

## DISCIPLING WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*SARANG KIM<sup>1</sup>*

### 1 Introduction

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Matt 28:18-20*

This paper is my personal story, the journey I have been on in learning how to nurture those who come to faith from a Muslim background. It is not a theological treatise on the subject and nor does it seek to develop a series of principles. In the six years I have been involved in ministry in the Middle East I have learned that the main point of discipleship is teaching people how to love God and how to love others, whatever the background they come from. Without God's wisdom and help I am not able to make disciples of other nations.

Even though it is difficult to be open in sharing my faith in the country where I live, there are emerging and growing communities of those who have come to faith from a Muslim background. And, it has been encouraging to see one of these communities send a worker from their own group, and support him financially, to work in another area of the country. This is evidence that God is at work; that people are coming to faith and growing to maturity as disciples of Jesus. At the same time, they face many challenges and we will look at some of these and they ways they impact our relationships in the ministry of discipleship and nurture of new believers.

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<sup>1</sup> The author is a Korean missionary with Interserve in the Arab World.

I share my journey in discipling by seeking to answer this question: How can I help a person commit his life to Jesus Christ, and at the same time help teach them how to disciple others, in places where there is limited religious freedom? I will do this by sharing some of the things I have learnt about myself, what I call personal preparation for discipling. Then I will look at some of the challenges that affect the relationship with new disciples and conclude with some of the things I have learnt as I have disciplined new believers.

## **2 Being personally prepared**

*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*  
Romans 1:16

There are two things that have kept me involved in this ministry of discipleship; understanding my identity before God and experiencing the power of the gospel. There are many discouragements along the way, times when there seems so little progress and demands I cannot meet. I have discovered that I needed to be sure of who I am in Christ, a child of the Living God, if I am to remain faithful to God in nurturing those who come to faith. I need to know the love of God in a deep way and experience his Fatherhood in my life so that I am comfortable with being vulnerable in sharing my life with these friends.

At the same time I need a deep understanding of the gospel. I need to have experienced its transformational power in my own life, to understand the work that Christ has done on the cross and its power to transform lives. I need a deep understanding of the gospel and its message in order to communicate it to those whose lives are shaped by such different foundations and experiences than mine. Without this personal experience and understanding I model culture and not the good news of the power of the gospel.

There are two other things that have been important in my own journey and preparation, both of which are particular to those situations where there is a local church but important if I am to model good discipleship. The first is being part of the local church where it exists. This helps to grow in me an understanding of the local context, the characteristics of the local body of believers, their strengths and weaknesses. Like many churches that exist in Muslim majority countries they have a developed church doctrine and dialectic theory that is shaped by their environment. They also have their particular struggles as a minority community living a life of faith in an environment where they are controlled. By drawing alongside the local church I believe we have a role to compliment that of our local brothers and sisters, strengthening them in their weaknesses and supporting them in their difficulties. Because of my background and experience of God and his body, I can bring into the situation resources (not financial) that can strengthen the body.

The second relates to community. I have been involved in small group Bible studies and prayer meetings as a way of serving, and serving with, women who are leaders in their local church. I started an intercessory prayer meeting with some other workers who were interested in a prayer ministry and we focused our praying initially on learning and sharing with the local Arab Churches. The group grew together with trust and honesty and after a year we held a prayer seminar. Through this God has raised up a group of women who wanted to grow in their faith and learn about prayer, most of them leaders of women's meetings at their church or in their homes. While we started, initially, to become intercessors for the world and particularly for the Middle East, those who are part of the group now have a keen vision to reach out and disciple in their own community. It has been a way of mentoring disciple makers.

These communities have played an important part in my growth in discipling those who come to faith. They have taught me a great deal that has helped me understand the context and

have come to be a safe and caring place to introduce those I am nurturing. They have been a place where I can go for advice and prayerful insights when I have faced difficulties in the discipling process. Modeling community life together, modeling commitment to the basic disciplines of faith while being open to learn from those who can teach me about the local context are all important elements of my personal life in this ministry of discipleship.

### **3 Challenges in the relationship with the young believer**

*So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.* 1 Corinthians 3:7

The nature of the Muslim family, with its strong male headship, is a significant challenge when discipling women who are new believers. This means that for many women the practice of their faith is very personal and often secret, restricting the opportunities for fellowship and encouragement from another believer and isolating them. Indeed, it limits interactions for discipleship. It is important to understand the personal circumstances of each woman, and find creative ways to help them access nurture and teaching, love and encouragement. Women have been willing to tell trusted family members about their faith, and in circumstances where they are widowed or divorced have been in a position to positively influence their children.

Facilitating and nurturing the religious education of children of new believers needs attention. At a seminar in 2007 a leading MBB of nearly 20 years experience shared his perception that this issue of caring for the children of new believers was a major obstacle that needed to be addressed when discipling new believers. We need to give more thought to how we disciple women so they have tools to nurture the spiritual life of their children. Children face ongoing religious education at school that darkens their worldview and shapes their understanding of issues of faith. They

also lack the skills to know when they should talk about things and when things should remain unspoken, sometimes placing themselves and their families at risk. Addressing these issues is an important foundation to nurturing healthy, whole believers.

