"Church Planting as Improvisation":
Learning Spirit-led, Principled Flexibility from Effective
Practitioners in the Middle East

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Frontier church planters can labor for years with precious little fruit. Then one day, a report emerges of a breakthrough in a similarly difficult context. Outsiders visit and verify and research this unique kingdom advance. A key leader publishes a book and launches a training which distills this movement into memorable and reproducible steps that anyone anywhere could apply in their context. A group of supporters vigorously advocate for the new method as the next, best available path to reaching the least reached. A group of skeptics equally vigorously raise the alarm of the unique dangers this radical new method poses to the prevailing, trustworthy approach to ministry. It is a familiar story often repeated in the frontier missions world desperate for encouragement and guidance toward increased fruitfulness in hard places.[1]

Weary of such black-and-white, either-or debates which seem preoccupied with finding the "right method" or ministry formula, a growing number of voices have instead advocated for an emphasis on recovering a spirit of innovation and adaptability to navigate the diverse, changing contexts in which least-reached people live. Ted Esler (2022), president of MissioNexus, captures this theme, highlighting obstacles to innovation from the occupational culture of frontier practitioners, offering tips for overcoming them and cultivating an experimental approach needed to reach the least reached. Trevor Larsen (2022), a fruitful mentor to movement leaders in Southeast Asia, similarly emphasizes the role of ministry experimentation, evaluation, and adaptation as key to his leaders' discovery of fruitful practices. Along these lines, Warrick Farah (October 2022 email correspondence), founder of the Motus Dei Network and a leading researcher of Church-Planting Movements (CPMs), observes that, "It seems that each movement is actually an innovation in a context and not the implementation of a method/formula."[2]

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[1] I am grateful to Timothy M. Stafford, Ted Esler, and Warrick Farah, for their feedback on an earlier version of this article.

[2] Farah's "adaptive missiological engagement" in Islamic contexts likewise highlights the importance of attending to the diversity that exists in Muslim communities rather than searching for a single model of ministry (Farah 2018).

Can we glean lessons from frontier breakthroughs while retaining the flexibility needed participate in God's mission in a diverse, changing world? Perhaps we might learn something from those through whom God has planted his church in difficult, volatile contexts. In this article, I draw upon my analysis of five fruitful practitioners who have planted churches among BMBs (Believers of Muslim Background) in the diverse, dynamic region of the Middle East. These examples of contemporary church formation suggest to us a picture of church planting, not as a formula to be implemented, but as an activity of collective improvisation. These practitioners present to us an example of skillful participation in the mission of God among the least reached which involve the collective, improvisational synergy of (1) the Holy Spirit, (2) the initiative of local believers, and (3) input from disciple makers within a principled framework. If we replace the image of "church planting as formula implementation" with an image of "church planting as collective improvisation," we are better equipped to constructively evaluate church-planting trends, navigate effective local-expat partnerships, and effectively adapt our church-planting efforts among frontier people groups in a rapidly changing world.

Drawing upon jazz theory, I first identify two key features of improvisation which are especially relevant to illuminating effective church-planting praxis. I then provide an overview of the church-formation research itself. Next, I unpack examples of this "improvisational" praxis that emerge from these five fruitful church planters, followed by summary conclusions and implications for frontier mission today.

"All that Jazz": Defining Improvisation

While notoriously difficult to define, jazz would not be jazz without improvisation (Edgar 2022, 9).[3] Improvisation can be defined as "a spontaneous creation of melody" (Rose 1985), not *ex nihilo* but in terms of "variation" (Hinz 1995, 33). To unpack this further: "The simplest method of improvisation takes a preexisting melody—a song known by millions or an original composition by a member of the band—and varies it. This method, melodic paraphrase, typically adds notes and distorts the rhythm into something that swings, but does not disguise the source material" (Kane 2012, 38). A careful listener to improvisation will also observe that not only melody, but other musical elements like rhythm and harmony, can be varied and improvised. Within this very basic framework, two key features of improvisation are of special significance in illuminating church-planting praxis: spontaneity within structure, and collective synergy.

