

STEPS TO CONVERSION

applied in a team setting by I.L.

The **desire** of all of us working among Muslims is that our friends become saved. A **desire** is something we pray for and is a long term objective. This article is a discussion of a tool which enables clear, achievable intermediate **goals** be set and steps planned and implemented which move Muslims we know towards our ultimate desire.

Based on the better known Engel scale, Nate Merza has drawn up a scale of possible steps to conversion that a Muslim might follow. This scale, which bridges the gap between present reality and long-term desires, is reprinted in Livingstone's, **PLANTING CHURCHES IN MUSLIM CITIES** (1). The advantage of Merza's scale is that it is much more adapted towards Muslims than Engel's more general ideas.

All of us in the Muslim world need to regularly review where we are in terms of each person in our circle of acquaintances, and where we should be going next. We need to establish **GOALS** which we can achieve with each of the people we meet. Merza's scale can be a very helpful tool to keep us from the pattern of simply surviving, muddling through, and reacting to events, but rather thinking clearly about where we are going with each individual and focusing prayer, discussion, and action to that end. Studied together in a team setting, the tool can be very stimulating, uniting a team and focusing it on positive outreach.

In order to best facilitate our acquaintances and friends being saved, we must

carefully distinguish between 1) God's responsibility to draw men to Himself, to convict man of sin, etc., 2) man's responsibility to respond to God, to seek God, to repent, etc., and 3) our responsibility to prayerfully discern where people are at and what we can **DO** to move them towards salvation. Besides continuing to pray for them we are responsible to be ready and able to stimulate them to make a step towards God.

The tool presented below can help us to be **READY**. It can give us confidence so that we take the initiative, and it helps us to be appropriate. It enables us to concentrate prayer and planning on the next step, rather than just the vaguer long term desire. With friends we have had for some time, the tool helps us to see what has been missed out. We may for instance believe a friend is at stage III and wonder why there is no interest in God's Word, when a possible reason could be that he still believes the Bible is corrupted, a stage zero question.

The following, then, is a summary of **STEPS TO CONVERSION** by Nate Merza. I have added stage zero as explained below.

STAGE 0-CASUALS

We aim to have a large turnover of casual acquaintances with the following aims:

1. Remove obstacles and objections, eg. the accuracy of the Bible, Jesus as the Son of God, the Trinity, what is a Christian, why not their prophet.
2. Use stimulating questions with "conversation starters", use of stories and parables and riddles.

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3. Assessing if we should seek to establish a deeper relationship, which could depend on spiritual interest, natural common interests and similar social class, ministry priorities as to target groups, families, work colleagues, times of special receptivity/need (bereavement, sickness...)

Each Muslim we meet needs to have an opportunity to show spiritual interest. We need to be prepared by developing relative fluency in appropriate language phrases, and then by learning a few ways of throwing out bait, and of turning conversations to spiritual issues. A team should ensure each member is able to operate at this level. Everyone is called upon to be ready to give account of their faith. All of us can learn the basics, and so be ready to not only reply, but to create opportunities.

STAGE I-ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS

This progresses through acquaintance, acceptance, freedom to speak openly, to trust.

On the team we discussed these four components of establishing a relationship. In particular we worked at how to show respect to a person without being defensive or overly acquiescent. It is possible at this stage to go so far in seeking relationship that disagreements and differences are glossed over. One possible approach to keep us on focus is to ask "why" questions, and to listen carefully to the reply. Questions such as "Why do you believe that?" "Why do you feel that way?"

STAGE II-SOWING

Goal: Clarifying the meaning of a being a Christian by highlighting a changed life through belief in Jesus.

0. Has the concept of a Christian been clarified?
 1. I am a committed Christian, not a cultural one.
 2. Do they know other Christians? (community, church)
 3. Have they heard my testimony?
 4. Do they know I have a relationship with God?
 5. Have they heard testimonies of others?
 6. Have they been challenged with the need for change of belief, the absoluteness of the Gospel?

The thrust of this stage is to move past the main objections to the Gospel to show a vital on-going relationship with God.

In the North African context, contacts should not be immediately introduced to other Christians. The first danger is that seekers may learn too much and become informers. Secondly, meeting a lot of foreigners feeds the ulterior motives so often present in the initial interest in the Gospel. Thirdly, to apply the insights of Scoggins (2), we should be encouraging our friend to seek others of similar interests from within their existing relationships. We need from an early stage to encourage the spread of the Good News along the lines of natural relationships.

STAGE III-WATERING

There seems to be a big step from II to III, due to the gap between knowing and understanding in stage II and

preparedness to actively and personally apply acknowledged truth. Opposition to truth may now be stronger. While there seems less that we can do ourselves, great initiative is needed at this stage. Activities such as the following might be appropriate:

1. Prepare and invite people to a short series of studies, for instance Genesis 1-3.
2. Provoke, question and challenge occultism.
3. Lend Christian novels, then discuss them.
4. Use the Marsh approach (what do you think of Jesus' miracles, prayer, life, speech, etc..) For the textbook see (3). For the autobiography in which this approach is described see (4) and for the booklets see (5).
5. Exploit festivals, Christian and Muslim, and birthdays.
6. Arrange a time when you can make a small presentation, beginning with the words, "I've been here a long time, but I've not shared what is important to me". For those of us who have been in the Arab world for several years this could be especially useful among contacts who seem to have "gone cold".

