

OFF TO A GOOD START DISCIPLING

By ES

ES is a full time mother living in the Middle East. She is trying to fit part time volunteer and paid work, team life, visiting, discipling, hospitality and church into her life. She squeezes in time to pray while doing the dishes and always wonders if she could do things differently to make her life easier, more spiritual and more organised. She knows God has to be in control of her efforts because she isn't!

I have had some experience in discipling before, both in my home country and here in my host country. Here my efforts have been tiring, frustrating, demoralizing and ended in me pulling away from the believers. I didn't see any growth and noticed the same unredeemed behaviour happening over and over. I came to believe that I wasn't good at discipling and felt totally inadequate for the task.

This year my colleague and I got in contact with a lady who had already professed faith in Christ. She was actively looking (by email) for someone to 'disciple' her, although she might not have used that exact word. However, most of the things we heard about her made us cautious and raised red flags. She described how she had come to faith through someone in another country, who might or might not have been a born again believer, and was now not a Muslim but a Christian. From the beginning she seemed to completely reject Islam and would have officially registered her change of religion if it had been legal. She wants to spend time with foreigners and would like to move out of the country. So we were cautious when we made contact, but when we met her it was obvious that she had experienced a new birth and was now a new creation in Christ, wanting to grow in her faith.

Sasha (not her real name) has been such a joy and an encouragement to us. Up until now, discipling her has been very easy. She absorbs everything like a sponge, but asks relevant and difficult questions as well. She loves reading the Bible with us, and is eager to learn. She suggests things to us and the first time she prayed out loud in front of us was her suggestion. Obviously, she still carries baggage from her old life and some of the decisions she makes, particularly about her future, show she is still depending on herself. Some of this is because she had a difficult childhood and now lives by herself, completely supporting herself, which is very unusual for this country.

We set times to do Bible study with her and while this is important and enjoyable, we knew from the beginning that this should not be the only way of discipling. Instead, we have to model what following Christ is like by our actions and words. We try to just keep in touch regularly, hang out together and phone each other often. Being willing to be available to her is easy, as we get on



well, but it takes planning because of our busy lives. It would be easy to let it slide for a few days, which could turn into weeks, so we need to make an effort. Even during the studies, she sees how we use the Bible to find a relevant verse (we really impressed on her that the Bible is a manual for life), how we pray for specific circumstances, and how we conduct ourselves around her. Once she told me how she saw right from the beginning that we were trustworthy and that we genuinely loved her. This gave me great encouragement that Christ was at work in our lives and had made an impact on her through us!

What surprised me was that discipling her made me look at my own life too. As she is a new believer, and we have been believers for a while, it would be easy to show how good we are and how much she has to learn. Watching her learn and seeing how she is changing and growing has made me think about my own walk with Christ and how my growth as a believer has stagnated. Her openness about the doubts, questions and struggles in her life showed me one of my failings – that I find it difficult to share with other people my struggles and the deep issues within my own life. For example, I would direct her from the Bible that she should forgive her father, but realized that even though I know what the Bible says; in reality I had not even applied it to my own life.

Watching her learn and seeing how she is changing and growing has made me think about my own walk with Christ and how my growth as a believer has stagnated.

If Sasha had come to faith through us, we might have done things differently, and also her situation living by herself is a bit different. We have learned, from other's experiences discipling, that it is useful to encourage her to share her faith, particularly with her family, as soon as possible. We have also been taught that it is good for a new believer to spend time with other believers, especially with those from Muslim backgrounds. At the moment she seems closed to both of these ideas and we are trying to work out how we can encourage her without pushing her. I want to be selfish and keep her for myself! But I do know that having relationships only with foreigners is not the best for her, and we are looking into how to introduce her to others, especially to some women believers.

I am so grateful that God has given me this chance to get to know Sasha and to develop a relationship with her. It is not at all like my previous experience and has felt very natural. I still feel inadequate, but that makes me put my trust in God, that as He has called her. He is filling her with His Holy Spirit. Sometimes it feels as though God has put her in my life, not so that I can 'help her to grow,' but so that I can see God at work. After nine years of living here and not seeing people come to faith, having Sasha in my life feels like a gift from God. This experience has even given me more boldness in my witnessing efforts; I have been encouraged and have grown in my walk with God. I see how God has done such a miracle in her life – what can He do in the lives of others?

