

Does the DMM Approach Lead to Movement Breakthrough?

Emanuel Prinz and Alison Goldhor

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Abstract

This article reports on the first-ever systematic empirical study of factors that either contribute to or impede the catalyzing of movements. The representative sample comprises a mix of those who have catalyzed movements and those who have not, a total of 307 pioneer missionaries across 38 countries. Of the effective catalysts in the study, 77 percent either specify DMM (Disciple-Making Movements) as their ministry approach or use a DMM-related approach.

Based on 45 in-depth qualitative interviews and statistical analysis, the study verifies several elements of the DMM process. These include prayer, meeting holistic needs (what DMM calls “compassion ministry”), finding persons of peace and working through their social networks, a discovery approach based around small groups, obedience-emphasis, and effectively raising up local leaders.

Key Words: catalyst, DMM/Disciple-Making Movements, movement, pioneer

Introduction

What is the correlation between the Disciple-Making Movements (DMM) approach and movement breakthrough? A major research project of Bethany Research Institute in 2020-21 provided a golden opportunity to investigate this question.

The study brought together a sample of 307 pioneer church planters for an extensive Catalyst Competence Research project. This group consisted of 147 effective movement catalysts and a control group of 160 pioneer church planters who had not catalyzed a movement. Participants represented the largest mega-cultures of the world, with a focus on the regions or groupings where most movements occur, specifically Francophone Africa, East Africa, India, Indonesia, Latin America, and among Ethnic Chinese.

The study had two main goals: to compare the traits and competencies of the catalysts and non-catalysts, and to examine the factors that either contribute to or impede the catalyzing of movements, including the impact of the catalyst’s ministry approach.

The research consisted of an in-depth survey, available in Spanish, French, Swahili, Hindi, and Indonesian, and also, where possible, an interview. These two methods combined provided a wealth of information about those who have catalyzed movements in a wide variety of contexts around the world.

Ministry Approaches of Effective Catalysts

As part of their general background information, survey participants were asked which of the following ministry approaches they use.

1. Adding new believers to existing Christian background-believer churches
2. Planting new churches consisting only of believers from the same religious background
3. CPM (Church-Planting Movements) as described by David Garrison

4. DMM as described by David Watson
5. T4T as described by Ying and Grace Kai
6. Community Learning Centers as described by Victor John

Of the effective movement catalysts, 73 percent selected DMM as the ministry method they use, confirming a clear correlation of DMM with movement breakthrough. (Note that of the 147 catalysts surveyed, 85 came from Victor John’s network which has its own unique approach, number 6 on the list above. Because of the uneven distribution—the result of a convenience sample—this bloc of respondents was not included in the statistical analysis in this section.)

Survey participants had the option to choose more than one approach; 14 percent gave multiple answers. In addition, they could choose an “Other” category; the following were listed under “Other” (with the number giving this response in parenthesis).

- Compassion ministry (6)
- Church Multiplication, as described by George Patterson (3)
- Focus on Fruit, as described by Trevor Larsen (2)
- DMM combined with Insider Ministry (2)
- Adding new believers to existing churches, among the poor (2)
- People movement approach, as described by McGavran and Kasdorf (1)
- Four Fields, combined with Media to Movements (1)
- Church planting with multiplicative approach (1)
- Zúme as described by Curtis Sergeant (1)
- Cell church model (1)
- Chronological Bible Storying (1)
- Person of Peace (1)
- Person of Peace, combined with obedience-oriented discipleship (1)

Several of these approaches overlap with DMM or certain aspects of DMM. They include: Compassion ministry, Focus on Fruit, DMM combined with Insider Ministry, Zúme as described by Curtis Sergeant (Zúme 2022), Person of Peace, and Obedience-oriented Discipleship. Taken together, the overall percentage of effective catalysts who have used DMM-related approaches is 77 percent.

Ministry Approach as a Contributing Factor to Movement Breakthrough

In the section of the survey on contributing and impeding factors, participants were asked to rate “to what extent adopting the right ministry strategy or method contributed to the catalyzing of their movement.” The average rating of the effective catalysts was remarkably high: 4.51 on a Likert scale of 1-5.

Not surprisingly, the pioneer church planters who had not catalyzed a movement gave a lower rating to this factor: 3.71. In their case the question was framed in different terms: “to what extent adopting the right ministry strategy or method contributed to their ministry fruitfulness.”

