

Mentoring and Building Community among Women

Muslim Background Believers—A Case Study

By P.R.

Description

A few years ago, I looked around at the group of North African Christians (Muslim Background Believers or MBBs) in our French city, and suddenly realized that there had been some changes. What had been a group of mostly single students was now a group with many young married women, some with young children. I thought to myself, "They need some teaching on marriage and family." I knew that when I got married, in spite of premarital counseling and plenty of books, I didn't have any idea what marriage was all about, and I figured that they were in the same situation. I also noticed that the women were isolated from each other. In France, many of the MBBs attend French churches, so the monthly MBB meeting was for fellowship and evangelism. While the women enjoyed being with each other once a month, they were reticent to initiate deeper relationships. So, I decided to start another group specifically for women.

The group was based on the instruction in Titus 2 that the older women teach the younger women. It was focused on marriage and later, as more and more children arrived, child rearing and family issues. Some on our team questioned the need for such a group. One person told me that Arabs don't have the same expectations in marriage as Westerners so they don't have as many

conflicts. Others asked what in the world I would teach these women. I replied that I would teach them things that I wished I had known in the beginning of my marriage, and also try to teach them to avoid the mistakes I had made. Since I had made plenty of mistakes, I had no lack of material!!

So, with fear and trembling and very little confidence in myself, but with a vision and a burden for these women, I started the group. We studied and laughed and cried and prayed through those first years of marriage, dealing with topics such as communication, forgiveness, in-laws, money and the all-time favorite topic of sex. Special attention was given to relate these topics to the women's North African culture. During the first two years, we met monthly since the women had studies, jobs, etc. Then, as babies arrived, there was need for more support. Young mothers can often feel isolated, so we started meeting weekly, discussing child rearing. Our hearts were knit together in love as we traversed these periods of our lives together. They greatly appreciated the teaching and grew in their confidence as mothers and in godliness as women and wives. I always made it clear to them that I was teaching them as the older woman in Titus 2, so that one day, they, as the older women, would be the mentors who teach others. And they are currently doing just that.

While our relationships deepened through time, the road to building a serving, loving community was a bit more of a challenge. The first time one of the women had a baby after we started the group, I tried to organize meals for her. People just couldn't find the time. Or they brought just a little something. Once we gave a party for a woman who had adopted a baby. Everyone was supposed to bring something. One person brought a cake, but others just brought a little box of juice or a little box of cookies. I had to empty my cupboards to supply the abundance of food required to honor our guest of honor. However, little by little, as the women experienced the blessing of being served, of having meals brought to them when babies were born, of visits during sickness or grief, of parties given, they began to do this for each other. In the end, it was modeling and encouraging that taught this idea of community. Now, all these things happen spontaneously between the women.

Another element of building community is the women learning to serve together. A special evangelist was coming, and we wanted to have a meal after the meeting. I was exhausted, getting ready for furlough, so I said to the women, "I'm tired, and I can't do this. You're capable of doing it. I'll guide you through it, but you do it." So, we talked through the menu that we could afford and that was feasible to do, assigned tasks, and decided who would coordinate it. The evening went beautifully; they were so pleased, and so was I. The woman who coordinated the evening said to me, "I

never thought that I was useful to God, but you showed me that God could use even me." And she hasn't stopped serving the Lord ever since. Before my furlough, the women organized a going away party for me and for a colleague who was retiring, complete with an abundance of food, dancing and great entertainment. They did a beautiful job, and I was very touched.

Underlying Principles

Having described our women's group, how it got started and how it functioned, I now want to look at some of the underlying principles that provide the foundation for such a group. The two basic principles are *mentoring* and *building community*.

Titus 2 instructs the older women to teach the younger women or to put it in one word—mentoring. A lot is being written on this subject today, so I won't go into the reasons or the need for it. We'll just accept that mentoring is good and necessary and that the Bible says we should do it.

