

THE LIVING PYRAMID MODEL FOR RELATIONAL COMMUNAL DISCIPLING

By Don Little

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Youcef (pseudonym) was one of the first believers I had the privilege of helping disciple shortly after I arrived in North Africa. Youcef was in his early 30s, had a good job and was well educated and still lived at home with his family. He had been a believer for two or three years when I met him in the weekly Bible studies with young men led by a colleague.

As I got to know Youcef I was initially impressed with his growing knowledge of the Bible and his apparently solid grounding as a new believer. For the first year or so, as our friendship grew, and as he continued to attend the weekly Bible studies, things went okay. As our relationship grew, and we shared more of our lives with each other, I began to challenge him in areas of his life in which he did not appear to have moved forward in obedience.

However, neither I nor anyone else, including the colleague who first contacted him, had ever met any members of his family. He kept his faith a secret from everyone in his family. He never told anyone at work about his faith in Christ, either. He was a 'secret believer.' I gradually became increasingly concerned about the dual life he led, identifying himself as a believer when he was with us, but silent about his faith to anyone that he knew at work or in his family. During one weekend trip, we talked at length about his 'need' (from my perspective) to share his faith with his family, and with his new girl friend. I strongly *exhorted* him that it would not be fair to his girl friend for him to marry her without her knowing that he was a believer. That conversation was a turning point, as after that he came to the weekly studies less often. He married this Muslim girl (whom none of the believers met), never told his family of his love for Christ and soon stopped coming to any meetings.

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same as we had experienced it in North America. We worked with Youcef *as an individual*, assuming that he was willing and capable of living his life as an 'autonomous' individual and paid almost no attention to who he was in his social and family contexts. Clearly, we need to better understand what it is we are trying to do when we disciple believers belonging to Muslim families who live in the collective cultures and societies of the Islam dominated Arab world.

I am increasingly convinced that much of the reason for our struggle in discipling believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMBs) is due to our use of a discipleship model developed within our individualistic Western experience and understanding. The model presented in this article is a discipling that seeks afresh to be not only Biblically sound, but also culturally and socially adapted for use in the Arab world.

Building a Model for BMB Discipling on Reflection and Research

When I researched the discipleship of BMBs, I attempted to come to a better *understanding* of discipleship and the processes at work in the spiritual growth of BMBs in the Islamic contexts of the Arab world.¹ This article brings together some of the primary lessons learned from my study of discipling and puts them into a *model* for BMB discipleship. In this model, I attempt to integrate the most important insights gained through my research into a simple yet comprehensive discipleship model. Working with a Biblically compelling and culturally appropriate understanding of discipleship may considerably strengthen all of our discipleship efforts and discipling relationships.

In this article, I describe the main components of this discipleship model and explain the meaning and significance of each part. I encourage you to refer to the diagram of the model at the end of the next section (p. 2, below), as I explain the missiological, biblical and methodological components of the model.

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1 After studying a broad range of literature on discipleship and spiritual formation, and then reviewing the primary literature that addressed the discipleship of BMBs, I conducted 75 interviews with experienced disciplers during two research trips into the Arab world in the spring of 2007. The outcome of this project was the thesis that was submitted to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in Boston, USA, as the final project to complete my Doctor of Ministry degree. The thesis is entitled: 'Effective Insider Discipling: Helping Arab world BMBs Persevere and thrive in Community.' (D.Min Thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2009). This article is adapted from the first part of the concluding chapter of the thesis (Chapter 5), pp. 221-231. I would be happy to send you the thesis in PDF format upon request.