It seems to me that nurturing the life of faith in a new believer can be much harder than the process of evangelizing. I have found it to be very frustrating at times, but have found encouragement by returning to the truth that one plants, another waters but it is God who gives life. Before actually becoming involved in nurturing new believers I thought I would simply teach them the Bible, but I discovered the greater challenge is to be vulnerable before them in order to demonstrate growing faith and walking with God. They understood more about the life of faith from observing my life than they did from the words I shared. The challenge is to live a consistent life of faith that is a model for others.

There is also the challenge of the spiritual battle. All of those I have been involved with have faced family or personal difficulties that have torn at their faith within a short time of their conversion. While I acknowledge this is not everyone's story I have seen a mother's death, a sister's death, cancer, traffic accidents and serious back pain happen in the families of new believers. These sufferings have profoundly affected their faith and resulted in one of them leaving the fellowship. This challenge is one that demands a deep prayer life on my part but also tools to help new believers grow a theology of God and faith and suffering. It may be that we should seek to teach these things earlier in their spiritual life. Many of us involved in discipling those new in their faith have not confronted this sort of spiritual battle and so are ill-equipped to model patient endurance through suffering. It seems important that we develop our own understanding and then use that learning to disciple others.

Another difficulty is the sense of obligation that confronts me in demands to meet their needs. There is often an expectation among new believers that I will be able to meet their needs, all of their needs whether practical, emotional, or spiritual. I cannot

deny their needs because they are very real, and yet I am also not able to meet all of them. As much as possible I emphasize my relationship as a friend who prays for them and with them in their difficulties and shares God with them. While seems an inadequate response at times I do not want to create dependency.

There remains a need for well-developed materials to help in nurturing new believers, ones that deal with many of these very real challenges they face while providing a good foundation in their new faith. It seems to be easier to find materials for evangelism and for believers from a Christian background, with limited material for the task of nurturing the life of a new believer from a Muslim background.

#### **4 Lessons I have learned in discipling new believers**

The main issue that I always consider now when I am discipling a new believer is how to love God and how to demonstrate his love in my relationship with them. I have come to understand the centrality of Jesus teaching on the greatest commandment to developing both a healthy identity and a sense of security in relationship. It provides the greatest challenge for me in seeking to live out this truth and yet speaks into the importance of a growing relationship with God as well and growing a relationship with others in community.

I also seek to introduce new believers I am discipling into the communities I am part of. One new believer understood what fellowship as part of a Christian community meant when I brought her to the intercession meeting with local Arab ladies. There were so many things this lady had not been able to grasp before, but in just a short time of fellowship with other women who loved God as she did she was able to understand the love of God in a more profound way. Things we may have talked about when we studied the Bible together came alive as she met with other believers, while things it seemed impossible to teach have been modeled in the life of this community of women together. By becoming part

of a community of local believers and growing together with them in honesty, truth and love I now have a place where new women believers can be connected with local mature believers. I consider this to be an important part of nurturing these women and helping both the mature believers and the new believer to understand more about what it means to the body of Christ.

Great wisdom is needed to know when it is the right time to introduce a new believer into such a group. I must understand her situation, the implications of meeting such a group for her and for the group, and be sensitive to stage of development of her faith. At the same time I want her to experience the love and fellowship that is part of being in the body of Christ and understand that I cannot nurture everything in her. In all of this I am reliant of God's Spirit to teach me and lead me.

Knowing God changes everything about the way we live and yet not wanting to make this new believer a cultural Christian, modeled on my own culture or any other culture I need to lead her always to the truth of the Bible. It means that differentiating between Christian beliefs and cultural Christian practices is important. What I want to do is give tools so they can apply the teachings of the Bible to their lives and situations, so I am not defining how something should be worked out in her life.

There are a number of steps I have found helpful in nurturing faith in the life of a new believer. I am committed to an emphasis on nurturing faith rather than evangelism. I have found these principles helpful in guiding me:

1. Spend time in each others home. Invite them to eat in my home but also be willing to accept invitations to eat in their home.
2. Teach them to read the Bible, including how to read the Bible, and check in with them about this.
3. Model and teach them personal spiritual disciplines including the importance of repentance and confession, bib-

- lical models of personal relationships and handling conflict, prayer, and tithing to name a few.
4. Encourage and support them in developing relationships of integrity with their family. This includes encouraging sensitivity to their family's practices of Islam, modeling the Christian life before their family, prayer for the family.
  5. Help them grow in answering questions so they are not in a position where they cannot answer and feel they have to deny Christ.

In John Chapter 4 Jesus met a woman in the land of Samaria. She recognized Jesus as a prophet and sought answers from him to theological and doctrinal questions. Jesus response was to explain we must worship God in spirit and in truth. He did not add any theological explanations or demands. I believe the most important thing in discipling a new believer is teaching them to love and worship the Lord in their lives and experience the power of the Word of God. Along with this we need to help them into the body of Christ, into community, with patience and gentleness and yet not denying them the opportunity of being part of this Body. For me, this is true discipleship.

*All quotations from the Bible are from the NIV.*