But if there is a **need for mentoring** in general, the need is even more acute, I feel, for MBBs. As one woman put it, "We grew up in North African Muslim homes, with one set of values and teaching; we've learned another set of values and teaching in France, and now we're Christians. We need to evaluate everything in our past, our culture and our education, in light of the Bible and decide what is good and can be kept and what needs to change. What you're doing, teaching us and helping us to relate the Bible to our culture and past is invaluable. You're

helping us to make a new way, a North African Christian way, to think and live." I found that even Muslim women are eager for mentors. How many of my young neighbors try to emulate my life, even down to my decorating style! I tell them that there is no power to live my life outside of Jesus, but they still try to put the varnish of Christian values and behavior on their Muslim lives. Perhaps one day the truth will penetrate. But I mention this to illustrate that women are in need of mentors and that we shouldn't be timid in proposing this type of relationship. I must admit that I started our women's group in fear and trembling, literally, my voice and hands shaking as I spoke in what seemed to me very faltering French. In spite of that, the women responded to the way I dealt with issues that touched their lives and honestly shared my struggles and the sufficiency of God's Word and his Holy Spirit to change. We can and should have confidence in pursuing mentoring relationships with women.

That said, there are some **dangers to be avoided in mentoring** relationships. One danger is to *appear as if you have no struggles*. It's what I call the "be perfect as I am perfect" image. This makes you unapproachable, and it discourages the women, who think they can never attain the same level of spirituality as you. But, if you openly share the struggles you faced in getting to where you are and the struggles you still face, they will have hope. You will repent together and pray for God's grace in your lives. You, too, will see that there is not a lot of difference between you and

them. We are all in immense need of God's forgiveness and grace. How many times have I been talking with someone about an issue, say for example, not returning evil for evil in a marriage. They listen as I explain things, but their eyes light up when I give an example of when I've said things or wanted to say things just to hurt my husband after he had hurt me. That's when they really start to listen. It's as if they think, "You know my life. You know what I experience. I can trust what you say." Transparency is an essential element in a mentoring ministry.

Another danger is *creating dependency*. Too often, the missionary or mentor becomes the hub of a wheel. All the women have a strong relationship with the mentor, but to a much lesser degree with each other; so when the mentor is gone, the group falls apart. We need to adopt the image of weaving a cloth of interdependent relationships among the group. This needs to be intentional on the part of the mentor: building community among the women and teaching them to care for each other rather than relying on her for all their support and needs. In our group, if someone were in need, I'd encourage the women to call her or visit her during the week. I generally let the women initiate contact with me outside the meeting. They contacted me when they needed me. Sometimes it was serious—counseling, rescuing (we had two cases of battered women), comforting in sickness or death. Sometimes it was light-meals or outings together, chatting on the phone or taking the kids to the pool. I was

available to them. They were and are my friends, but I always had the goal of not creating dependence on me but of involving the women in ministry to each other. It helped that after three years of being together, I left on furlough, and so they had to count on and minister to each other.

Another danger is that of *not transferring leadership and responsibility* to the women. This is another form of dependence where they look to the mentor to do all the ministry and don't feel capable themselves. Again, the mentor has to communicate this intentionally from the beginning. I always told the women, "I am teaching you for the moment so that you, in your turn, will be the older women who teach others. You will not always need me to teach you." I also intentionally pointed out to them what I saw as their spiritual gifts and how I saw God using them to minister to others. Opportunities to minister together, such as putting on dinners and parties and preparing meals for the sick, all helped them to grow in their confidence that God had gifted them and could use them. Many of these women now have dynamic evangelistic ministries among the women in their neighborhoods. Two took the initiative to begin Bible studies with a new believer who wanted to be baptized. One discipled her sister, who then in turn discipled a friend. Another has a heart for bringing people together into supportive, loving Christian community. In addition to these spiritual ministries, they minister to the practical needs of the saints—meals, housecleaning, visits, and childcare in

moments of sickness and need. I have a lot of admiration for these women.

An issue that comes up when dealing with transferring leadership and responsibility for ministry is that of the *missionary's identity*. Every missionary will say that their goal is to train believers for ministry; but when it comes down to it, we are reluctant to give up control. A coach for church planters once said that he had never seen a situation where the church planters turned over the work too soon. He said that generally the missionary thinks the believers aren't ready and that often the believers themselves are timid about taking responsibility and are content to let the missionaries do it. The result is an unhealthy co-dependent relationship.

Thus, we need to be constantly evaluating our own motivations in ministry. Are we deriving our identity from our work? Does it threaten that identity to turn control over to the believers? If we find our identity, our purpose, our sense of self-worth in being the professional, the one who does the ministry, then it will threaten us to train others to take over what we do. We won't have the patience to let them learn and fail and progress because we can already do it so much better, and that's our job, right? In our mentoring, we need to keep before us the goal of training others, enabling them for ministry and turning leadership over to them. We also need to have our identity firmly rooted, not in what we do, but in who we are in Christ. We need to be constantly rooting out the

idols that take hold of our hearts, idols of love of glory, reputation, self-worth, and control. We need to be honest with what is in our hearts.

