

PART I: STORIES, MODELS AND LESSONS ABOUT DISCIPLING BELIEVERS FROM MUSLIM BACKGROUNDS

CAN I CHOOSE MY DISCIPLES?

by Joy Loewen

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Desperate love

'Every day of late I get phone calls that some stranger wants to kill me,' explained a battle weary Somali sister God chose to save. Just last week a man, with a cap pulled down covering part of his face, grabbed her dress as she was walking out of a mall and threatened to kill her. We have lost count of how many times police have been at her door.

Only a few months earlier, our sister, euphoric and cheerful, announced to her shocked Muslim settlement officers upon arrival at the airport, that she was a Christian. 'We have a problem, a BIG problem,' the government settlement agency worker declared, emphasizing the word big. A Somali converted to Christianity, a Somali woman? This was unthinkable, intolerable for a Somali Muslim man. Our brave sister, who had survived so much already in Kenya, naively assumed that a free country meant freedom from troubles and danger. She thought she would finally be safe and there would be a sunny future for her and her six children in Canada. Five years earlier she had been widowed.

Some troublemakers within the Somali community have made it difficult for her to feel safe in her newly adopted land of Canada. The challenges of her first year in Canada could fill a book, a suspense story of unbelievable experiences. In just a few short months of arrival her eldest son, confused and lost, joined a gang, was arrested twice and jailed. The family, living on government assistance, was assigned to a housing unit that harbours young gangsters and drug dealers. Conservative Muslim families from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia surround them on all sides. There is no other Somali Christian in our city. She has no blood family here. The honeymoon stage of euphoria quickly vanished. The reality of escalating new challenges stares her in the face day after day. She pines away for the Somali fellowship group left behind in Nairobi, Kenya. That group of Somali Christians were her lifeline.

How does one disciple this lone Somali believer so unassimilated into

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Western culture and church? It is a joy to sit and read the Bible with her. She cannot read English yet and labours away reading Somali, not completely fluent in her native reading skills. Her urgent crises usually determine what passage of Scripture we will read. I want so badly to build a deeper foundation of knowledge but the crises cry loud for specific verses to address her need of the moment. After reading we discuss the passage in her broken English. Sometimes my mind grows fatigued trying to figure out what she is trying so hard to say. Then we sing Somali worship songs together. They are tucked away in her memory where no one can snatch them away. Her face is fully alive and bright as she sings. We can sing a long time together. We close in prayer. Her prayers disclose a desperate, dependency upon Jesus and an unflinching love for Him. Sometimes we have communion together.

If discipling would mean only Bible teaching times, discipling would leave me flying high. But it is much more. It includes caring for her every-day needs, teaching her children about rules, boundaries, right and wrong, and even tutoring the older ones at a transitional school, and accompanying her to court hearings.

Simple faith

With arms raised and eyes looking heavenward, my Kurdish sister pleaded with God, 'Do something, Lord, with my husband. Discipline him, Lord. 'Dis-ci-pline him,' enunciating each syllable, thinking that somehow, she must not be explaining her request clearly enough. One day, many years ago, her husband-to-be led her to Jesus. She was baptized on their honeymoon. He served the Lord, selling Bibles in their homeland. Danger pursued him forcing them to flee to a neighbouring country for refuge. They were strengthened in their faith worshipping with fellow refugee Kurdish believers. They experienced many miracles.

We were notified about this family shortly after they arrived in Canada. They attended the church closest to them but could not understand why the Christians were always crying rather than celebrating. They decided to try another church. It happened to be mega size and after not being able to get to know anyone they left that fellowship. After some time, my Kurdish sister's husband got a job driving a taxi. But alas, that put him in compromising situations meeting customers, which brought about one temptation after another. It didn't take long for his faith to weaken and finally disappear to the point of renouncing Christ. But our sister has held on to her simple faith.

