

Five Principles I Believe In

by MK

Although the title may not sound very creative, I am convinced these principles form the backbone of our mandate.

Holistic Contextualization

Contextualization can be defined as *ministering in a fashion that reflects sensitivity to, as well as integration with, the local culture (customs, forms, language, etc.)*. Obviously, there is no single "context" in the Arab world. Rather, many contexts exist, making the question of contextualization a many-faceted issue. The particular context of my ministry is a Middle Eastern country where the church does exist. The following are some of the elements of that cultural context which must be taken into consideration when ministering:

1. *A majority Muslim population* where orthodox Islam is predominant and folk Islam, while practiced, is eschewed by the religious establishment.
2. *An Arabic speaking context.*
3. *A dramatic shift over the past ten years to a free-market economy*, encouraging investment from the West as well as the development of a vibrant tourism industry. Business, tourism, education and the diplomatic corps have brought thousands of foreigners to the country either for visits or long-term residency.

4. *The presence of the church.* There exists an Orthodox Church, visible in every town and village, as well as an Evangelical Church. Individuals among these churches are active in evangelism of Muslims and have, to some degree, succeeded in integrating this ministry into church structures.

5. *A wave of secularism which is not content with traditional interpretation of Islam.* This secular version of Islam is reinterpreting many Islamic tenets such as the status and dress of women, freedom of opinion, marriage, education, etc.

6. *A backlash of Islamic fundamentalism* that is gaining ground among the illiterate and uneducated, while being denounced vehemently by the religious and political establishment.

My contention is that, in order to contextualize properly, each of the above elements (as well as others) should be entered into the ministry equation. Often the presupposition of workers is that we must attempt to act, dress and speak as much as possible like our target audience-Muslims. I contend that this is an over-simplification. It is ill-informed contextualization. Rather the worker must strive for a holistic view of the culture and people he works among. He should be aware of ideas and trends that are shaping the future of the culture and constantly ask the question, "How

should a minister of the gospel look and act in this context?"

"Net" Evangelism

The long-standing view of evangelism in the Muslim world has been the one-to-one approach, achieved primarily through the development of a relationship. Proponents of this view have argued that we cannot possibly hope to succeed in evangelism of Muslims unless we log a certain number of hours with them. Obviously we should be spending time with our target group. It is not only critical to evangelism, it is also essential for our own development as cross-cultural communicators. However, I question the premise that this is the most effective means of evangelism in this particular context, or that more hours necessarily produces more believers.

I liken personal evangelism to fishing with a pole. It is a good way to catch fish, but you can only catch one at a time. Then, what does one do if the fish aren't biting?

When Jesus called his disciples, promising them that they would be "fishers of men," he had in mind the use of a net, not a pole. The advantage of a net is that it draws in a number of fish in a shorter period of time. It also allows the fishermen to cover a greater area of the lake in which they are fishing than the pole-and-line method.

There are at least two huge nets sifting through the waters in the country in which I work. They are **media** (printed, audio and visual) and the **local church**. Although we have long

touted radio follow-up as an effective strategy in our area, it bears restating here. Following up contacts from radio, television or any other medium allows the worker to sift through thousands (dare we say millions?) of people to locate precisely the few in whom the Spirit of God is at work. Concerning the local church, every single MBB I currently know has come to me through the local church. This does not imply that the local church evangelized all of them. In some cases, that is true. It does mean that once they came to faith, through whatever means, they sought out fellowship and instruction in the only place they knew to find it—the local church.

I can hear you objecting: "Media and the local church often use vocabulary and forms that are foreign to our Muslim friends. By going down this road we will fail to reach the masses. Also, with those we do reach, we will be moving toward extractionism. We must plant churches that fit into the local culture and values." Well said. We'll come back to that one.

Local Partnership

Although much could be said about inter-agency partnership, my purpose here is to encourage partnership with local (national) believers—whether they be MBB's or believers of Christian background. Again the tendency among many of us has been to stay away from the national church (in areas where it exists) because it is foreign to Islamic forms (particularly language and worship forms).

Before giving some rationale for partnering with the local church, allow me to share some of the benefits I have seen in relating to the local church in regards to ministering to MBB's.