To briefly summarize what we've seen so far, mentoring is good, necessary, and biblical. In our mentoring, we must be careful to be transparent, to foster relationships between the women, to keep the goal of training others for ministry and to be honest with the motives and idols of our own hearts.

The key to effective mentoring or discipleship among MBBs is two-fold, I believe. First, it must address *Christian character*. We can't fill believers up on so much abstract theology (and I'm a firm believer in the need for a deep and thorough theological base for our faith) or vague biblical teaching without precise application, that we neglect the areas of Christian character and obedience. One summer, we had a number of young, single men MBBs pass through and stay with us. All were convinced that God could really use them for his kingdom if they could just move out of their parents' houses and find an avenue for ministry. We told each of them that the best preparation for ministry was to get a job and to learn responsibility, respect and submission to an employer and their parents. These guys were puffed up with knowledge but needed to work on their character and obedience before they could be useful for the kingdom. We place a lot of emphasis on family relationships. We tell people that you can have a great ministry to others, but

if you can't love your spouse and kids, your ministry is really not worth a lot. It's in the home that we see the extent of our sanctification and progress in the Christian life. We develop a theology with practical implications. For instance, we develop a theology of suffering with applications of not returning evil for evil and not taking vengeance into our own hands. We develop a theology of sex,⁸ helping people to think biblically about sex and to have that affect their thoughts, behavior, and even how they teach their children. It is important, we see once again, to be transparent and to share our own work in applying the Bible to our lives and character, especially when it's difficult and will cost something.

The second aspect is that mentoring and discipleship need to *address the person's culture*. As I mentioned earlier, one woman said, "You're helping us make a new, a North African Christian, way." Discipleship must go deeper than just teaching the Bible. We must identify cultural practices and values, evaluate them in light of the Bible, and decide how behavior needs to change in light of this. If our discipleship is just teaching the Bible without helping people see how their past and culture affect their behavior and evaluating that biblically, then change will be just superficial. Take, for example, child rearing. In North African culture, boys are generally spoiled and allowed to do what they want, girls are closely controlled, and lying is an acceptable method for controlling children. These are often unconscious behaviors

and values. So, if we just teach broadly what the Bible says about children and never discuss, in light of the Bible, the cultural practices and values that people have grown up with, they will unconsciously keep those values and habits. It's true in any culture. This is where mentoring is so important. When someone is learning a new behavior, he needs to see it in action. Just a word of caution: we need to be careful to evaluate what we're teaching people as to whether it's really biblical or just our own cultural values. Is a fixed bedtime for kids biblical? You can argue that it's helpful and that there are some good reasons for it, but I doubt that Jesus, as a child, had a fixed bedtime!

As an example, I'd like to address now just one area of discipleship that was important in our women's group, but that we also address frequently with Christian and Muslim couples: the area of marriage. My colleague's comment that Arabs don't have the same expectations in marriage as Westerners, so they have less conflicts, hasn't proved to be true. We're all sinners, and, as we tell people, marriage is difficult because two selfish sinners are trying to live together. We all have conflicts in our relationships. It's not that one culture has more or less problems; rather, it's just a different twist on the same problems. For instance, in-law problems are often more pronounced in North African culture because you often have a couple living with or being financially tied to the family. (Either they are dependent on the parents or vice versa.) North African culture

spawns competition between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law for the son/husband's love and attention. The son is the mother's retirement plan, and it is in her interest to keep him attached to her and not to his wife.

We are always going back to Genesis to see God's plan for marriage and family relationships. We see the concept of a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife. We discuss the ideas of becoming one flesh and intimacy in marriage. How that works itself out in each culture will be different. We're not going to tell someone to walk down the street hand in hand with his wife or to give up his male friends and confide everything in his wife. But the Bible is clear that one of the reasons for marriage is intimacy, and if that's totally lacking, there's something wrong with the marriage, no matter what the culture says.