I directed her to a different church. She has been attending that church for nearly ten years now but still has found few who will speak with her or spend time with her. I meet with her weekly, if possible. How I would love to go through a systematic study of the Bible. She needs to grow in deeper



knowledge of the Word. But her personal crises usually determine where to look in the Word for immediate help. Our time is limited because she is a busy working mother. It is not easy to live with a husband who now mocks all spiritual hunger in her. She lives with daily abuse but is unwilling to separate because she is too afraid to live alone. She is confused about how to implement her freedoms in the West and does not understand or act upon her rights as a Canadian/Kurdish/Christian woman. At times she is all mixed up and confused. She wonders who she is. How do I disciple her in this area? There have been a number of occasions when the husband has marched over to our house accusing his wife of not respecting him. It can sometimes be a never-ending circus of watching control being exerted on both sides. Much of my teaching has revolved around forgiveness and letting go of a stronghold of revenge. She was raised in an abusive home where revenge and cursing were the norm. I want to go beyond this teaching.

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Nevertheless, of all the women I have disciplined, this sister brings some of the highest joys to my soul. It is clear that God chose my Kurdish friend to be saved. She is the most transparent person I have ever met. There is no hypocrisy or hiding of her real feelings. She is honest. But that intimate sharing would not be possible if I were not available for her needs, convincing her that I love her. Biblical teaching and daily practical care go hand in hand. I have discovered that discipling women who have come out of Islam to follow Jesus to be labour intensive and even more so in their new land of Canada. Discipling women like her in a weekly program at church is not sufficient when the teaching may not address the overwhelming urgent and complex needs of an uneducated Muslim-background believer who is trying to figure out who she is becoming in the strange new 'Land of Many Churches'.

Jewel

I was overjoyed at a new sister's baptism. God chose a jewel in this sister! She is bright and energetic. We had explored whether the Qur'an is God's Word and the meaning of the Trinity and divinity of Jesus. The Holy Spirit has given her increasing spiritual understanding. She is the 'first fruit' in her family line. Then almost immediately after her baptism she seldom phoned or was willing to meet. It was like she had concluded that she didn't need any more teaching. There have been months of almost no communication between visits. She needs ongoing discipling but how can I help her to see that? Then suddenly the phone will ring and she has questions.

Rose

A few years ago I invested heavily into a new believer's life. The love that bonded us together was sweet. Our Bible reading and prayer times were so



encouraging. She was soaking it all in, growing like a beautiful rose opening up. It was awesome discipling this chosen one. Then, suddenly, one day she unfolded her dark secret of being sexually abused by a relative. We knew the man well. The discipleship was abruptly stopped. Shame overtook her. She ran. No matter how persistently I tried to speak grace into the tragedy, she wouldn't reopen our relationship. I never knew shame could go so deep. I had to be willing to let her go. God redirected her to others to carry on teaching her.

I'm proud of each sister I am privileged to walk along side of. They teach me so much. Sometimes I wonder who is discipling who? However one day, weary from the intensive involvement with them, I felt overwhelmed with the magnitude of challenges and complexities a Christian discipler faces with a woman who comes out of Islam and gives her life to Jesus. Those challenges and complexities grow even larger when she comes to an unfamiliar land where Christians are busy, accountability is not usually in place, independence reigns high in value, and churches can be difficult to fit into. There may be no other believer from her cultural group in her city and her English minimal, sometimes being illiterate in both her language and English. By contrast I look at the average Canadian person who comes to Christ who is often invited to a structured Alpha program once a week. The videos are interesting and the discussion easy to follow. There may be no other form of discipleship necessary in that person's life and she can move forward in amazing ways.

I began despairing because it is so time consuming and complex discipling a woman coming out of Islam in our Western nation. There are no easy answers or formulas or methods. Reflecting on the sisters I have come alongside of from a variety of Islamic nations, I could tell that each sister was chosen and handpicked by the Savior to belong to Him. However, I wanted to choose whom I would disciple; ones whose lives would not require so much of my time, or they could assimilate quickly into our Western culture, be literate, have adequate skills in speaking English, who would not run away or close the door. I wanted to choose those who would turn out to be success stories or bring only joy and deep satisfaction; and most of all those I could teach Scripture to in a foundational way, week after week, getting more systematic knowledge planted. But I realized that my unspoken desire deep in my heart was ultimately self-seeking and selfish. Can I choose my disciples? If He has chosen them for salvation and sent them to me, the discipling process and result belongs to Him. Who am I to question His choice? I am His servant and must be willing to welcome each precious soul He sends my way and do my best to show them the true love of the One who died for them.

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