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[3] William Edgar defines jazz in terms of five essential aspects: (1) "simple and significant structures," (2) improvisation, (3) not one single style in one era but a family of sub-styles that evolved over time, (4) a "music of protest" (i.e., the blues), and (5) an implicit "narrative from deep sorrow to inextinguishable joy" (Edgar 2022, 9).

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Spontaneity Within Structure

The spontaneity of improvisation is not chaotic; it takes place within certain patterns. In *A Supreme Love: Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel*, Edgar (2022, 6-7) notes,

> It is true that jazz allows for considerable freedom, but it always takes place within a form. The form may vary, but it is usually a set number of harmonies (musicians call them 'changes') over a particular rhythm. The best musicians tell a story, using those changes as a guide.

Edgar highlights the chord progression ("changes") and rhythm as two structures within which musicians improvise.

There are other structures as well, such as the melodic direction of the song (typically established at the beginning and recalled at the end).[4] "Tradition" and jazz "social conventions" also create structure for improvisation:

> Jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis says, 'Jazz is not just, "well, man, this is what I feel like playing." It's a very structured thing that comes down from a tradition.'" … The jazz musician first listens to artists across time, then begins to emulate jazz masters, playing solo transcriptions and learning riffs played by the greats. In time the musician finds an original voice, but only within the context of listening and emulating what has gone before them. (Kane 2012, 38, citing Berliner, *Jazz*, p.289)

The jazz tradition provides a shared structure within which all musicians draw from and improvise within.[5] Improvisation is not a simple free-for-all; it is an activity that

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[4] Another important structure is the overall song form. The 12-bar blues "has its origin in African American folk poetry, featuring a distinctive, asymmetric three-line stanza" (Giddens and DeVeaux 2009, "Jazz Form and Improv," 26). This form "may be packed with extended chords and fanciful substitutions, and its structured interrupted by composed transitions and contrasting sections, yet the same basic form remains—and has remained mother's milk in jazz to this day. It has withstood countless musical fashions …. There is no such thing as a jazz musician who can't make something of a twelve-bar blues" (Ibid, 31). An alternative, but also popular, song structure includes the 32-bar AABA song. Giddens and DeVeaux note that "The idea behind the form is pretty basic. Compose an eight-bar phrase. Repeat it. Contrast it with a new eight-bar phrase (known as the bridge or release or middle section), ending with a half cadence to drive the piece forward. Then repeat the original phrase one last time" (Ibid, 32). Both the 12-bar blues and the 32-bar AABA song provides a known structure, which overlays chord changes, rhythm, and melodic direction, within which musicians will improvise.

[5] Along with this are several social conventions that all are expected to know and follow:

> Behavioural norms include: the nominal leader, who decides which songs to play and in what key; the soloist, who determines the style and embellishment; and the use of a chorus, which restates the basic theme. Band members use a combination of hand signals and eye contact to communicate change in tempo, the beginning and ending of soloing, call-and-response exchanges, and so forth. There is an unspoken understanding of the need to respect and comply with these basic guidelines for action, for without them, the improvisational process would degenerate into chaos. (Kamoche and Cunha 2001, 746)

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takes place within the structure of these behavioral norms, the tradition in which they are passed on, as well as known chords and rhythms.

These jazz structures are what can be called "minimal structures," in contrast to the more rigid structures of classical music. Classically-trained musicians are "aware of the elements of a notated composition; the improviser is aware of scales, intervals, harmony, chord structures, and other musical elements. In the improviser's hands, however, these musical elements become malleable" (Hinz 1995, 32). While classical music is more of a "composer's art," jazz music is more of a "performer's art," because "the performer of a notated work has no influence on the style and vocabulary of the piece, unlike the improviser, who directly influences a piece's style and vocabulary" (ibid., 33).

This feature of "structured improvisation" is particularly useful in capturing fruitful church planting in my Middle East case studies, as is a second feature—its communal synergy.

