Grace Environments

Teach older women to be reverent in the way they live … Then they can train the younger women… (Titus 2:3 – 4a)

By Kristine Prenger

Introduction: Need for Mentoring in South Asia

After nearly 20 years of work at L___, a rural South Asian health and development project, I have not seen the emergence of transformed Christian leaders for the next generation, male or female. We have offered substantive training opportunities, from orientation to and discussion of our Bible-based organizational mission, vision, and values, to short courses of Perspectives on the World Christian Movement (called *Kairos*) through to somewhat more academic theological education by extension. But our ongoing institutional efforts at training seem to have born little fruit in the way of overcoming problems such as inter-ethnic tensions and a lack of loving, generous behavior that would evidence changed lives. It is time for us to implement a more individualized mentoring program as a way to disciple a few.

We hope to offer "grace environments" of reflective learning to help overcome cultural and spiritual strongholds in the lives of both cross-cultural workers and nationals. In a book called *The Ascent of a Leader,* Thrall, McNicol and McElrath write about this concept, explaining how "[a]n environment of grace works hand in hand with relationships of grace to create cultures in which trust, creativity, hope, and other positive outcomes emerge" (1999: 32). Much of the writing on this topic is related to leadership development, and the individuals considered below are women leaders in a challenging Muslim-majority environment. Our mentoring approach must involve a commitment to discerning prayer and listening to God on behalf of a mentoree, possibly with considerable time commitment, in order to work through the complexities of Christian women in leadership in South Asia.

A classic in Christian mentoring literature, *Connecting*, by Stanley and Clinton, names discipling as one of several sub-categories of mentoring. (1992: 41) In their mentoring continuum, discipling is necessary early in Christian life to build basic spiritual disciplines; spiritual direction would be helpful with more mature Christians, with willingness to listen together to how God is bringing growth opportunities through experiences. This article will tell the story of a young woman believer of Muslim background, whose mentoring needs include discipling, some element of spiritual direction, and also other types of less-intensive mentoring.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN CROSS-CULTURAL DISCIPLESHIP-FOCUSED MENTORING

First, I will describe some relevant South Asian relational patterns as well as expatriate assumptions and practices. Next will be a section detailing ways mentoring can be a path to overcome our challenges in developing leaders in cross-cultural ministry, through telling one

woman's story. I will illustrate the need to go deep with only a few, and consider questions of interest for women aspiring to be leaders, and to build future women leaders. I conclude with a personal reflection on the power of grace environments to restore and build through discipleship.

Cultural patterns of mentoring functions

In our South Asian country, nearly every student draws on perceptions of discipling and mentoring from the models provided by their school teachers, as they memorize expected answers in a rote-learning context. Another semi-feudal cultural pattern which shapes attitudes is the expectation that rich or politically-connected 'patrons' must provide resources or advancement opportunities (a role into which foreigners are almost always placed in our country).

A Zwemer Center writer, Dr. Warren Larson, describes how *pirs*, or saintly men, can be seen as a source for spiritual learning or blessing, continuing even after death. Most of the world's Muslims engage such Sufi-influenced practices (especially women seeking supernatural intervention for infertility or other struggles) even though Wahabbis (ultraconservative puritans whose influence has spread widely) strongly oppose them. This openness to connect to the supernatural is not restricted to women, and can be especially significant in working with women where participation in formal religious practices is limited.

L___'s country of service enjoys a communal culture, and any approach must resonate with local cultural values. A challenge to a discipling relationship may be the authoritarian model of local leadership. Servant leadership and reflective learning can be difficult to model, especially when Westerners are seen by nationals (whether believers or nonbelievers) as exhibiting unattainably different behavior (a spiritual stronghold of fixed, false belief).

Expectations of Western cross-cultural workers

Western missionaries work toward independence for church and project leaders. As opportunity and maturity increased, more nationals have been assigned leadership positions at L___. Through prayer, we expected the Holy Spirit to guide Christians' engagement with scripture and application to holistic ministry. But busyness has led to expatriates being involved more often in spontaneous or intermittent mentoring, essentially as a problem-solving mechanism. This leads to gaps in systematic development of spiritual knowledge, skills, and character as applied in a health and development project.