1. *The benefits of an expanded net for evangelism* (mentioned previously).
2. *Role models abound in the church.* MBB's are in desperate need of role models in the areas of marriage and family, financial accountability, development of a Biblical work ethic, spirituality, etc. I have seen my own effectiveness increase dramatically as MBB's with whom I work have been exposed to church leaders. I am amazed at how effortlessly these leaders reinforce many of the principles I am seeking to communicate to my MBB friends.
3. *Attendance in church meetings allows the MBB to participate in corporate worship.*
4. *The MBB can potentially receive a stable diet of teaching and preaching in the local church.*
5. *In our area MBB's have found jobs, housing, and help in a myriad of other practical issues through the network the local church provides.* These are areas I could not dream of providing for as a foreign worker.
6. *Some MBB's have found spouses through the local church.*
7. *The local church has participated in funding some full-time MBB workers.* This has been more effective than funding the full-time MBB worker through a foreign agency.

You may object that this is not a good model. MBB's should be self-supporting. The church, since the Acts of the Apostles, has had both full-time (paid) workers and self-supported ministers. Both models are acceptable.

Now let's return to the objection that linking with the local church moves the MBB away from his culture and ultimately results in an extracted church. Several comments are worth considering in this regard. First, in my setting *it is virtually impossible to keep MBB's away from the local church.* I have seen a few attempts by Western workers to "fence" the MBB from the local church in order to preserve the Islamic nature of his language and worship forms. Clearly, this has been counterproductive for both the growth of the MBB and the development of his relationship with the expatriot worker.

Second, *by linking with the church and its established ministries, we gain credibility and influence with our Arab brothers and sisters.* As a church made up of former Muslims begins to emerge, we will be positioned to point out any "foreign-ness," the elimination of which would speed the growth of the kingdom in our respective areas. This partnership with the church should further the goal of bringing as many Muslims as possible to the light of Christ. I do not wish to advocate a church-based ministry which serves more to isolate the worker from his objective than to further it. I advocate selective partnership. I have found a number of national believers in my

country who, although a minority, have a high level of commitment to discipling former Muslims and ultimately seeing them released to form their own church. Admittedly, my situation may be rare, but I believe we will see Arab nationals who are like-minded with increasing frequency. Even in countries where no national church exists, Arab missionaries are becoming an increasingly frequent phenomenon.

Finally, *the national church does not go on HMA!* (furlough)

Leadership Development

The all-important task to which we are called is to disciple MBB's, teaching them to observe all that Christ commanded—a task demanding discipline and consecration. While my focus has been on leadership development among men, my wife has had ample opportunity to be involved with the wives of the same men. Some of these women have shown both potential and desire to be involved in women's ministry. Doubtless, many of the same comments I have applied to working with men will be applicable to women.

Just how does one do it? I am fortunate to have acquaintance with a number of MBB's. Sensing the urgency of the task before us, I have opted to invest as much of my time as possible in a handful of them, with the goal of discipling them to the fullest measure of servant-leadership in the church of Christ. I will simply share some observations:

First, *these men are readers*. I never had to answer the thorny questions of the

trinity or divinity of Christ with these particular men. They had already devoured books on the subject and progressed well ahead of the typical new MBB in these areas. There were, however, some areas which needed addressing. The following list gives an idea of the subjects which we have spent long hours discussing.

- Creationism versus evolution
- Status of women in the church
- Election and predestination
- Discipline of children in the home
- How to communicate effectively
- Conversational graces. How does a Christian talk?
- The Christian concept of leadership in the home, church and society
- Poverty and a Christian response to the redistribution of wealth
- Socialism versus capitalism
- Hermeneutics (with reference to the Koran and the Bible)
- Fund-raising for Christian ministries
- What is true spirituality? Dealing particularly with the charismatic phenomena.
- The preoccupation of Christians with the hereafter to the exclusion of the here and now.

These believers are not content to take theology from the "bottom shelf." Their questions are well thought through. They have an aversion to "ready-made" answers—Christian platitudes. They want reality. Such a hunger, while encouraging, is also challenging. It is critical for the

worker to understand issues and be competent to communicate. The Arabic proverb "faaqid esh shay' laa yu?tihi" (the one who has lost something cannot pass it on) is apropos. If we are not developing in our own understanding of truth, how can we possibly lead these new disciples in that direction?

While personal visits have given us good opportunities to discuss these and other issues, *these men continue to suffer from the lack of a consistent forum to develop and train them in Christian leadership* (in my country they do not have access to a theological college/seminary). For that reason, one often finds himself having to provide a structure. I have found TEE materials helpful in this regard. Still, I would welcome a full leadership-training course for ministers of the emerging MBB church. Such a course should go beyond the standard program of biblical studies to theology, ethics, hermeneutics, church history, apologetics and other related fields.