Both catalysts and non-catalysts commented in the interviews that frustration with existing traditional ministry methods had led them to experiment with new forms of outreach. This

extensive quote from the catalyst of a huge ongoing movement in South Asia describes the early days of his ministry:

I said: ‘What is it we're doing wrong? Why are they rejecting the gospel?’ I looked at the culture and looked at the language and our dependency on Western money: it was so power-controlled, and they were telling people what to do. I said, ‘How about doing it the other way round, and letting the people discover what to do by the help of the Holy Spirit?’ I was also thinking about the gender issue. At that time only men could baptize people.... Did Jesus give the Great Commission only to men or to all? Is obedience only for men or for all? In those days I had more questions than answers. If I asked anyone, people in the ministry were very defensive and no one was willing to give me an answer.

In this catalyst’s case, willingness to try new approaches eventually led to a tremendous harvest of new disciples that continues to multiply to this day. Other effective catalysts also discovered that what others had thought were wrong ministry approaches proved to be right for their own particular contexts. The catalyst of a very large movement in Southeast Asia commented, “What everybody else was saying ‘Don't do’—that usually works in our case!”

Whatever the specific approach, each successful movement catalyst naturally has confidence that approach is the right one.

Other Factors Contributing to Movement Breakthrough

Survey participants were also asked to rate a total of eleven factors that had contributed to their movement breakthrough. The list below was based on the factors cited most frequently by practitioners in interviews that formed part of a previous study (Prinz 2016; 2021).

These contributing factors include the following that are essential to the DMM method.

- Contribution of prayer
- Have done compassion ministry and met people’s holistic needs
- Adopted the right (movement) ministry strategy or method
- Used discovery approach and discovery groups
- Implemented reproducible disciple-making
- Raised up leaders effectively

The following table shows which of these factors mark the greatest difference between the catalysts and non-catalysts.

Table 1: Contributing factors to movement breakthrough/ministry fruitfulness ranked by the greatest difference between catalysts and non-catalysts			
Factors that contributed to movement breakthrough	Catalysts	Non-catalysts	Difference
Raised up leaders effectively	4.55	3.75	+0.81
Adopted right ministry strategy	4.51	3.71	+0.80
Used discovery approach/groups	4.16	3.45	+0.72
Used reproducible disciple-making	4.52	3.97	+0.54

Met holistic needs	4.17	3.67	+0.50
Contribution of prayer	4.76	4.61	+0.14

Significantly, five of the six factors rated highest are all core elements of the DMM approach, the one exception being “Adopted right ministry strategy.” (For more on DMM distinctives, see *New Generations 2020*.)

Characteristic elements of the DMM process that are also distinctive of the catalysts will be examined below, one by one. From anecdotal evidence collected in the interviews, it is clear that those catalysts who do not identify DMM as their ministry approach also make use of many of these DMM elements.

DMM Elements Listed by Effective Catalysts

(1) Prayer or fervent intercession

Prayer is a vital element in the DMM Cycle, and it is key in all forms of movements. The table below shows the same list of factors that can contribute to movement breakthrough, this time ordered by the rating that the effective catalysts gave to each. The contribution of prayer was ranked as number one by both the catalysts and the non-catalysts.

Table 2: Contributing factors to movement breakthrough ranked by effective catalyst rating			
Factors that contribute to movement breakthrough	Catalysts	Non-catalysts	Difference
Contribution of prayer	4.76	4.61	+0.14
Raised up leaders effectively	4.55	3.75	+0.81
Used reproducible disciple-making	4.52	3.97	+0.54
Adopted right ministry strategy	4.51	3.71	+0.8
Met holistic needs	4.17	3.67	+0.50
Used discovery approach/groups	4.16	3.45	+0.72

Besides being the most significant contributing factor in movement breakthrough, “fervent intercession” is also shown to be a key trait of effective movement catalysts. In addition to examining the role of contributing and impeding factors, the survey tested for traits and competencies that correlate with movement breakthrough. Participants rated themselves on a list of traits and competencies of effective leaders based on an extensive review of the literature on the subject over the past 70 years (Prinz 2021). Of all these traits and competencies, “fervent intercession” shows the greatest contrast between the two groups, as seen in the top row and last column of the following table.

