

Partnering in Obedience, Partnering in Grace

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A key aspect of most church planting movements is obedience-focused discipleship. This discipleship model stresses that following Jesus is primarily about living in loving obedience to Jesus and His commands rather than simply gaining head knowledge of Jesus. In this model, new believers might not have very much knowledge about Jesus yet, but they are invited to live in practical obedience to what they do know.

Partnering in obedience-focused discipleship can have many advantages in cross-cultural relationships. It creates the ultimate level playing field for all believers, stressing that all believers fail. Missionaries fail. Baby believers fail. All believers fail. However, when they do, they all receive grace, acceptance, restoration, and ministry. Over time, all believers also share victories through these struggles.

Thus, obedience-focused discipleship, coupled with grace, has the potential to remove many of the unhealthy dynamics of the patron-client relationship in cross-cultural ministry. In a patron-client ministry relationship, one party (usually the missionary) is expected to give or provide spiritually (and not receive). On the other hand, the second party (usually the local) is expected to gratefully receive spiritually (and not to give). This means the missionary would not confess their sins to the locals because that would show the missionary is weak and would need to receive, rather than give.

However, all of humanity is bound together by our shared need for God. Although doctrinally we agree that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rom. 3:23), our cross-cultural partnerships rarely seem to show this. Obedience-focused discipleship is one of the vehicles that helps restore relationships by building them on a shared need to obey Jesus and our shared need to receive grace when we do not obey. These cross-cultural partnering relationships, formed through the lens of obedience-focused discipleship, are then based on a shared weakness before God rather than one party being weak while the other is strong. It is this shared weakness (all have sinned) that restores kingdom order and leads to greater opportunities to experience grace and true Christ-centered (grace-centered) community.

In this short article, we concentrate on one case study in cross-cultural partnership. We hope to show how obedience-focused discipleship made a difference in changing the nature of the partnership and how this change brought wholeness, healing, and belonging to all parties. Although we recognize the diversity of experiences and contexts among the mission community, we offer this particular story as an illuminating example of what we believe is possible in many places.

Pursuing Wholeness Together

Sexual wholeness has been a challenge for followers of Jesus. Churches sometimes struggle to talk about the topic and often do not know how to address issues of pornography and other sexual addictions in appropriate and nurturing ways.

In 2017, the Lord called Ruth Njagi, a single Kenyan woman, to “go public” with her struggle with pornography (Njagi 2017). She wrote a book and began to speak out publicly about her addiction, one that she struggled with even as a believer. She knew she needed to live out James 5:16 to get free: *“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”* (NIV). The problem was she did not have a safe place to confess her sins, feeling that confessing to other believers would lead to shame rather than healing.

Enter on to the scene an American missionary couple seeking to ignite church-planting movements in Kenya. They understood their job as helping people to live in loving obedience to Jesus and His commands (John 14:15).

Ruth eventually connected with this missionary family and joined the church-planting movements training they were offering. Ruth felt called to share about her addiction with her fellow church-planting students, but she was still afraid she would find condemnation rather than restoration.

When Ruth began to hear about obedience-focused discipleship, she felt this group of believers might be a place of healing for her, and she eventually decided to confess her struggle with pornography. When she did, she found something different than in previous Christian groups she had been a part of.

This group celebrated Ruth, even when she failed completely. Then, they would pray for her to find obedience going forward. They told her

that God loved her even when she lived in partial obedience and God even loved her in complete failure. They praised her for being vulnerable and honest with the church and for being willing to try again. She found a safe place to belong. In addition, the missionaries who were the trainers shared their life struggles vulnerably with the group. This was a different kind of leadership than Ruth had seen modeled before.

During discussions about obedience in which every church member participated as a part of regular church gatherings, Ruth discovered that grace abounded in a way she had never experienced before in other churches she had attended. She found a place built around shared weakness rather than shared strength. Neither she nor the missionary were expected to follow Jesus perfectly. However, both she and the missionary shared their weaknesses and sins, and both she and the missionary also received grace. Ruth grew in Christ. Sometimes she slipped back and failed, but she always came back to Christ and to this small church.

Discipleship Defined: Deliberate and Costly

Often, church-planting movements have been criticized for shallow discipleship. However, look at how Ruth defines discipling as she experienced it in the midst of a church-planting movement: "Discipling is the act of deliberately teaching someone how to live out their Christianity, taking the time to pray, guide, celebrate success and partial obedience, offering support over a long time, and walking the journey with someone through everything. It means being available and taking time to be with someone else to ensure their spiritual growth" (Njagi 2017, 87).