This is also where the principle in Ephesians 5 of sacrificial love comes in and where the Bible needs to transform the culture. If the wife desires something (for example, that the family go out to a park or do a picnic on the weekend), but the husband has never done this and has never seen a family do this, he's uncomfortable. He says he won't do it, it's not his habit, and it's not his culture. However, it is his wife's desire, and this is where Christlike sacrificial love and mentoring come in. He needs encouragement, teaching and example. This problem isn't confined to North African culture. Husbands in all cultures need to listen

to their wives and be willing to make hard changes. They are generally willing to work hard at changes for their work but not too much in their relationships. This is where spouses or teammates need to be repenting and changing themselves in order to teach and model Christ-like love.

As I talk to women and read Arab women's magazines (non-Christian ones) and listen to popular music, I find that North African women do have many of the same desires as Western women. They want tenderness, love, appreciation, and communication, a real relationship with their husband. It may not be expressed in the same ways as in the West, but if she wants this, the husband needs to find ways to meet these desires in a culturally appropriate way. Of course, I work with the women, so my message to them is that they can't change their husbands, they can change only themselves. They need to pray for their husbands and work on repenting and changing their own worldly ways of control and vengeance: critical spirits, manipulation, withholding sex, etc. They need to trust God to change their husbands and ask God to work change in themselves.

Building community was another of the foundational goals of the women's group. The women were isolated from each other and *needed to be brought together*. I found several reasons for this. One that I struggle with myself is **fear** and a lack of confidence—fear that if we approach someone, we'll bother them, they won't have the

time, or that they wouldn't want to spend time with us. The fact is that we almost all have such feelings, and it takes just one person to break through the isolation and to begin to connect with others.

Another reason was **busyness**. Everyone is busy and thinks that others are busy and won't have time for them. You don't see this as much in more traditional societies or in tight immigrant communities because social structures are well in place and the cultural values of community and being together are still intact. But as more and more women, even in North Africa, begin to work outside the home and as immigrant communities get dispersed, the traditional support structures break down and women become isolated.

Another reason that can keep women isolated is **mistrust and suspicion**. A key element in building community is building trust. I found that this wasn't an issue among the women in our group who had grown up in France as second-generation immigrants. However, among my Muslim neighbors and the first generation MBBs, it is a big issue. Mistrust and suspicion are present in most relationships outside the family unit. I know so many lonely Muslim women, lonely because they don't trust anyone. "You start to get to know people, and you only have problems," they say. They trust me, however. They know I won't gossip about them and spread their lives and problems all over the neighborhood. But I can't be every lonely Muslim woman's best

friend. Even among the believers of the first generation, we often have to point out their suspicion of other believers and exhort them to 1 Corinthians 13: "Love hopes all things and believes all things." This mistrust can destroy a group and must be dealt with.

Building trust takes time, but we can create an environment where trust grows. One way to do that is to be transparent ourselves. To share openly shows that we trust the women and encourages them to open up and trust each other. I stressed in the group that everything shared among us was to stay among us and was not to be shared with others. Generally, we did not have a problem with gossip, which can be very dangerous and destructive and must be guarded against and dealt with. Another factor in building trust is simply spending time together and getting to know one another. In our group, relationships were built as each woman took a turn hosting us at her home. We could see where she lived, and she could minister hospitality to us. We took outings together, had meals together (sometimes with our husbands and families, sometimes just among us women), and just enjoyed being together. This social aspect is very important in building trust and community.

Another aspect of building community is *learning to serve each other and to serve together*. We worked toward becoming a loving, serving community. I found that these women had lost some of the habits that their first-generation immigrant mothers have: visiting the sick, taking meals to people, doing

housework for someone in need, listening and counseling. They had become very Western in this way, each one taking care of her own needs, alone. In fact, some of these women say that I gave them back their culture: things they had rejected as old-fashioned or had just lost, they've regained. They have discovered a pride in the positive aspects of their culture. I described in the beginning of this article our first, faltering efforts in learning to serve. It was by modeling, encouraging, and experiencing the benefits of being served that the women began to serve in practical ways. It was a conscious effort to include everyone in service and not just to do it all myself. Over time, trust was built, relationships deepened, and practical service became a natural response, as did spiritual ministry to one another.

Conclusion

In summary, I see a great need for effective mentoring that addresses Christian character and obedience and that engages a person's culture biblically. Efforts should be made to be transparent in our teaching and modeling, to foster relationships between the women, and to train them for ministry. Priority should be given to building community by bringing people together, creating an environment of trust and learning to serve each other and to serve together. Even though our group was formed in a European immigrant context, I think these principles can be applied in other contexts as well.