Table 3: Fervent Intercession - the trait that most distinguishes catalysts from non-catalysts			
Traits and Competencies	Catalysts	Control group	Difference

Fervent Intercession	3.83	3.07	+0.76
Disciple-making	4.65	4.07	+0.58
Inspiring Personality	4.60	4.06	+0.54
Empowering	4.63	4.11	+0.52
Influencing Beliefs	4.70	4.19	+0.51
Assertiveness	4.77	4.29	+0.48
Creativity	4.32	3.86	+0.46
Agreeableness	4.60	4.16	+0.44
Inspiring Shared Vision	4.66	4.23	+0.43
Confidence in the Bible	4.77	4.39	+0.37
Confidence in Locals	4.88	4.53	+0.36
Hunger for God	4.51	4.15	+0.35
Listening to God	4.51	4.16	+0.35
Internal locus of control	4.43	4.11	+0.32
Persistence	4.30	3.98	+0.31
Expectant Faith	4.67	4.36	+0.31
Conscientiousness	4.69	4.41	+0.29
Evangelistic Zeal	4.68	4.39	+0.28
Tangible Love	4.69	4.43	+0.27
Drive to achieve	4.41	4.14	+0.27
Openness to Experience	4.44	4.19	+0.25
Extroversion	3.27	3.37	-0.10
Emotional stability	3.01	3.15	-0.14
Flexibility	3.47	3.63	-0.16

The in-depth interviews conducted with 15 catalysts and 30 non-catalysts add helpful details here. These interviews consisted of 14 open-ended questions which allowed interviewees to share about their experiences.

Figure 1 summarizes findings concerning the frequency of intercession, showing the difference between the practice of the catalysts and the non-catalysts. The last column indicates that some pioneers mentioned fasting in addition to prayer.

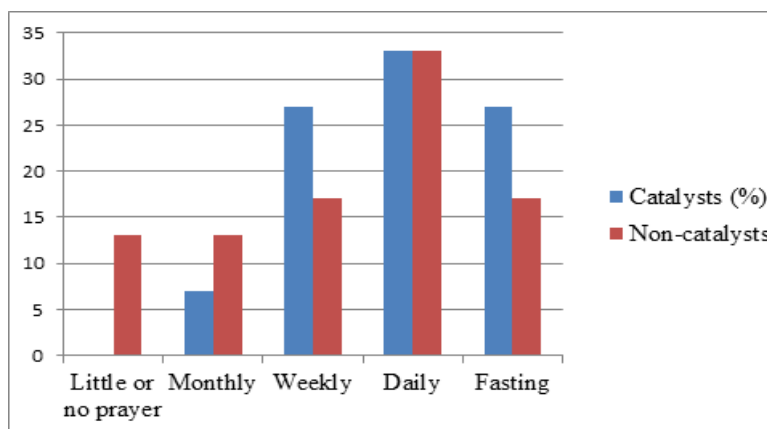


Figure 1: Frequency of intercession by catalysts and non-catalysts

The depth and quality of intercession are harder to assess. The following examples give a feel for the prayer lives of some of the catalysts and the disciples in their movements.

From East Africa: “Every morning a group of us get up early to pray before dawn and we call each other to wake one another up to pray. There are about 20 of us in our group committed to pray like that.”

From West Africa, as reported by an expatriate catalyst: “The local leaders are people of prayer. ... At the beginning of the year they have seven days of prayer and fasting. It is normal to fast.”

Also from West Africa, from a local catalyst: “Pastors and church leaders all pray. The last Friday of every month in our ministry is a time of fasting and prayer. We start from 8:00pm and go on to midnight or sometimes until 1:00am. Every week from 7:00pm to 8:30pm there is also a prayer meeting.... We pray for the unreached, for our missionaries (=local trainees sent to nearby people groups).”

From South Asia: “At one point we had up to about forty people that had committed to intercede every day based on whatever we told them.”

In Southeast Asia a catalyst reports that new disciples are also taught to pray so that around 1200 Muslim-background believers (MBBs) are praying for him and his ministry.

Each one of the catalysts reported that others were also interceding for their people group. In some cases the intercessors were from within the movement; in others, sending churches were praying.