Improvisation as Collective Activity

Although there are solos in jazz, improvisation is not a solo activity, but "a unique form of interactive creativity, centered on group processes in real time rather than the eventual product of an individual" (Macdonald and Wilson 2006, 59). The spontaneity within structure occurs in relational synergy, and "musicians will deliver unrehearsed lines and rhythms and respond to each other's spontaneous contributions while (usually) maintaining a common tempo through repetitions of a harmonic framework" (Macdonald and Wilson, 59).

Different members of the band play different set roles in this process. The bass, percussion, and harmony instruments (piano, guitar, etc.) each uphold a different part of the overall structure in ways which seek to inspire and accompany the main soloist (trumpet, saxophone, etc.), as different instruments taking turns in soloing throughout the piece. In the process, "The members of the band have to listen to one another, exchange ideas and find mutual inspiration" (Kane 2012, 38).

These features of jazz improvisation have stimulated inspiration in Christian ethics (Kane, 37), missiology (Corrie 2014, 299), and in the business world (Kamoche and Cunha 2001, 733-34). In the church-formation research detailed next, jazz improvisation illumines a fresh way to think about fruitful church-planting praxis in the diverse, changing contexts of frontier mission.

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Overview of Church-Formation Research

To prepare for a training session on church formation, I interviewed five church-planting practitioners who had been involved in the formation of at least one church of BMBs in the Middle East. Conducted in the fall of 2022, the research consisted of a written interview with 14 questions, clarified by follow-up questions via email, Signal, or Zoom, which I transcribed.

The five cases each come from different contexts across the Middle East. One interview was co-answered by a male BMB and a woman from a Western country. Another participant was a native Arabic speaker who answered the written questions in Arabic and follow-up questions in English. The remaining three were church planters from Western cultures and native English speakers.

The participants were asked about the nature of the churches that they helped to start, the story of their formation, their definition of church, obstacles faced, and advice for fellow church planters. Some of the participants were involved in the formation of a single congregation, while others were involved in a network of multiple house groups/churches.

The participants' definitions of church varied some, though all had a common core that is familiar to most frontier workers. At the same time, many also recognized the natural development that happens over time in church planting with different groups at different stages at varying moments in its life cycle. Among these cases, there are also some groups and churches which, depending on one's definition, could potentially be considered "embryonic" churches—in the process of moving toward "church"—while others would be considered having already crossed the threshold of being "church," while still on the journey toward a spiritually mature church (Antonio 2023, 13; cf. Waterman 2011, 465-67).

All cases represented fresh breakthrough in places or people groups which were previously unchurched. Most were in relatively conservative communities with varying degrees of proximity to Westernized sectors of society. No cases were "ideal" lacking past (and ongoing) challenges. Each reflected a unique church formation story:

1- A BMB national and a Western woman helped a group of relatives transition from a friendship group into the first known church in their tribe, co-led by the woman and three BMBs.

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2- A national believer and his wife started a Discovery Bible Study in a church with refugees, which grew and then split into geographically based house groups. Through tangible service and mobilizing and mentoring refugees as leaders, these groups multiplied into a growing network of believer groups and embryonic churches.

3- A Western church planter and his wife, utilizing simple ways of equipping and empowering new believers to share their faith with their relational network and to baptize and disciple people into house churches, helped form and coach a network of house churches and embryonic churches in Shi'ite communities.

4- A Western church planter, in partnership with other workers over many years, helped to disciple and network together different believers in an urban area, who later scattered throughout the country due to instability. They then began to grow and reproduce along familial and tribal lines while remaining networked together because of their long-time relationships in the first city.

5- A Western church planter and his wife, along with cross-cultural and near-cultural teammates, saw two streams of church develop as a result of media ministry. One stream was an embryonic church which developed and spread organically in a single extended family. The second stream was a church which began as a baptism class for various believers from multiple Arab nationalities that continued to meet and then developed into an indigenously led church.

After collecting the interviews, I synthesized these five cases of church planting and assessed them for relevance in my own context and similar contexts in the Middle East. I identified several significant themes or issues which I believe deserve consideration (Antonio 2023). A critical element that emerged was a picture of fruitful church planting as involving collective, improvisational synergy of the Holy Spirit, initiative of local believers, and wise disciple-making within a principled framework. The basic jazz awareness outlined above highlights fresh insight that stimulate our thinking and practice in frontier church planting.