How mentoring will help: "grace environments"

In *Connecting,* Stanley and Clinton review factors which enhance Christians finishing well: a lifetime perspective, repeated renewals, spiritual disciplines, learning posture, and mentoring. (1991: Kindle loc 1617) I hope developing a mentoring culture at L___ will contribute to both expatriates and nationals finishing well. Developing deep relationships can

foster grace environments, as will be needed in this culture where learning from experience, including mistakes, is not the common conceptualization of adult learning.

Women's stories and struggles

L___ was originally established to reach a particular tribal group, so women from this tiny minority ethnic group have risen to positions of authority at L____. One of these Christian women in leadership was basically assigned, on the basis of her commitment to spiritual growth, to attend a training for initiating spiritual conversations and gospel discussions with Muslims. The training was intended to equip Christians to begin fostering home Bible study groups among Muslims, a strongly Spirit-led approach. However, she voiced a not uncommon, deep fear of Muslims during the training. To my disappointment (since I hoped to build missional vision for Muslim-majority outreach), she expressed her primary desire in terms of wanting to consolidate opportunities for her own growth, both personally and in advocating for her tribal community.

Khaleda,*[1]Teacher at Mission School

Introduction.

Another woman who came only very recently into leadership at L____ is a believer of Muslim background. She has struggled with suspicion from traditional Christian coworkers, where her Christian belief was only reluctantly acknowledged. She clearly feels mistrusted by other tribal (women) colleagues. She is from a more urban upbringing, with a breadth of experience, while the women at L____ are more often rural.

A national of L___'s country, Khaleda grew up in Africa until her businessman father threw her, her mother, and sister out of their African home. All three women came to faith soon after returning to their home country. Though her father followed them back to their home country two years later, he is still violently opposed to their Christianity. She has had multiple strong Christian influences in her life, and has a soul deeply sensitive to where God is at work in people's lives. Khaleda moved from the capitol city when God called her to spiritual warfare in the area where L___is located. She teaches at the mission school here, but I didn't really connect with her until about nine months ago. My (expatriate) prayer partner was leaving and told Khaleda and I we needed each other: both verbal processors in a group of mostly introverts. We meet most weeks for prayer and after we had been meeting together for some time, she asked me to mentor her.

Mentoring: A Range of Roles.

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* name changed

My time with Khaleda has been as a *coach*, helping her see parallels between her experiences and those of other expatriate missionaries. Her social contexts growing up were in an urban setting in Africa, so the culture of the rural nationals around L___ was startling to her. Like most expats, she can't easily read and write Bangla. I have been *teaching* her what I have learned of cross-cultural work and conflict resolution, which is relevant because as a (majority) Muslim-background person, the (persecuted minority) tribal fellow-teachers she works with have treated her with suspicion. I have also acted as a *sponsor*, talking about her unique perspective with our executive director, in order to highlight how she can contribute to identifying strongholds acting as barriers to change in the local church.

Mentoring Dynamics.

Initially our relationship was built around the dynamic of needing to talk through ideas. When we started praying together, I learned of her frustrations with life in a rural area. But I saw her as an answer to prayer, in our organizational desire to hire and encourage more believers of Muslim background. I was '*attracted*'[2] to her with a desire to encourage perseverance through the difficulties of cross-cultural adaptation. She in turn felt my interest in a deeper relationship through my probing questions into her relationships with her tribal colleagues. She wasn't sure she was going to be able to overcome their suspicions, and was consequently insecure in her leadership.

But she has been very *responsive*, in reading books and articles I have given her, and asking for books to read when I discuss learning from my Fuller classes (I am working toward a Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies). She now feels affirmed through our recent discussions to pursue a long-simmering goal of training in counseling and perhaps spiritual direction, as we mutually agree she has gifts of discernment and skills in reflection. Despite her rocky relationships with colleagues, she is solid in her calling to spiritual warfare, and wonders if breaking down the dividing wall between tribal traditional Christians and Muslims or believers of Muslim backgrounds might not be the key in that warfare.

Personal Takeaways.

Khaleda is the first person from this country with whom I have had an intentional mentoring relationship. She is learning with me the dynamics of attraction, responsiveness, and accountability. Meeting Khaleda affirmed that God will bring people into my life at his right time. This relationship came after a long-time lack of deep personal connection with nationals here, as well as not having a kindred spirit in a small community of foreigners. Just as I needed to learn more about being a mentor, along comes someone who asks me to be one. I want to be with her as we see how she uniquely fits into God's plan.