(2) Compassion ministry or meeting holistic needs

The DMM approach includes compassion ministry, also called access ministry, as one of its key elements. New disciples learn to love those around them in practical ways, taking care of widows and orphans and meeting holistic needs in the community. When asked about their ministry approach, six of the effective catalysts who answered “Other,” rather than specifying DMM, described it as “Compassion ministry.”

Survey participants were asked to what extent “meeting holistic needs” had contributed to the catalyzing of their movement. The effective catalysts’ average response was 4.17, significantly higher than the non-catalysts (3.67—see Table 1 above).

A catalyst in West Africa told how a local farmer wanted him to join him out in his fields planting tomatoes. Despite his feeling that evangelism and church planting should be his first priority, he felt compelled to go and help. In the process he met several other farmers, and seven people were led to Christ and baptized as a result.

In one Southeast Asia movement, community learning centers provided the strategic platform to connect with local people and minister to them through this access ministry.

Other interviewees mentioned the advantages of having a practical skill such as well-digging as a way to integrate themselves into a community. The community accepted them because they had something useful to contribute.

(3) Finding persons of peace

DMM practitioners gain access to communities by looking for a friendly community member with whom to build a relationship: a “person of peace” (from Jesus’ instruction in Luke 10). Such a person is open to the messenger, is open to the message, and opens his or her networks to the gospel. The person of peace is not necessarily the first believer; he or she may never become a disciple. His or her role is simply to open the door to the rest of the community. The following examples from the interviews illustrate this point.

Most disciples within one movement in South Asia came from extended family groups which formed the basis of house churches numbering anywhere from ten to 25 people. The first disciple in the community, the person of peace, was able to use existing networks of kinship for gospel witness. In other cases, relationships from work or neighborhood provided channels for evangelism.

Local evangelists in a West African movement prayed intensively that God would lead them to people of peace, both before setting out and as they arrived in a village. As they would strike up conversations or begin telling stories, they built relationships that eventually resulted in their being welcomed by the whole community. They often marveled at the way God would bring them to just the right people in ways they could never have planned or predicted.

A catalyst in East Africa gave the following account. He had been having great conversations with a senior sheikh and invited him to host a meeting when more could hear, so emissaries went out on donkeys and a month later a total of 55 sheikhs from around the region gathered together. He explained, “I didn't want to call for an immediate response. I wanted to facilitate... group conversion; I wanted to steer the whole group of political leaders into the Kingdom as a group. There was interest after the meeting, and we repeated these meetings for several months.” When he felt they were ready he invited them to “to renounce Satan and all his works and to put their trust in Isa (Jesus) and become his followers and thereby enter the Kingdom of God—and they all did. Then they said they wanted the message to come into their villages, so they asked us if we could come into their villages: schoolteachers or headmasters of schools ... said they wanted us to teach their children this message”—and so the movement spread. This sequence of events presents a classic description of the way a person of peace (in this case the senior sheikh) can open up his or her network of relationships for disciple-making.

(4) A discovery approach based around small groups

Once they see a clear welcome for their message, even by just a few, DMM practitioners encourage them to gather together to discover for themselves what God says in his Word, through Discovery Bible Study (DBS) groups.

Survey respondents were asked to what extent using a “discovery approach and discovery groups” contributed to the catalyzing of their movement or to their ministry fruitfulness. The catalysts’ average rating was 4.16, once again significantly higher than the non-catalysts (3.45—see Table 1).

A West African interviewee described how a miracle opened the way for a DBS, which in turn led to the multiplying of the church. A woman whose father was an imam had become paralyzed, unable to walk for several years. A DMM team that began to reach out in that village came into contact with her. “Over time she experienced a dramatic miracle: she could stand up and be on her feet. This gave access to the people, with more openness in the family and community. We did DBS, engaging people with the Word of God. This lady... is now leading two or three groups.” (This example also serves to highlight the role of the person of peace, in this case the imam’s daughter.)

A catalyst in Southeast Asia explained that his movement’s only strategy is Discovery Bible Studies. “We don’t preach sermons; just tell Bible stories, just have questions and discussions. You don’t have to have a formula to do that.”