Vignettes of Church-Planting Improvisation in the Middle East

I will focus on two aspects of church-planting "improvisation" in the Middle East: collective synergy involved in church planting, and spontaneous creativity within a structured framework.

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Collective Synergy in Fruitful Church Planting

Who is responsible for "planting/building" Christ's church? We might answer in one of three different ways. Traditional church planting often assumes *the expat missionary* to be the one who "plants" the church, after the model of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 3:9). Others, however, might advocate for *local indigenous believers* to take the lead and be empowered to plant and shape the church from the beginning; the cross-cultural worker shifts to a facilitator role (cf. Steffan 2011). Still others might answer that it is *Jesus himself* who "will build my church" (Matt. 16:18), hence we should abandon "church planting" terminology altogether in favor of "disciple making" or "Word sowing" as more accurately conveying the cross-cultural workers' role (cf. Miller and Little 2022, 103).

But what if the answer is "all of the above?" The five cases of recent church plants in the Middle East which I studied paint a picture of divine-human *and* local-outsider synergy, which faintly resembles the collective improvisation of a jazz ensemble. Perhaps the planting or building of Christ's church is an act of God, external disciplers, and local believers, all at once.

To begin with, each church-formation story clearly shows evidence of *a supernatural act of God*. In some cases, healing played an instrumental role in bringing the initial person in the network to faith. In another, it was expressed in a divine appointment which connected a local with a foreigner who proclaimed the gospel and brought that person to faith. Another example can be seen in the clear leading of the Spirit of the initial embryonic group of believers to discern that God wanted them to start a house church in a way they neither expected nor anticipated. Yet another example shows God's fingerprints in the expansion and reproduction of believers through significant societal upheaval and persecution. In one way or another, each of the five cases reflect God's clear fingerprints in the formation of the churches.

The divine intervention in each story, however, did not exclude human agency. Regarding the local aspect, one common theme is the way that each of the cases include the clear *empowerment and involvement of the local disciples* in the process of church formation. In a few cases, the disciple makers partnered with same-culture or near-culture believers, either on the church-planting team, or in the actual decision process to plant a church. In several cases, equipping local disciples was an intentional, integral part of the disciple-making approach from the beginning. In a couple cases, security or instability forced the network to rely upon local involvement through the exit of foreign disciple makers from that context, leading to distance mentoring which required

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increased local responsibility. Rather than outside church planters being front and center as the sole human agent seeking to "plant" a church, these effective church planters all mobilized and empowered the local disciples to play significant roles in forming and leading these churches.

The outside church planters, however, were not passive observers in the process; they intentionally interacted with the local disciples in a symbiotic relationship between indigenous activity and *cross-cultural input and initiative*. The intercultural team of three nationals and the Western female discipler is a good example. Although she listened and deferred to her local partners, she acknowledged ways that she and another more mature believer played a guiding and directive role at times, particularly in helping the group clearly engage the biblical teaching on the nature of the church early on, and later in helping to mentor the mature believer to take over the main teaching role in the church.

Another example of this indigenous-outsider interplay is the "baptism class"-turned-church. Though the outside disciple maker initially cast the vision for the class to be a training experience which they could reproduce in their families, the local group requested at the conclusion of the class that they continue meeting together. The disciple maker was receptive to this local initiative, continuing to meet and host the meetings, while intentionally guiding the group in the direction of an indigenously led and indigenously hosted church. Throughout the process, the locals actually resisted every move toward more indigenous leadership, but the disciple maker pushed back on this local preference and persisted in his vision toward an indigenous church. The group did eventually shift to an indigenously led and organized church, while the original disciple maker shifted into an outside mentoring role.