Stage III needs to incorporate the following:

- A. The Bible as our basis
 1. Do they have a part of it? Have they read it?
 2. Discussion on what has been read
 3. Attend organized events for Bible instruction designed for people at this stage
 4. Complete a Bible study series

B. An accurate picture of Jesus -- the story of His life, based on the Bible, use of the Jesus video

C. The Gospel message: core known and understood, use seekers' books

D. Key to responsiveness identified

1. What motivates them?

2. What disturbs them?

3. What is their aim in life?

The discussions on our team focused on the irreducible core of the Gospel message, and what supporting literature was available. Rodda's list of the Basic Christian Doctrines that are Necessary for Salvation (7) proved to be a helpful focus, coupled with McIlwain's insistence that the Gospel, the good news of salvation, is only good news, and should only be taught as such, to those who already know their sinful state and the impossibility of a solution unless God provides one (6, vol 1, p 59). A discussion of 1 Cor. 15:3-4, and Luke 2:11 also proved helpful.

STAGE IV REAPING

A. Has a personal decision been faced?

B. Has a personal decision been made?

Missionaries tend to think someone has become a believer up to two years before the individual would say the same thing. A team can profit from reviewing 'decisions' in the last few years, and discuss reasons why some have continued while others have not. By asking "whose responsibility?" a team can seek to identify areas of negligence and mistakes, repent of them if they were committed by themselves, and plan remedial action.

The other danger is that seeking to work slowly and thoroughly we will never bring someone to the point of decision. When someone knows the Gospel, they need to be challenged to believe, to stop wanting to stay in both camps, and to accept Christ as Saviour. A few years ago, such a person was challenged with the question, "What is it that stops you? You're not convinced of the truth, or is it because it is costly to believe?" He admitted the problem was the consequences of belief, and in the next few weeks he did make a commitment to Christ.

CONCLUSIONS

"Be Ready" has become a guiding light to me in the last few years. Use of the Merza scale has helped me to become pro-active in witnessing. It has become a habit to try to discern where people are at, by listening, questioning and testing. This has enabled me to plan specific baits to put on my line and to sometimes actually go out fishing for people! Another consequence of thinking hard about the steps to belief was the setting of toolkit one (see previous article in SEEDBED XI, 2, pp. 2-8). In summary, we found the major advantages of such a framework to be:

- The weak points in one's readiness for action stand out;
- A greater level of readiness of all team members is achieved;
- Team members, even the timid ones, can acquire greater boldness;
- There is more effectiveness in the efforts that are made;
- There is much more of a pro-active

stance that seeks and plans opportunities;

- The scale is a stimulus to both prayer and action;
- The scale can act as a continued meaningful evaluation of the process of evangelism and what should be the next step in the process;
- Used prayerfully and intelligently, the scale can be a guide for spending maximum time and effort on the most promising people.

In addition, when done as a series of team exercises, I see the following benefits:

- The team has a regular focusing mechanism on our primary reason for being in the country. In the midst of many pressures to sidetrack, it can be a means of continually drawing people back to the cutting edge of what we are doing.
- Team unity is strengthened. Even if team members are dispersed during the week and rarely see each other, the scale can function as a reinforcement of the common focus.
- Team sharing can be deeper, as each gets involved in discussing and praying for the others' contacts.
- Problems of team unity can be kept in perspective as the team unites round the common purpose. This reflects my opinion that one of the best ways to stop squabbles among believers is to concentrate the efforts of all concerned on our common task and greater common sense of working together. Work is now needed, to develop a similar framework, with accompanying literature, to cover the various stages of discipleship and church planting.

POSTSCRIPT

When we discussed this scale on the team, we were all familiar with McIlwain's Chronological Approach (6,7) and my wife was writing and using materials suitable for such people, centering in particular on a thorough study of Genesis 1-3 (8). The Merza scale, and the Laying of Firm Foundations from the Old Testament, are two tools which work well together. The Merza scale is a framework for analysis, evaluation, discussion, prayer, planning which precedes Bible studies and continues until someone fully grasps the Gospel. The chronological approach is our preferred means of teaching the Scriptures. If a team is studying the scale and is not yet familiar with preparing people for the Gospel by teaching from the Old Testament, they could with profit take the time at this point to cover that lack.

One surprising effect of the scale has been to stimulate me to question the basic premise of the scale, which is that friendship is essential for presenting the Gospel. I know my questioning goes against nearly all we have learned on how to do friendship evangelism, and how that is the primary way forward in Muslim countries. But somehow we must spread out our nets wider if we are going to see more results. Friendship in our adopted culture demands a lot of time; therefore we can only be friends with a few. If these few are not responsive, what do we do?

Do we trust God that the friends He has given us are the ones He wants to save; therefore we should endlessly cultivate their friendship even if initial interest has long ago gone cold? Or do we leave

the door open to these people, but continually press on and throw out the bait to other fish?

Some years ago we were encouraged by a leader to have a 'turnover of friends'. But a friend by definition is not to be rejected or ignored. So what is the answer? The answer came through reading Donovan's book, CHRISTIANITY RE-DISCOVERED. (9) He explains how, when faced by a similar problem in black Africa, he adopted the approach that he was there to proclaim, explain, and persuade. His style was that he would enter into commitments with village groups to meet and discuss Biblical material on a regular basis for a year. Then people could make their choices. He was not committed to long-term friendships because there were other people to reach. The writer is a Catholic, but his approach at this point proved helpful. His book reminded me of that classical text, PRACTICAL APPROACH TO MUSLIMS, which most of us had read in pre-field preparation and in which we were encouraged to be proclaimers, and to keep sowing the seed, keep moving on (10).

In the light of 1 Thess. 2, the temporary nature of relationships formed does not mean that relationships must be shallow. There can and must be deep involvement with people. But both Paul and his colleagues were willing to limit the time of involvement and to move on.

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