(5) An emphasis on obedience

One element of a Discovery Bible Study that sets it apart from traditional group Bible studies is that each group member is asked, “How will you obey?” Each time that they meet, DBS participants decide on a specific way they will put into practice what they have discovered in God’s Word. This commitment to practical application puts the emphasis on obedience from the very beginning. New disciples are expected to obey what they have learned, and they are held accountable for the steps of obedience they commit to take. Next time they meet, they report back to the group on the fruit of these commitments. All are mutually accountable, from the newest believer to the group facilitator. For this reason, DMM is characterized by its emphasis on obedience.

Survey respondents were asked to what extent this statement applied to them: “My disciples give me the feedback that my discipling them has led to character formation and greater obedience to God.” The effective catalysts’ answers averaged 4.65 on the 1-5 Likert scale, once again significantly higher than the non-catalysts (4.07—see Table 1).

Because of the subjective nature of many of the questions about catalysts’ traits and competencies, a sampling of third-party observer ratings was also collected. On this particular question, most of these rated the catalysts higher than they rated themselves.

“Obedience to the Bible” was mentioned by several of the catalysts interviewed as a factor that contributed to movement breakthrough. In addition to the contributing factors listed in the survey, the open-ended interview questions provided an opportunity to list other factors from their own experience. These additional factors covered a wide range, from “use of internet and social media” to “financial resources,” and from “reproducible tools” to “openness to the gospel because of crises.” Twenty percent of the catalysts interviewed listed “obedience to the Bible,” compared with

seven percent of the non-catalysts. Twenty percent of the catalysts also added “DMM principles” on this open-ended list as a contributing factor to movement breakthrough.

(6) Reproducible Disciple-making

Because of its simplicity, the DMM approach is easily reproducible. This is another factor that effective catalysts rated highly in the survey as contributing to the catalyzing of their movement, with an average score of 4.52 for “used reproducible disciple-making” (Table 2). Again, their ratings prove higher than those of the pioneers who had not catalyzed a movement (3.97).

“Disciple-making” was also one of the competencies for which the survey tested. Once again, the catalysts scored significantly higher (4.65) than the non-catalysts (4.07).

The head of a large network in Southeast Asia reported that his team holds leadership retreats every quarter, equipping each movement leader to train the next level of leaders. These have now been reproduced to 16 or 17 generations.

A West African catalyst described how two of his leaders were able to cover an entire region by dividing into twelve segments the tribal territory they were trying to reach. Each was given a motorbike, and each recruited someone to mentor. A year and a half later, the trainees were ready to become mentors themselves. As new leaders were raised up, it became possible to reach more and more villages, each leader being mentored by the one who had recruited him or her.

(7) Effectively raising up local leaders

Every DMM is above all indigenous. This means that raising up local leaders is vital, another factor which catalysts rated highly in contributing to movement breakthrough (4.55—see Table 1). In contrast, the non-catalysts rated this factor much lower (averaging 3.75) in contributing to ministry fruitfulness.

A catalyst in South Asia reported, “We prayed for God to give us an evangelist who could communicate well in the local culture. God brought to us [a local man], who... developed an ability to lead people to Jesus from the Qur’an alone.... We encouraged him to reach out to people of influence.” This is the common practice of this movement, leading to tremendous multiplication.

A West African movement developed the same way, as described by an expatriate catalyst: “It's not us: it's the two nationals that we've trained who are doing the work at this point. These two local people have catalyzed a movement that now has over 3,300 groups.”

It is clear from the interviews that catalysts place great importance on the role of local leaders and the need to train, equip, and empower them.

The research shows “confidence in locals” to be a key characteristic of effective catalysts, the highest scoring trait (4.88) of all the traits and competencies for which the survey tested, as shown in Table 3 above. The catalysts also rated high in the competence of “empowering” (4.63), significantly higher than the non-catalysts (4.11). Interestingly, the data show that catalysts value “empowering” more highly the longer they have been in ministry, presumably because they see its tremendous benefit to movement breakthrough and sustainability.

Conclusion

Both the quantitative analysis and the qualitative data from the interviews verify a clear correlation between the Disciple-Making Movement approach and movement breakthrough. This positive correlation is based on the experience of those catalysts who explicitly identify DMM as their ministry approach, as well as those who put into practice its characteristic elements.

This correlation is made all the more striking by the contrast with those in the control group who have not catalyzed a movement. Time and again the effective catalysts rate higher in all elements related to Disciple-Making Movements.

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