A final example of indigenous-outsider synergy is the way several locals approached the cross-cultural workers to request help with discipling their children who were forced to attend Islamic classes every day. The cross-cultural workers were receptive to this request, but they did so in an intentional way that sought to direct it towards a goal of local sustainability and fruitful church formation. Though agreeing to host and lead a regular bi-weekly gathering to help teach kids about the Bible, they required at least one parent to be present, casting vision for the believers to learn a model of home-based discipleship in the future. This combination of listening to and involving local disciples, along with intentional direction and input from disciple makers, led to an important breakthrough in their church-formation efforts, resulting in strong bonds among the families which continued to knit the whole network together even after they all

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relocated in other places in the country. As the research participant noted, this involved "a combination of casting vision to the local believers, but also listening to the local believers as to what is going to work in that season" (Interview 5).

Rather than the sole activity of either God, the outside church planter, or the indigenous believers, effective church planting in these five church plants involved collaborative synergy in which all three parties were involved. A divine work of God (1 Cor. 3:6—7; Matt. 16:18; Acts 1:8), in collaboration with divine image-bearers (1 Cor. 3:9), both external agents (Matt. 28:19—20) and local agents (Acts 8:4; Acts 10:33; Col. 1:7)—church planting might echo the collective synergy of a musical band engaging in the enterprise of jazz improvisation.

Church planting reflects not only this collective interactive collaboration; it also reflects spontaneous adaptability within form.

Creative Flexibility of Church Planters within Structure

The interviews of these five practitioners did not suggest a picture of rigid implementation of a single, consistent formula or method. No two church-formation stories were the same; a variety of approaches and combinations were reflected in the handful of reported churches/networks. And like jazz improvisation, it was not chaotic, but in the context of a framework of principles.

All cases represented some degree of flexibility and creative adaptability. However, in all cases, the practitioners worked within a clearly defined set of principles for biblical discipleship and indigenous churches, with a goal of building toward eventual multiplication among multiple streams. Two of the practitioners began with one approach and later adjusted approaches when the situation changed or they were exposed to new information or training. In one case, a practitioner employed two different church planting approaches simultaneously. With one group, he employed an "aggregate"-style approach in connecting people who did not know each other into a new congregation; with another group, his team employed a relational-network (*oikos*) approach which worked with a group of believing relatives to help form them into a church.

Another example of improvisational adaptation involved a female worker from a Western country and a BMB national, who co-planted a church primarily consisting of BMBs within a particular tribe and familial group. The church plant took shape in a way that was completely unexpected to the female worker:

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This was not my plan when moving to the city. To be honest, I have never considered myself a church planter as a single, Western female (despite some experience with church planting in another [Muslim]-dominated country). But as I had many, many conversations with the believers in this city and tribe, it became obvious that a house church was where God was leading all of our hearts. I listened much more than I spoke. I sought advice from others. The last thing I wanted was to make the church westernized. I spent hours and hours in daily conversation with the three MBBs that joined with me to plant the church. We went through some incredibly difficult times together. I had to be much more vulnerable than was natural for me and allow myself to be open to criticism. I certainly received lots of criticism along the way from other foreign workers who were not involved with the situation. But my leadership and mentors fully supported me and helped guide me. (Interview 3)

The female worker demonstrated an openness to the leading of the Spirit and the input of her BMB friends, which allowed her to adapt her mindset and practice to a process of church formation that she did not expect. At the same time, her answers to the questions showed that she had a clear framework that she worked within, including a clear definition of "church" and a strong commitment to indigenous church principles, which guided her own constructive input into the process.

One of the more poignant illustrations of this improvisational flexibility is found in an established network of house churches in a volatile context. A key lesson emphasized by the research participant was the importance of being willing to flex one's approach in response to changing circumstances:

Everybody's looking for, "what's the secret, what's the formula, how did it work?" … looking back, it's kind of like, "I don't know, exactly." I look back … and I say, "Oh that was a really important strategic thing we did there." But at the time, we didn't necessarily think it was that strategic. We just thought, "OK, we're just responding to what's being asked … to a need." And, so, at that time, that worked well. And then the situation changed … and it didn't work quite as well. … And so [we started asking] "What now? What can work in this environment?" … It changed organically as the situation changed. And I think that's perhaps maybe the biggest [lesson]. (Interview 5)

