "Groups, not Individuals." This fruitful practice is one of our guiding principles. We discovered it through experimentation, by comparing what was working to what was not working as well.

When we had been going for 10 years and had 110 groups, I participated in a conference where I was asked to share our case study. I was on the plane thinking "They're not going to believe it when I tell them there are 110 groups of people from the majority religion, who have come to Christ and are discussing the Bible and applying it. They're going to think I'm lying!" But all the other case studies presented were from Africa and India, and they all had *far* more fruit than that!

It was such a good jolt for me, to realize that what had been developing in our country was only a little drop in the bucket, compared to what others had. It was a great encouragement to my faith to reflect: "There aren't limits on an expandable system. This can keep going." And during that conference, I received CPM training for the first time, done by David Watson: the DMM model.


Many conference participants didn't like the CPM training because it jolted the way they'd been doing things in many years of ministry. They raised objections that didn't need to be raised. I kept thinking: "I should stand up and tell them: 'Why don't you leave the room and let me listen to this speaker?' This is what we've been learning in our country. These principles are the same things God has been teaching us. How did he figure this out,



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in a different country?" That was my experience in that conference. Most of us don't want to stop doing what we have been doing and try a new model. However, what we had learned through experimentation in the field for many years, others had also discovered, in other contexts among other kinds of unreached peoples.



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