

The Glorious Messiness of Discipleship

By Margaret Powell

The discipleship of women from a Muslim background is not clear cut. Consider Fatima and Karin...

Fatima decided to follow Jesus after overhearing Christian people singing. Their joy and commitment and hope were palpable and she knew she didn't have that in Islam. She wanted it. She wanted to know this Jesus that they were so excited about. Her Christian friend explained more about Jesus to her and then arranged for her to meet up with a male leader, and after that, a female leader, to teach her more. This however was all done in secret so that her new husband and his family would not find out. Lessons were taken from a book specifically designed for BMB's and were done as often as possible, lasting usually only 30 min. In recent months it hasn't been possible at all. She still sees her Christian friend regularly. In what sense can we say that Fatima is being disciplined?

Karin decided she wanted to be baptised after being disillusioned with Islam and hearing about Jesus on the internet. She went to a church far away from her home and a retired couple cared for her and went through a course called Christianity Explained with her. She was baptised 3 months later. The plan was for her to meet with another believer to continue teaching her and walking with her in her new life but sadly that hasn't happened. Karin hasn't ever grasped who Jesus really is (although she thinks he is beautiful) or what it is to follow him. She hasn't seen the importance of growing as part of a Christian community. She insists that she has changed religion but in what sense has Karin been disciplined?

In the western context, discipleship is often seen in terms of doing a course with the new believer so that they have the right information about God and about how they now ought to live. As new courses come out we established Christians (often from the West) can think of them as new ways to disciple people but they are all variations of the same theme – discipleship is about giving the right information.

As I have met with new believers from a Muslim background it is clear that this is woefully imbalanced and this approach can be frustrating for both the BMB and discipler. What does fruitful discipleship of BMB women look like?

Khadija began to get to know a community of Jesus' people just before her marriage broke down. It was this community who cared for her and provided for her when she was rejected by her family and Muslim friends. She was always interested in knowing what the Bible said and now, a few years on, continues to meet regularly with followers of Jesus to read the Bible, negotiate life in a new country & have fun. She joins with the wider Christian community each week as they praise God, read his word, pray and learn together. "You know I'm still a Muslim don't you?" she asked a new member of this community. It's too hard for Khadija to even contemplate changing her identity from Muslim to Christian but she loves Jesus. That she remains a Muslim doesn't stop Khadija sharing her understanding of Jesus and how his followers are to live with other Muslim women. In what sense is Khadija being disciplined?

Discipleship often begins before there is a commitment to Jesus. Evangelism and discipleship seem to be one continuum as women start to be interested in Jesus; then learn about him and what he said and did; and learn what this means for those who take

him seriously. It's not necessarily a step by step process. It often all happens simultaneously. It's also a mix of talking & listening; living & observing followers of Jesus. It's a glorious mess of living honest lives together.

Ayesha was telling me some distressing news from within her community- intrigue, adultery, lies. She prefaced her comments solemnly – "I'm only telling you because I know you won't tell others." She ended it saying "When he was telling me I didn't get angry. I wanted to act like you and other church people – calm, listening, patient, understanding."

Ayesha has learned about Jesus from stories and discussions about the Bible. More than this, she has observed the lives of those who follow Jesus. I am convinced that Muslim women watch us before they listen to us. Are we worth listening to? Do our lives match the words we are speaking? Can we be taken seriously – in other words - are we honouring our prophet in our lives? Is what they see desirable? Do they want to be like us? What is the best way to live?

Ayesha has been around a community of people who follow Jesus for several years. She loves hearing stories of Jesus and she welcomes my prayer in Jesus name for her when I visit her. She admires and covets Christian relationships (including marriage) because she has observed that they are based on honesty and commitment and sacrifice. She has learned that this is a copy of how God has loved us in Jesus Christ. She is impressed and wants a life like that.

However, she cannot believe that Jesus is God. And this, she says, is why she remains a Muslim.

Khadija, Ayesha and even Karin can't quite get their mind around the deity of Jesus and other theological truths. However, they remain in a constant state of change as they continue to expose themselves to followers of Jesus– a change in their desires, a change in their interests and a change in their understanding. This is true for those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ as well as those who have not. The key it seems (humanly speaking, for the Holy Spirit can change hearts and lives without us or with us!) is contact with faithful, authentic, transparent followers of Jesus. The key truth our Muslim friends need to understand is that they are not subscribing to a particular institution (namely Christianity) but to the one they already admire – Jesus Christ.

Consider the long-term growth of the early church or even of Jesus' first disciples. Their understanding only came after years of observing Jesus and pondering his teaching. They loved him and followed him but didn't understand him nor his identity completely. After the resurrection that they had been warned about by Jesus himself they still didn't understand. Jesus' identity was a mystery to them for many years but they remained his followers, his church.