It seems that *relationships between these leaders have been the object of a frontal assault by the enemy*. While our tendency as Westerners is not to intervene unless invited, believers have nonetheless appreciated our attempts to mediate between them. Rather than seeing this as meddling, they tend to appreciate the fact that the worker feels close enough to confront in love. Robert MacLeish's presentation on conflict resolution has been helpful in bringing about some breakthroughs.

Finally, *in order to keep our studies and discussions from being too "heady," the disciple's triangle has been helpful*. This triangle consists of the mind, will and emotions. When applying truth the believer should ask first, "How should application of this truth cause me to think differently?" (the mind); then, "How should it cause me to act differently?" (the will); and finally, "How should application of this truth make me feel?" (emotions). Constant reference to this triangle has helped restore balance in many of our deliberations.

Church-Planting

The reader might assume from preceding comments that I am not in favor of planting new churches in countries where the church already exists. Not so. While grateful for the involvement of the national church in Muslim evangelism and discipleship, I have yet to see an MBB come fully into leadership in the official church.

Even if the existing churches succeeded in integrating thousands of Muslims into their congregations, that would hardly represent a drop in the bucket. Also, cultural distinctions, while often exaggerated, make the established church an unlikely candidate to host a mass integration of believers from Islamic background.

A house-church movement that grows along lines of familial and societal relationships is still the most likely scenario for the church-planter working with MBB's. In fact, there is a real danger that the worker in a country where the church exists may

fail to act on this aspect of his call. Until the church is established, the work is not complete.

Following are a few observations about church planting in our context:

1. *The church should be linked to the official church.* The link need not be organizational or official, but it should be nonetheless real. This link should exist, at least on the leadership level, as a bond of friendship, fellowship and accountability. This increases the likelihood that the church will continue to exist. It may also afford it a measure of protection from hostile authorities. Even in areas where there is no recognized church, MBB leaders are often linked directly or indirectly to leaders in expatriot fellowships.
2. *The term "under-ground" fails to portray our objective accurately.* It tends to breed fear in the MBB as well as sowing seeds of distrust among the national church. Additionally, our hope is that this emerging church will not actually be underground. We anticipate the day when changes in the political climate will allow the establishment of "above-ground" churches of MBB's. We are working in the intermediate phase while waiting for a more favorable political climate.
3. *The church should be oriented towards reproduction.* This begins in the evangelism and discipleship phase. By now it should be common knowledge that cutting ties with the MBB's family and social network must be avoided if at all possible. The easiest way to recognize a future church leader is to find an individual whom the Lord has used to lead other family members or friends to Christ. This person is a future pastor or elder. Invest in him/her liberally. (Obviously, there will continue to be cases of family ostracism of the MBB. There are some cases where this simply cannot be avoided.)
4. *The foreigner should not be the pastor.* We are coaches, mentors and disciples of leaders. While my experience is lacking in this area, more than one incident indicates to me that the foreigner should be virtually invisible in the meeting context from the beginning. Too often, the MBB bonds strongly with the foreigner while avoiding a healthy relationship with his compatriot leader. When the foreigner goes, so does the meeting, so does the church.
5. *The coaching of the national church leader should be very practical.* Questions such as what are the elements of a worship service, who leads the singing, do we take up an offering, who serves communion, what happens if one of the children is disruptive, etc., should be answered. The foreign coach should go over an outline of the meeting with the national leader. Nothing is perfected without practice. Emphasize to the church leader that he must practice and

give him opportunity to do that with you. Make him a success.

6. *This mentoring relationship is the proper place for consideration of worship forms.* What forms will make MBB's feel most comfortable and desirous to return while fulfilling the Biblical mandate for what constitutes corporate worship? The foreign mentor/coach can be very influential as he hammers out these issues with the national MBB leader. Incidentally, allow the leader you are mentoring to see that you, as well, are being mentored by someone else. Then, encourage him to select and mentor others.

7. *We should work toward a network of house churches.* One lone house church is almost destined to disband. All of us appreciate knowing we are part of a growing movement. MBB's suffer from being marginalized. The knowledge that they are not alone, that their house group is part of a larger fellowship, will enhance and sustain the group.

Conclusion

I close with two thoughts. First, *prayer is the fuel that ignites the whole process.* May the Lord burn that truth into our hearts-especially mine. The second is that *we must act.* Paul tells Titus to let no man despise (belittle) him. He repeats the same exhortation to Timothy, "let no man look down on your youth." A friend recently shared with me that he would rather die trying to accomplish this work than to do

nothing. We have a task, a mighty work. Let us either accomplish it or die trying.