Ruth's definition hardly seems like shallow discipleship. It seems labor and time intensive. It seems relationally intense. It seems messy. It highlights a constellation of related outgrowths of obedience-focused discipleship that creates a strong framework for believers to grow. We will unpack this definition below.

The first aspect of Ruth's definition is that discipleship is *deliberate*. This small church not only cared for each other, they learned how to share their faith and lives with others. This involved practicing telling "Jesus stories" from the Bible and actively praying for opportunities to share Jesus. The missionaries even provided special trainings to help people *"always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect"* (1 Pet. 3:15). All church members knew and studied Luke 10 as a life pattern, learning to offer peace to everyone they met in accordance with Jesus' instructions.

The second key aspect of Ruth's definition of discipleship is *time*. In fact, Ruth makes an effort to point out this key aspect in multiple ways in her definition: "taking the time to pray," "offering support over a long time," and "taking time to be with someone else."

In a recent conversation in the Motus Dei research network ([discussed](#) in this issue of *Seedbed*), Sandro Oliveira, a Global South practitioner in the Global North, had this observation about the issue of time in the life of churches in his home culture versus in the West:

I have observed that, for a good number of believers in the West, the Sunday service tends to be the only "church activity" of the week. Now, I understand things are done differently from community to community and denomination to denomination. However, based on my personal experience and observation from serving in England, what I have observed is true for a large part of the church membership, particularly among reformed congregations. In the Global South, however, as I have experienced it, church is more of a whole-life experience. When you come to Christ, you are brought into a new "family." In this context, relationships are very close and people spend a huge amount of time together. There are also numerous church activities throughout the week. Because of the constant interaction a believer

has with his/her community of faith, learning and transformation is not taught, but modelled, encouraged, and expected.

Churches in the West often only spend one to two hours per week together. In addition, Westerners often struggle to find time to rest, honor the Sabbath, or carry out the “one anothers” of Scripture. Although many popular Christian books in the West are about resting, slowing down, and Sabbath rest, many Western believers still find little time to rest and be with their fellow church members outside of the weekly gathering.

We personally do not know of any church in any movement where church members spend only one or two hours together on a weekly basis. Movement-based churches are typically in each other’s homes and lives together on a regular (usually daily) basis. They know each other’s families, children, and lives. There is little or no room to remain anonymous or to hide in a small community-based church.

One aspect of movement-based churches that helps facilitate this sharing of time is the convenient location of many movement churches. Movements typically consist of many small neighborhood-based churches. This means that church members are able to “pop in” to say hello, to check on one another, watch each other’s kids, or simply chat and process the issues of their lives. The size and location of the churches means church members are known by each other. Unlike large churches, no one participating in the church meeting can do so anonymously.

As one begins to reflect on practical realities such as global urbanization and the grid-locked traffic of many cities, the need for many small local churches becomes even more apparent, since churches that are far away simply become impossible for people to participate in. Transportation across the world’s mega cities is often too expensive and time consuming for church members. A church in every neighborhood

provides access to the gospel and to the local church body life that large gatherings simply cannot offer.

Discipleship That Heals

Much has been written about social-networking theory in movements. These discussions are usually in the context of allowing the gospel to spread quickly through entire networks of people. These are discussions we applaud and hope to encourage. However, too little discussion has been related to the power of social-networking theory to bring healing and restoration in a broken world. In the power of community, people are healed.

The promise of James 5 for healing resides in the phrase “*one another*.” People cannot “*one another*” if they only see each other for an hour or two each week, sit facing each other’s backs, and watch a monologue from a stage.

How much does this matter? Consider some typical global contexts in which we live and work:

- In the ghettos of Kampala, people who are still addicted to drugs are also studying the Bible. They come from backgrounds characterized by abuse, hunger, and gangs.
- In the refugee camps of Europe, Iranians who grew up in an Islamic police-state begin to discover Jesus. They come from backgrounds in which they have been spied on, lied to, and abused.
- In the shadow of Manhattan live various Asians, African Americans, Hispanics, and Caucasians who come from backgrounds in which they have experienced isolation, abuse, intense pressure to succeed, and fractured relationships with their neighbors.
- In the villages along the Zambezi River are different people groups. They have each been told through colonialism that they are weak and need to be served. As a result, they wait for the church to give them something, believing they are too weak to give. They come from

backgrounds in which their communities are passive, hopeless, often hungry, and often drunk.

What binds the people in these diverse contexts together? We submit that the binding agency is weakness—a shared need for Jesus Christ. However, some of our missions models do not currently reflect this reality. Perhaps one of the reasons many of us do not see the power of Christ we long for is because we do not put this verse to the test: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (2 Cor. 12:9).