Evangelists and missiologists make use of objective markers to assess where people are in relation to belief in Jesus (e.g. Engels scale), but is this realistic for Muslim women- or anyone? The discipleship of Muslim women involves telling them about Jesus and showing them what it is to follow him in ways that intrigue them and in ways that feed them and transform their desires so that they want to know more, so that they want to be like his followers, to follow him. At the same time, we are teaching and demonstrating who God is and who Jesus is by whatever means is necessary so that our Muslim friends can come to a point, suddenly or gradually, where they identify as a follower of Jesus, belonging to him. And at this point, they know how to live as the daughter of the living God.

What does such messy discipleship look like?

My experience is not extensive but here are my observations.

Discipleship of Muslim women/ believers from a Muslim background is about sharing your life with them and letting them share their lives with you. What this looks like will vary from woman to woman & culture to culture but the end result is that you get to know what they love and what they fear, what they need and what they believe. They get to know how you live, why you live like that & what you believe. All of this happens as you respond to the stuff of daily life as well as intentionally lead them into issues of faith.

It's about responding to whatever is happening at the time.

It's about giving her Jesus' perspective on whatever already has her attention. This can be done by Bible story telling or personal testimony or just talking about it. It's about using the opportunities before you.

To do this effectively we need to be good listeners and questioners.

Anesha was cooking and was talking about how stressed she was - every day she has to put so much time into preparing food and it just disappears so quickly she has to do it all over again- sometimes on the same night. I could launch into a story about cooking or food – maybe Jesus feeding the 5000 – to connect with her frustration or I could ask more questions. I did the latter. It turned out that her husband continually invited people home for meals without telling her. She had no idea how many to cook for so she always cooking to make sure there was plenty of food. The issue wasn't cooking as such but her relationship with her husband. I empathised with her; we talked about what an ideal marriage would look like; I shared God's thoughts on marriage with her; I prayed for her and for her husband – while stirring the curry.

It's about being intentional as well.

It's about knowing who you are discipling. As we get to know our friends we will get to know where they hurt, what they are hungry for, what delights them. We will make note of issues to visit or re-visit; think of passages in Scripture that will serve those immediate felt needs and prepare ways to communicate them.

It's about making plans to study certain issues that we know are confusing for a new believer from a Muslim background; issues that are vital for them to grasp otherwise they will have a distorted understanding of the gospel and Jesus; issues that are of specific interest to women e.g. the nature of Scripture; the nature of God; nature of prayer and connecting with God; how to be pure; how to deal with spiritual forces; dealing with the burden of shame; death; the nature of grace and forgiveness. We need to think about what the Bible says about such things and also how a Muslim might understand them. How can we speak of them in ways our friends will understand? We need to consider not only the content of what we will talk about but the method of teaching/ learning.

So whether we are picking up on a current need or moving through some planned studies it is crucial that we equip our friends to read and understand the Bible for

themselves and build their confidence in doing so. Helpful methods include Discovery Bible Studiesⁱ as well as pre-planned studies designed specifically for BMBs.ⁱⁱ

It's about modelling a life lived for Jesus.

Our lives show our friends what it looks like to follow Jesus better than words. This then means spending time with them so they can observe us in different relationships; when stressed or relaxed; at work or leisure. This also means that we must be prayerful – that we will follow Jesus Christ faithfully and represent him well in our daily lives. We need to be in constant prayer that we will not be misleading.

Sadia was living with me for a few months. We were on our way out and we were running late. Sadia kept assuring me she was ready but still didn't emerge from her room. I spoke sharply to her and went and sat in the car. I felt like dirt and was thinking "what have I done?" After what felt like hours but was probably only a few minutes, Sadia got into the car. As we drove off I apologised for being so short -tempered. There was silence. I looked at her and she said "no one has ever apologised to me before. Why would you do that?" And so began a discussion on repentance and forgiveness; what is honourable and what is shameful.

It's about praying

We must pray for our friends because all of this is God's work isn't it? He is calling his people to himself and in his mercy he chooses to use people like us. We don't do it – we are totally dependent on God to use us for his good purposes.

We must pray for ourselves because we are representing Jesus Christ to our friends and we need his strength and power to speak and to act as authentic followers of Christ.

Mary can't trust men any more. She has been so badly abused in the past it's something she can't even contemplate. She loves hearing about Jesus and even reading the Bible but to trust the God we call 'Father' and who we talk of as 'he' is a step too far. I always pray for her when we talk – whether face to face or on the phone. "I love your prayers", she says, "send me some so I can pray. They are beautiful – it's like you know actually know God."

We must pray in front of and with our friends because this is how they will see more of who God is and what prayer is about – that it is God's children speaking with their perfect and trustworthy heavenly Father. This is how they will learn the greatest privilege of all as a follower of Jesus Christ - to pray.

ⁱ Discovery Bible Studies involve the telling or reading of a passage of Scripture several times followed by simple reproducible questions such as *what does this tell us about God? What does this tell us about Jesus? What does this tell us about people? What do you like about this story? What might some people not like? After reading this, what will you do? And Who can you tell this story to?*

ⁱⁱ For example Tim Green, *Come Follow Me* (Lulu, 2013) – a series of 20 studies tackling topics that are specific to believers from a Muslim background.