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The biggest breakthrough in this network was strategic only in retrospect; in reality, it was the result of a spirit of adaptability of this fruitful team. This improvisational spirit came easier for some than for others:

> We've lost some workers that were partnering with us over the years, because the plan changed, and they liked the old plan. … I understand that. I'm a fairly methodical person myself. … That's something we have to stretch and grow in, those of us that are less like that. Now my colleague who I mentioned, who has this apostolic gifting … I swore he stayed up at night just dreaming up ideas to make my life miserable … he was always coming in with new thoughts, new ideas … and those "ideas people" … can adapt more easily to changes. … I don't usually like to use military terminology, but we are working in … enemy territory. … The environment's going to be changing around us all the time. We need to be flexible and adaptive in order to continue the growth that starts. There are people who I have seen stick very methodically [to their original plan]. The ones that I've seen … that have stuck very methodically [to their original plan] … they mostly continue on, [with] a small group of local believers. But 10 or 20 years later, it's still that small group—maybe smaller. (Interview 5)

In this participant's view, a more methodical approach is less fruitful in the long-term than one in which the church-planting team is open to change and improvises with the constantly changing landscape.

Legendary jazz trumpeter Miles Davis famously said that a note is only "wrong" based on the next note played.[6] These skillful church planters seem to embody a similarly flexible, responsive approach. To depict improvisation a free for all lacking all boundaries would be to misunderstand both jazz and church planting. As skillful improvisors flexibly adapt to the dynamic set of notes played by various members of the ensemble, they do so within the structures of known jazz chords, rhythms, traditions, and behavioral conventions—or else it would not be jazz. Similarly, the responsive, creative flexibility of these church-planting improvisors took place within the grounding structures of Scripture and responsible missiological principles.

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[6] I'm grateful to curriculum design scholar (and jazz musician) Dr. Timothy M. Stafford for this insight and reference.

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A willingness on the part of church planters to adapt and improvise, within a set of biblical and practical principles, is significant for understanding effective church formation. Like jazz musicians, fruitful church planters collaborate with local disciples and the Holy Spirit in church formation. Rather than rigidly following a classical musical score, they improvise and adapt freely within the structure of their principles of indigenous, biblical discipleship and church formation.

Conclusion

Church planting among least-reached communities is a humanly impossible, foolhardy venture. While frontier practitioners are eagerly searching for and debating the best formula, process, or method to achieve that elusive kingdom breakthrough in the hardest places, other perspectives and images might supplement these discussions by stimulating our imagination with a fresh vision of the nature of the task and our role in it.

In this article, I suggested that five fruitful practitioners who have recently planted churches among BMBs in the Middle East resemble, not those who have discovered or mastered the perfect formula, but skillful and sensitive improvisers in a flexible, principled collaboration with God and with local believers. There is much more to be learned from exploring other aspects of the jazz improvisation model, evaluating other church-formation case studies within and outside the Middle East, and exploring further the specific principles that structure effective church-planting improvisation.

It is important to highlight what is not concluded in this research. My study focuses on church formation, not church longevity; it focuses on the process and factors of groups forming into churches, not on the factors that enables churches to remain and grow to health and maturity—also a worthy and needed study. Additionally, my research does not make universal claims for all frontier church planting contexts, or even for the whole Middle East region. Rather, it seeks to understand and describe what possible insight emerges from these five examples of church plants in a volatile region. The five examples of church-planting breakthroughs are unfinished stories, and each has its own ongoing challenges which go beyond the scope of this study.

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We can give thanks to God that in the hardest of places, he is building his church. In doing so, perhaps he is not doing so unilaterally, making us passive observers; nor is he hiding some secret formula somewhere, withholding breakthrough until a genius unlocks it for the rest of the frontier mission community to implement mechanistically. Perhaps God is instead inviting us to pick up the instruments and gifts he has given us, listen to and collaborate with our local disciples and with the Holy Spirit, and create music together as we trust the Spirit to bring fresh breakthrough in our distinctive contexts, in his time and in his way.

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