1. Missiological conclusions from reflections on contextualization

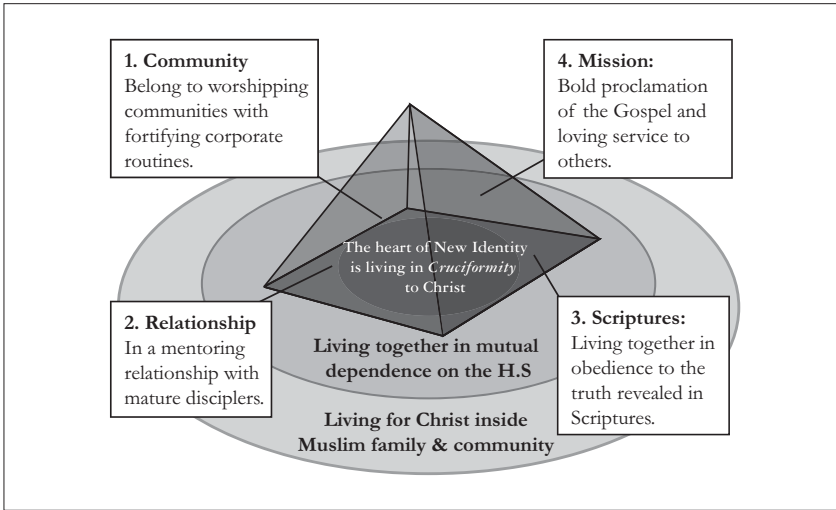
In the first chapter of my thesis, I examined the ongoing debates about contextualization in light of the challenges involved in discipling BMBs in the Islamic contexts of the Arab world (See *Effective Insider Discipling*, Chap 1, Sections 3 & 4). I conclude that the discipling *objective* should be the effective discipling of believers so that they are able to both remain within their Muslim families *and* join local C3 or C4 churches (typically, informal house churches of some kind) that are able to flourish within Muslim communities. However, I do *not* believe that it is appropriate to encourage disciples to remain inside the religious institutions and traditions that exemplify Muslim society. BMBs must have clear identities as Christ's followers that are distinct from the *Muslim religious identity* of those who honour Mohammed and seek to fulfil the religious and legal obligations of the Qur'an, Muslim tradition, Islamic ideology and law. I do not believe we should encourage BMBs to remain *religious* insiders, yet every possible effort must be made to ensure that BMBs continue to live and serve Christ within their families and as ongoing members of their Muslim communities. Extracting followers of Christ from their Muslim context is to be unremittingly avoided.

However, given the often strong self-identification of *Muslim* communities as those who pray the Shahada with conviction, and the shame-motivated often violent rejection of all who 'apostatize', it should not surprise us that followers of Christ are often forcefully *expelled* from their communities. Nevertheless, the research found a number of important ways of speaking and acting that can often considerably defuse the potential and extent of hostile responses. There are effective means of helping believers remain within their communities even after they are identified with Christ. Thus, for disciplers of BMBs to be effective they must consistently strive to practice 'insider discipleship' that integrates new believers successfully into 'insider churches'.

This missiological conclusion is the foundation for the *Living Pyramid Model*. In the diagram, the 'insider discipling' goal is represented by the large circular surface upon which the whole model rests, labelled: 'Living for Christ inside Muslim family and community'. Extraction must be avoided as one practices *insider discipling*. Yet, we must be realistic and understand that far too often the residence and witness of BMBs within their own families and communities is impossible, at least in the short term, and disciplers must not force disciples to carry burdens heavier than they can bear.

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Fig 1: The *Living Pyramid Model* of Relational Communal Discipleship



2. Conclusions from the exegetical reflections on discipleship in the NT

In the second chapter of my thesis I take a fresh look at discipleship and spiritual formation as it is seen *in* the New Testament (NT), because I believe that part of the reason for the frequent failure of our BMB discipling is an inappropriate understanding or false assumptions as to the nature of discipleship as it is seen in the Bible. Examining Galatians and Philippians, and the two volume Luke – Acts, in the order in which they were written, I sought to see afresh how Paul and Luke, two significant and representative NT authors, understood this vital topic. I believe that the conclusions reached provide a valuable biblical underpinning for the vision for discipling articulated in this article.

In Galatians spiritual life is portrayed as a life of *corporate* dependence on the Holy Spirit for everything that is needed for godliness and fruitful living. For Paul, it is only as we learn to walk by the Spirit *together* that we will experience power over the flesh and a flowing of the fruit of the Spirit into our lives, our homes, our churches and our communities. Paul believes that we are to live as believers in Christ *as members of* a Holy Spirit enabled and guided *community*. In Galatians, Paul is alarmed that anyone could think that one becomes more mature or more holy by obeying Torah. In the Muslim contexts of the Arab world where conformity to a religious legal code is the norm, effective discipleship must be grounded in radical *corporate* dependence on the Holy Spirit. This central Pauline

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lesson from Galatians is represented in the *Living Pyramid Model* (see Figure 1 above) by the green circular plane labelled: 'Living together in Mutual dependence on the Holy Spirit.' This *green* circle represents this *life giving* spiritual truth that all discipleship involves radical dependence on the Holy Spirit as disciples live together a transformed supernatural life in step with the Spirit.

Another vital aspect of the Pauline vision of the Christian life is expressed in Philippians. Not only are we to live in conscious dependency on the Holy Spirit, but the Gospel itself is to shape our core identity as people who are redeemed by and devoted to our *crucified* Lord. The supreme example of Christ and his self-sacrifice not only buys us salvation and new life, but it also provides a model for us to emulate as we seek to conform our life to that of the crucified Saviour. Seeking to express clearly how Christ's crucifixion shapes our identity, a NT scholar named Gorman coined the term 'cruciformity' and defines it as 'conformity to the crucified Christ.'² Living one's entire life in conscious imitation of and conformity to Christ, who, in love, sacrificed all and died on the cross for us, is living in 'cruciformity' to Christ. Paul's own life is a powerful model of someone who imitated Christ in his self-sacrifice and suffering. We not only have faith, but we live our lives in radical self denying conformity to Christ who went all the way to the cross for us. In our discipleship, we experience Christ's life of suffering and service, even unto death – we live lives of cruciformity.