Ruth highlights how such deep brokenness and pain is approached in a movement context in a third aspect of her definition of discipleship: “walking the journey with someone through everything.” The term “everything” is necessary in this definition. Church-planting movements cannot simply focus on those who are basically already emotionally healthy, well-educated, and already-contributing members of society. This is because the church of Jesus does not have this option available. Jesus was very clear about caring for the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner in our midst (see Isa. 58:6–10; Luke 14:12–14).

For some, this definition of discipleship might seem to be counter-intuitive to the idea that the gospel will run swiftly through a people group in a church-planting movement. It is true that not all members of a church-planting movement are “super spreaders” of the gospel. However, obedience-focused discipleship creates the opportunity for grace to abound while also holding up the goal: being joy-filled believers who share Jesus with others.

This dual focus of being both outward looking (sharing the gospel with new people) and inward looking (shepherding the flock in the midst of their needs) has practical implications for how all believers live out their life in Christ. Such an approach encourages our church members with more inward-facing pastoral gifts to also reach out in evangelism (as a response of obedience to Jesus). Conversely, it encourages those with primarily outward-facing gifts of evangelism to care for the brokenhearted (also as a response of obedience to Jesus).

Although it is true that apostolic teams will likely not deeply meet heart needs themselves (for they have a different gifting), apostolically gifted people cannot ignore these needs in the churches they plant. It is worth noting that attending to these needs could help ignite a hunger for Christ for the first time in some people. When heart healings occur, the power of the Kingdom of God is demonstrated as it transforms individuals. As this transformation is noticed by the community, there is a possibility of increased interest in following Jesus and potentially more churches being planted. This potential increase in new disciples happens because brokenness brought into the kingdom leads to healing—sometimes instantly and sometimes over time—which leads to joy and new proclamations of the gospel.

Grace Abounds

In short, obedience-focused discipleship creates an opportunity to “*prefer one another*” (Rom. 12:10) and to “*bear with one another*” (Eph. 4:2), while at the same time to “*stir up one another to love and good works*” (Heb. 10:24). Only in this environment of a relentless call to obedience to Jesus was Ruth also able to receive relentless grace. Only in this environment was she able to finally gain some victory over her addiction.

In Ruth and the missionary’s relationship, the grace did not flow one direction only. The missionary also received grace and care from a loving community. Ruth credits the missionary’s daughter—who was four at the time—as being one of her major teachers. This also speaks to weakness. A missionary who is operating as a ministry patron probably would not simply invite people to come and be with them in their home while they lived life. However, this missionary needed grace to handle her life circumstances as a mother of children. Thus, Ruth watched and was included in the sometimes “hectic” family life of the missionary, seeing both the good days and the bad days. The foreign missionary needed the local church to make accommodation for her as she included the children in everything and to give her lovingkindness in this area.

Children can be very good at showing and teaching aspects of God's character. However, they have often been seen as a nuisance during times of ministry. And, truthfully, they can be a challenge. Children have often been seen as a hindrance to ministry, a reason to keep women at home and not able to do ministry in public.

This missionary mom simply brought her daughter along and invited others into her home life of raising children. This showed the challenge and chaos of family and parenting. We have seen the power of a woman, with children in tow, to minister to whole families (including men) in a way that no man (without his kids) or single person can do. Whole families ministering to whole families creates a "real world" relatableness that in and of itself is healing to tired parents. It also addresses the need of a world that is overwhelmingly under the age of eighteen to also have an opportunity to come to Christ and join a church community.

Weakness is something that all humans share. Victory in Christ, belonging in Christ, and community in Christ are also available to all human beings. However, only sharing victory without sharing weakness may potentially lead to unhealthy Christian relationships, colonialist dynamics, and unhealthy patron-client relationships in mission.

Through obedience-focused discipleship, such relationships can be restored for the mutual benefit of all involved and for the advancement of the kingdom of God. This potentially gives believers of all backgrounds, all socio-economic classes, and with all kinds of addictions the opportunity to enter the Kingdom of God on the same footing: as weak people in need of a Savior and a community of grace. This firm foundation can lead to healing, wholeness, and healthy cross-cultural partnerships.

Questions for Discussion

- In what ways does Ruth's experience in community connect with your own experience? What are the most important lessons and applicable insights for your own life and work in your context?

- What do you think of the Pam and Ruth's understanding of obedience-focused discipleship? In your view, how do obedience, grace, and discipleship relate to one another?

Bibliography

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