I believe areas of growth for women of these two very different backgrounds (tribal traditional Christian and Muslim) will require strong attention to biblical models of women outside of common roles, such as Deborah in Judges 4 and 5. Western women must

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[2] Described by Stanley and Clinton in *Connecting* as an affinity which brings a mentor and mentoree together.

acknowledge the even greater potential for insecurity among South Asian women. The risk of women trying to hide weakness (in an environment of usually male leadership) is reduced through identification with and affirmation of other women. Western and nonwestern women can benefit from informal but intentional lateral (peer) mentoring relationships for and with women, especially when there are few formal mentoring opportunities.

Slow, small, deep with a few

We can acknowledge that both Jesus and Paul most often worked with groups, not in what might be a sort of idealized one-on-one discipleship or mentoring relationship. However, I spent too many years setting up discipleship programs that seemed efficient for a large staff in a densely populated unreached country. My personal application of these principles is to facilitate L___ spiritual and leadership development focus around going small, slow, and deep with a few in a mentoring approach. Frank Hankins wrote of the need for "spiritual foundation mentoring", which he defined in terms of discipling (for basic spiritual disciplines) and spiritual direction (to deepen and widen the base for the more spiritually mature). These shape a leader's heart for a ministry that "flows out of being." (Hankins 2003: 194)

A heart is shaped through molding: this can come from close contact with a relationally safe mentor committed to building the next generation. Institutionalized training can be sterile, while exploring and reflecting on growth areas together with a mentor focuses on deeper needs and long term development. There are a number of scriptural models of long-term engagement where knowledge, skills, and character were developed in mentorees: Barnabas with Paul and John Mark, Paul with Timothy and Silas; Elijah with Elisha; Moses with Joshua, just to name a few. Often long-term employment at L___ (or any institution) gives a context for formative relationships, adding mentoring accountability to that of organizational management, and to God for spiritual development. But given the cultural pitfalls noted above, where patronage and authority define expectations, get advice from experienced local workers on likely barriers to sharing at a deep level—or the potential for disappointment when what you thought was a relationship built around mutual spiritual growth is then a platform for a request for preference. There might need to be some redefining of relationships to include more obligation that might be anticipated—again, to be worked out with help of experienced local cross-cultural workers.

Issues for women in leadership

I believe confidence is a huge struggle: in my experience, women tend to second-guess their own decisions. Not without exception, but in my professional life as a doctor, I have had women friends with whom I agonized over clinical decisions—while male colleagues were much less prone to this self-doubt. In Khaleda's case, her own self-doubt was magnified by the lack of trust afforded her across ethnic divides. I wonder how much of the fear of Muslims expressed by tribal Christians, and females in particular, is linked to their own self-doubt (inability to answer questions, inability to model a Christian life). A key question is how to nurture a

woman's assurance of her place in God's kingdom and his plan to reach the nations—in a context where women are often offered only token leadership roles.

Discipling relationships can uncover commonalities among women and build trust, such as when one admits to self-doubt. This can help establish 'life-on-life' relational connections, a term coined by the discipleship-oriented parachurch group, the Navigators. Practical content can be framed around mentoree self-disclosure, receiving a mentor's feedback, and then together reflecting on what has been shared. (Lewis, 2009: 183, 218) Underpinning everything, such discipleship must be built on a foundation of prayer, in grace environments such as that provided by Jesus when restoring Peter to ministry in the scene by the breakfast fire next to the Sea of Galilee in Jn 21.

Conclusion

L___ is in a new time of relying on the Spirit, discerning a way forward by listening. The group of medical missionaries there has been busy, but not necessarily as effective as we would have liked when it comes to the spiritual transformation of our South Asian colleagues, whether Christian, Muslim, or Hindu. With Khaleda, I am slowing down and going deep, with non-defensive, grace-filled humility allied with a confidence in the power of the Spirit.

I believe all the expatriates should be challenged as I have been by my need for mentors, in order to finish well. During a difficult few years for me personally, over the time when both my parents battled cancer, I have often neglected specific work tasks. This led to an overall sense of ineffectiveness, even shame over a lack of faithfulness. One scholar cautions workers to watch for 'emotional wounding' leading to burnout and not finishing well. (Quoted in Frank Hankins' thesis 2003: 198.) Grace environments help overcome those wounds. I have a sense of call to initiate an intentional mentoring program at L___ as a way to redeem the mistakes, and help both myself and others finish well.

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