This vivid picture of cruciform discipleship is vitally important in the Arab world. When we call Muslims to follow Christ, we are often asking them to lives of hardship and suffering far beyond anything we ourselves will ever experience. Well do I remember the profound struggle one of my believing friends had as his decisions to remain faithful to Christ repeatedly cost him his job, his security and his safety, and as months stretched into years, he lived on the edge of starvation barely surviving. Compromising Christ's call on his life could have opened up the way to a secure job and a stable life. His life was truly lived in cruciformity.

What is more, sustaining such cruciform living is only possible as disciples live as part of a committed believing community. The story of the Gospel, of Christ crucified, was a central shaper of Paul's identity and his spirituality, and of the lives of the early Christians. In the *Living Pyramid Model*, this central Pauline understanding is placed at the heart of the pyramid in an attempt to suggest that the BMBs' *new identity* is found through living in *cruciformity* to their crucified Lord.

My examination of discipleship in the Gospel of Luke and in the book of Acts explored a number of rich discipleship themes. Discipleship to Jesus in Luke is a radical commitment to live life under the loving care of the heavenly

2 Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 4ff.

Father in such a way that every attitude and perspective is turned on its head. Following Christ means a journey of faith in which we learn to live in self-denial, loving others, serving others, forgiving others and trusting God to provide all that we need so that we do not need to be anxious about our security, wealth, health or reputation. Such discipleship is characterized by prayerful trust in the heavenly Father that empowers disciples into lives of self-sacrificing service and self-giving, even unto death.

This picture of disciples living out a radical trust in their heavenly Father seen in the Gospel of Luke is extended into Acts. Here, the radical discipleship that Jesus called his disciples to in Luke, is fleshed out in the lives of the early believers. Their lives are characterized by deep fellowship, profound love, selfless sharing of their resources, care for the needy, the powerful presence and working of the Holy Spirit in healings and proclamation and in zeal to share the truth and reality of the gospel. In Acts, radical discipleship empowered by trust in God as a loving heavenly Father created deep mutual commitment in the new body of Christ, the church. This understanding of discipleship in Luke and Acts is portrayed in the banner at the top of the *Living Pyramid Model* (above) declaring that 'Trust in God as Heavenly Father sustains radical discipleship to Christ.'

Reflection on the NT vision for discipleship yields a perspective that is far richer and more complete than simply that of an individual disciple privately reading a Bible, praying and witnessing. Discipleship, according to Paul and Luke, is a corporate life in which we live together in complete dependence on the Spirit. Applying this to BMBs, we find believers who trust profoundly in the love of their heavenly Father revealed to them in Christ, who live lives of sacrificial love and service to both fellow believers and to those in their Muslim communities, empowered by the Holy Spirit for Christ's sake. This NT vision of discipleship is the central foundation of the *Living Pyramid Model*.

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3. A Research-based Vision Statement for Discipling BMBs

Part of the reason for our poor success in discipling BMBs has been that we have had an inadequate understanding of how discipleship works and what is the objective of discipleship. When our discipleship vision is weak then our practice will also be weak. In an effort to better understand discipleship, I reviewed selective literature on discipleship and spiritual formation across the major Christian traditions,³ as well as the literature on ministering to Muslims

3 Don Little, 'Approaches to Spiritual Formation Reviewed for Insights into Discipling Arab Muslim Background Believers,' Major paper (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2003). Electronic copies of this review are available from the author upon request.

(the third chapter of my thesis). Synthesizing what I learned from those two reviews I developed this discipleship vision statement:

We endeavour to see believers from Muslim backgrounds (1) living in loving mutual submission within believing church groups that (2) experience together the transforming grace of God through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. (3) They live their lives together in submission to the scriptures and in obedience to their Lord, (4) developing individual and corporate routines that fortify their faith (5) so that their worldviews are transformed in ways faithful to the reality of the great biblical story of creation, fall and redemption.

(6) Further, they live out their faith in obedience to Christ in ways suitable to their culture and society. (7) Growing increasingly into Christ-like holiness together, (8) they compassionately serve and (9) reach out with the gospel to people in their families, social networks, communities and beyond, bringing Glory to God (10) as they grow and multiply.

