

CASE STUDIES IN DISCIPLESHIP OF BELIEVERS WITH A MUSLIM BACKGROUND (BMB)

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1 Case: BMB Discipleship is Rarely a Straight Line

Through a European co-worker, Mary, who openly shared about her spiritual and church life, this expat Arab brother, Ahmed, expressed interest in visiting her church. Mary was not an intentional cross-cultural worker and was not trained in contextualized ministry. In a society where women cover, she stood out with her attire (some would say that her dress was a bit too revealing for church) but that did not seem to be an obstacle. Their age difference made it unlikely that there was romantic interest on his part. A decision to follow Jesus was made shortly thereafter, and intentional workers disciplined Ahmed.

There was good initial spiritual growth and progress, but also periods in which there was backsliding. Struggles with loss of friendships, community, and identity were live issues. About a decade later, apparently unprompted, Ahmed became more serious about his faith and had to be moved for security reasons. He now lives in his home country where he is an apologist for the Christian faith, disciples other BMBs, writes discipleship materials, and is working on ways to encourage children of BMBs which include addressing marriage issues for young people.

Discussion:

The person was ready and brought to the local church, even though the believer who made the initial contact had no training in cross-cultural outreach. She came across as culturally insensitive; some would even consider her culturally offensive in the way she dressed. Because this believer was an older woman, many of the tentmakers who were involved in the initial discipleship of Ahmed were sure there were no romantic interests that could cloud the reasons for his conversion. This has not always been the case with BMB discipleship in the region: in the past there have been some extremely bad outcomes, with disastrous consequences. Ahmed's disciplers took care not to rush him to grow too fast too soon, and also avoided putting him on a pedestal by giving him upfront and visible church responsibilities prematurely.

Another lesson workers have learned from mistakes is to avoid making promises regarding future opportunities. One instructive example involved a BMB who became fixated on the potential to move to the west which in itself became a consuming goal. Although the desire was hidden and latent/dormant for many years, when the opportunity presented itself this BMB absconded with funds from an NGO and fled the country to seek the life in the west to which he felt entitled.

Most workers would agree that the majority of BMBs face myriad challenges on the way to becoming mature disciples of Jesus. Periods of growth may alternate with seasons of backsliding and regression. The process is rarely linear and smooth. Some may even seem to have become apostate or to reject their Messiah. There may be months in which no contact with mentors/disciplers becomes the norm: workers may wonder if the person has dropped off the face of the earth, only to see them resurface later, ready to engage in their walk with the Lord. Grace, sensitivity, and ability to gently restore fallen believers are skills that workers need. It is an exceptional case where a BMB does

not come with significant 'baggage' that requires years of hard work and discipline to rectify, until Christ is formed in them. However, when we see the Lord 'redeem the years that the locusts have eaten' it can be a beautiful sight, and these BMBs will be able to encourage others who have to journey this same road.

For many BMBs the need for a warm and close knit community to replace the one that is lost is critical, especially initially. Ideally workers need to be able to access a larger group of people who can provide fellowship and care, and a network of additional and specialist resources. The loss of community for the BMB is real and can affect employment and marriage prospects. The experiential and emotional loss is probably much greater than most workers from the west can comprehend.

2 Case: C1 BMB

Yusuf came to faith in Jesus through reading a copy of his unbelieving friend's Bible. University educated, he arrived in a city on the Arabian Peninsula for job placement. Quickly he found the local C1 church where he shared his desire to become a Christian. He was discipled by intentional workers, and then went through a church membership class and believer's baptism. Eager to grow in his faith and apply scripture, Yusuf also is enthusiastic about sharing his new faith with family members, co-workers and friends. As a result he has suffered physical persecution and rejection. He is actively seeking ways to serve in the international church, and does not feel a strong connection to the Arabic church even though this would be his heart language. After one church gathering where he was called upon to share his testimony, another church member came up, giving Yusuf a big hug, and exclaimed, 'You are my HERO!' Yusuf shared with his discipler how this incident made him extremely uncomfortable. Yusuf has a desire to explore vocational Christian ministry, but is unsure

how he would receive training and in what setting he would be able to pursue such a calling. The C1 church is considering inviting him to serve in a church pastoral internship program.

Discussion:

Yusuf has shown through his early testing, suffering and trials that he has counted the cost of following Jesus. He is eager to grow and has chosen to identify himself with the local C1 church. He has immersed himself and has been assimilated into this church where he enjoys fellowship and encouragement. He does not have the problems of C6 hidden believers: he has openly identified with the open, visible church. He has no desire to be part of an Arab congregation, or an exclusively BMB fellowship. Should God call him to pursue vocational ministry this does create some issues in his discipleship. Whereas there are well-defined pathways to pursue vocational ministry for other C1 church members, the hurdles for Yusuf include issues like employment visa and the ability to provide for his future family should he marry. Yusuf himself has commented on how this seems to be 'unfair'. Why is it, in one Christian 'body', that there seem to be different resources available to similarly gifted and possibly-called persons based on their prior religious or national background? It is most likely that Yusuf's ministry will require a significant time of being in the marketplace as a tentmaker or working bivocationally so that he can provide material support for himself and his future family.