The first four points in this statement emphasize that BMBs need to be in *community*. They experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in community together, and they corporately submit to the scriptures in obedience to Christ. Point 4 states that BMBs develop ‘individual and corporate routines that fortify their faith.’ I believe that one of the strengths of

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some of the monastic and liturgical traditions is that they recognize the power of good community habits and understand the role of the classic Spiritual Disciplines in bringing about spiritual transformation of individuals. As BMBs gather together regularly, it is important that they develop patterns of corporate worship and prayer that strengthen their understanding and practice of their faith. The first four points all express the fundamental need BMBs have of being in a supportive local community. In the *Living Pyramid Model* this essential requirement for spiritual growth is the first cornerstone of the pyramid, and is entitled Community (cf. Figure 1, page ? above).

The third through fifth points in this vision statement stress the fundamental importance of BMBs living in mutual submission to the Scriptures, so that a biblical worldview can replace the Islamic worldview of their heritage. This is the third cornerstone of the pyramid – Scriptures: living together in obedience to the Scriptures. The eighth and ninth affirmations in the vision statement, that believers are serving others and sharing the gospel with those in their communities, make up the fourth cornerstone of the *Living Pyramid Model*

– Mission: Bold proclamation of the Gospel and loving service to others.

The only cornerstone in the *Living Pyramid Model* not expressed in this vision statement is the importance of a personal mentoring relationship. However, this point came out strongly in the interviews that I conducted. The strong consensus of those interviewed was that effective discipling of BMBs means the whole life involvement of the discipler with the disciple. Discipling best happens in the contexts of strong intimate personal relationships. Disciplers are people who walk alongside the disciple, caring for, teaching, mentoring and modelling authentic Christian discipleship. They practice life-on-life mentoring that, in Muslim contexts, is often quite intense, especially at the beginning. This personal mentoring is the second cornerstone of the *Living Pyramid Model* – Relationship: In a mentoring relationship with mature disciplers (see Figure 1, page ? above).

These four vital components of discipleship are summed up in the four cornerstones of the living pyramid: Community, Relationship, Scriptures and Mission. My research found that they are the four essential components needed for BMBs to grow to maturity in Christ. With these essential cornerstones the *Living Pyramid Model* of Relational Communal Discipling is now complete.

As the saying goes, 'If you aim at nothing, you will be sure to hit it.' Much of the reason for our failure in BMB discipleship has been, I am convinced, due to an inadequate understanding of what we are trying to accomplish and of the means necessary to achieve the discipleship objective. If one aims at discipling only individuals on their own, then that very objective undermines eventual success. In his recent doctoral dissertation that studied convert groups in France, Leonard argues that individualized approaches to ministry are ineffectual, whether one is talking about evangelism, or about discipleship. Both need to be done communally, not individualistically. Leonard affirms:

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You cannot reach a communal people using individual methods of evangelism. We must demonstrate that becoming a Christian is to become a member of a community that is closer than the family... To have a group you need to start with a group. This does not mean that there is not a lot of individual attention given to each person in the group-that is a necessity. It means, for communal people, you do things together.⁴

⁴ John S. Leonard, 'Oasis: An Ethnography of a Muslim Convert Group in France' (PhD diss., Trinity International University, 2006), 300. This dissertation makes many observations that confirm the need to work in groups and stress relationships in reaching and discipling people from such cultures.

Having a full-orbed, biblically, spiritually, socially and psychologically valid discipleship objective that fits within the host culture goes a long way towards us finding the processes and approaches that lead to fruitful discipling. The *Living Pyramid Model* visually portrays the essential aspects of discipleship and suggests the essential cornerstones upon which to carry out effective discipling.

4. The Value of the *Living Pyramid* Figure

The *Living Pyramid Model of Relational Communal Discipleship* figure given above (page ?) is my attempt to give the reader an image of discipleship, a way of visualizing how the key elements in BMB discipleship all fit together. This image of a *living pyramid* draws on the Apostle Peter's image of believers being *living* stones joined together into a spiritual living house (I Pet 2:4-10). The pyramid is also a familiar Middle Eastern iconic structure that resists the pressures and stresses of its environment in order to endure and stand strong for generations. Fitting in socially and culturally, the mature BMBs and BMB fellowships, these *living pyramids*, become accepted parts of their surroundings that rise above the limitations of their cultural and religious environment so as to, through the power of the Spirit, transcend and transform their Muslim communities.

This image of a sacred and living pyramid⁵ effectively captures some of the central dynamics involved in fruitful discipling of believers as they follow Christ in Muslim communities. Though no drawing can depict the living spiritual dynamics of BMB discipleship, my hope is that this image of a *living pyramid set solidly at the heart of Muslim society* will inspire us all to strive continuously towards effective discipleship that adapts to the Islamic contexts of the Arab world. Building on this model can help us to do a much better job of discipling BMBs who grow and endure amidst all of the pressures and opposition encountered *inside* their families and communities.

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5 Part of the inspiration for this diagram comes from Willard's 'Golden Triangle of Spiritual Growth.' See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 347.