A second issue relates to the natural church community that BMBs would choose to join. In several cities in the Arabian Peninsula BMBs become part of existing C1 churches. Generally, this happens through natural friendships and/or affinities such as life-stage, socio-economic, or shared interests. In many of the AP cities, joining the existing church is a real option, even though one would think that language and cultural background could be an obstacle. Generally, these BMBs are at the C1 end of the Travis

spectrum and would not necessarily feel a call to plant BMB churches, even if they felt a strong burden to share with Muslims. Should we consider how to include C1 and C2 movements as a significant strategic initiative in reaching Muslims in our ministries? What does this mean for the need for and expression of contextualized and indigenous Christian faith in these cities?

3 Case: Sowing and Protecting the Next Generation

Claudia is a European married to a local Muslim. Although a nominal Christian before she married, she has now become more serious about her faith and is being discipled by an intentional worker. She has a ten year old, Tim, who goes to a weekday Christian program but they are not permitted to attend church services. Tim is required to attend religious education classes in school which is increasingly uncomfortable for him. He is identified with his father's religion, but his father is not a very observant or religious person, and Tim is not required to go to the mosque. Claudia's in-laws view her as a convert to Islam and she usually covers at family gatherings. Tim loves to memorize Scripture, sing praise songs, and sometimes will do so spontaneously at school. His friends ask him what he believes, and Tim talks about Jesus and what he learns in Bible club. His mother has counseled him to tell his schoolmates that he is 'Muslim' rather than 'Christian'. Tim has pointed out to his mother that he feels he is lying about his true spiritual identity. She believes that when he is older he can choose how to identify himself; perhaps by then it will become more acceptable and safer to 'convert', but for now he should identify himself as 'Muslim'.

Discussion:

Claudia, although technically not a BMB, lives much of her life as a secret follower of Jesus. She has counseled her son also to choose security, and risk confused faith allegiance and religious identity at this time.

There are obvious Scriptural examples of secret believers like Nicodemus, and those who hid their true 'identity' for a season like Esther, until God's appointed/ordained time. Work among expatriate women who marry nationals is strategic and a significant ministry that intentional women workers can and should engage in. It is probable that the Apostle Paul's protégé, Timothy, who was to pastor some of the early New Testament churches, came out of such a family background. It is accepted that, in Arab families, the women serve as the guardians of the faith and can provide the cover and protection for believing children.

The question for Tim then is that his mother has essentially chosen to have him live as a C6-like secret believer, even though in his heart he knows that he is a follower of Jesus. What criteria should govern how these young people are counseled, and at what age? Should the young person's conscience and misgivings over lying about his true identity be a guide for how to proceed in these instances? Also, in the case of children, should security be given higher priority and value over honesty and integrity than with adults?

4 Conclusions

Some of the general questions raised by our case studies include whether the Travis contextualization categories are helpful, and in what strategies they are not. We know that, as descriptors of where BMBs are in their public identification, these are useful categories and handles for intentional workers to use for communication with each other. However, they invite scrutiny and examination in different contexts, especially in globalized cities

where the Arab and Muslim cultures are challenged and mixed with post-modernism and western secularism. Also, the C1-6 spectrum is more useful as a collection of descriptive phases. In the lives of most BMBs it behaves more like discreet quanta where one jumps from one to another, rather than a spectrum or continuum that predicts smooth transitioning from one to the next. Perhaps (as implied by others including Parshall) the continuum needs to be viewed as 'three-dimensional' where there can be significant overlap among the various C1-5 categories. Many would agree, though, that C6 is a different species of 'bird' altogether and therefore cannot be put on a single 'continuum'. C1-6 may or may not be helpful in evaluating outreach or church planting strategies: probably, at best, they are descriptions of how movements happened, as the categories do not flow directly out of theological reflection on how these movements should develop (Stringer).

Finally, reflection on the increasing numbers of isolated and anecdotal cases of BMB discipleship and spiritual formation raises the question of whether we can define best practices in our collective approaches. There are common issues that most intentional workers face and have to wrestle with when discipling BMBs. One Arab believer has commented that '[it] is easier to catch the fish, but much more difficult to clean them!' One multi-agency country partnership has embarked on the process of developing a platform for moving toward best practice in BMB care and discipleship. Because of limited 'measurable data' available to evaluate what truly constitutes best practice, the project is best seen as a 'cookbook' at this stage of development. So it could be said that for 'good BMB care' one has a comprehensive framework/checklist, much like a cookbook would have a standard recipe for the dessert 'Umm 'Ali', but leaving room for personalization and preference as to the quantity and 'brand' of specific ingredients. This project has led to important conversations and sharing about the current state, and ways to come to some broad consensus over common issues and approaches. Ideally, such a project will provide the future platform for soliciting and collect-

ing feedback so that one moves from a collection of anecdotal case studies to shared best practice and/or more consensus statements based in part on some 'data'. For the country where this has been launched, the city coordinator is one of the key persons for contact and access to the various resources that have been identified and developed.

Bibliography

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