Possibilities and Problems of Following up New Believers from a Muslim Background

Various inter-mission groups have met in the Arab World from time to time to discuss this issue. The focus has been on how to co-operate more effectively in establishing worshipping groups of new believers. These discussions included the best ways to reach people with the Gospel – usually a multi-faceted approach (radio, satellite TV, Internet chat rooms, personal witness etc.)

But we are very aware that reaching people with the Gospel is not enough. There must be a "favourable hearing" of the Gospel so that people understand, accept and then grow in their understanding through follow-up. This is often one-to-one at the beginning and later by integrating them into a worshipping group of believers from a Muslim background (BMBs) if there is one.

In the past, the hope from such conferences was that we could come up with a joint project through mass media – radio, satellite TV, more effective correspondence/Internet courses, videos, DVDs etc. In fact we learned that the most important way we could co-operate together to build what we now call "vibrant communities" was to focus on effective follow-up, whether through radio, satellite TV, online Bible correspondence courses etc.

Many of these people are **on the way to faith**. It is hard to estimate how many people fall into this category, but it probably runs into many thousands. Up to this point, only a small number are being personally followed up in the Arab World. I have no idea if this is also true across other countries in the Muslim World. But I think we would all agree that follow-up/discipleship of new believers is at least equally as important, and perhaps even more important, than getting people to make a profession of faith.

We rejoice greatly at what God is doing in some places in the Muslim World and the increasing number of BMBs. I started in the Arab World just over 50 years ago and I am thrilled today to see that what God is doing far exceeds any of my earlier expectations! Now my deep concern is what is happening and what might happen to these new babes in Christ. Are they being discipled? Are they being brought to maturity in the faith? Are they being integrated into "vibrant communities of Jesus worshippers"? Or are they being left to struggle as newborn babes until, in despair, they either throw away any belief in anything or revert to being Muslims?

In some Arab countries there is a recognised Christian church for local people. But in the majority of Arab countries discipleship among BMBs is starting fresh. What I want to share with you is mainly applicable to places you may be working where there is little or no possibility of integrating BMBs into existing vibrant fellowships often of Christian background believers.

I hope some of these principles will be valid for the whole Muslim World, if not for the whole world. As I see our goal in discipleship, it is to help launch a new BMB into a new pattern of life to the point that he/she is making steady progress. This should be the case whether he/she is isolated because of family pressure or detention or whether, right from the beginning, he/she is able to be incorporated into a vibrant fellowship group.

I don't believe we should be aiming at a polished specimen of a mature believer! Usually for a limited period in the life of a BMB – often during the transition from the old life to the new – the goal is to get the new believer started in a new **pattern of life**. Then we have to trust God to keep him/her going – perhaps by bringing in local believers to take over the task of discipleship.

I don't believe there is a unique method of discipleship. It is not that I am against **methods**. We all use methods. Especially those of us who are westerners are structurally oriented and so we almost inevitably use some sort of method and there are many types of methods. These will vary depending on the country we are working in and the people we are working with as well as our different personalities. A method I find helpful with 'Muhammad' may be quite unhelpful with 'Ibrahim'.

So in discipleship, our dependence **must be** on the Holy Spirit and not on methodology. God works by his Holy Spirit in the lives of the individuals with whom we are working. Our trust must be in **His** working and not in any method. The moment we begin to depend on a method rather than on God the Holy Spirit, we will cease to be effective disciplers.

Some of the problems we face in discipling BMBs

This is not an exhaustive list.

- **The Religious Problem**

  BMBs have a religious background that is diametrically opposed to the Gospel. There must be a lot of destruction and breaking down before we are ready to build. Islam recognises so many truths of the Bible, but vehemently denies that which is the very heart of the Gospel. We may be dealing with new believers who have been serious, well taught and even fanatical Muslims and have come to faith in the Lord Jesus or with those who are open to new ideas such as the majority of university students. We may be dealing with secularised Muslims who have no faith in Islam at all. But in all cases there is a common background – a foundation of the Muslim understanding of who God is, who man is and how man relates to God.

  All these things have been drilled into them since babyhood. They have been taught that the Lord Jesus did not die on the Cross to bear the consequences of our guilt, that He is not the Son of God and that the Bible has been corrupted. There are many other standard objections. So even if a Muslim has no faith in Islam, these concepts are deeply ingrained in his mind and heart. We need to deal with this so the new believer can begin to construct a positive newness of life in the Lord Jesus.

  Here is one example. A man named Omar came to a worker in North Africa with a very strong interest in the Gospel. He had been studying the Bible. He seemed to progress very rapidly in his understanding and in his acceptance. He came to a point when he made a very clear profession of faith and was preparing for baptism. But one day Omar came to the Bible study and began to ask some of the stock Muslim objection questions that one would think would have come at the beginning. It was a total surprise that they came at this point.

  At first the worker tried logically, calmly and gently to explain and hoped he would believe and go on in faith. But it was soon obvious that a totally different spirit had entered Omar somehow or other and very soon it developed so that rather than becoming a disciple of the Lord Jesus, he reverted to being a fanatical defender of Islam. Nothing said could penetrate and it was no longer possible to talk about religious matters with Omar. But all through that period Omar still kept coming to see the worker or called him on the phone arranging to meet him somewhere. There was something that kept drawing Omar back. Over a number of months the worker continued to meet with Omar. Nothing seemed to penetrate although his attitude did seem to soften gradually until one day Omar asked the worker if they could begin studying the Bible again.

  They began studying the Bible together once more. After some time, while studying a New Testament passage, Omar asked, “Can we pray?” The worker responded that that would be good if Omar was ready. They prayed together and Omar prayed in the name of the Lord Jesus. He is now baptised, but it is very difficult to integrate him into a local fellowship. The other local BMBs are slow to receive someone like Omar who has gone through this type of experience.

  Please notice that the whole Islamic religious background came flooding into the foreground and had the potential to completely overwhelm the truth that Omar was getting from the Gospels. It took time and patience and a great deal of trust in God on the part of the worker to bring him through this period of rejection until he was once again ready to receive the truth. Never minimise the tremendous religious barrier for Muslims to become BMBs.

- **The Problem of the Social System**

  But it doesn't stop there. Islam is not just a religion it is a **social system**. So even if some of our Muslim friends haven't met the "religious" problems, the social problems still remain. One young man was having a conversation with a worker about the Son of God and the meaning of that title. It was a stimulating conversation and the next evening he came back visibly excited saying, "I have seen the truth! I understand that Jesus is the Son of God and that He is the only one who can save." Then he thought a bit, and a worried look came over his face and he said, "I can't believe this in this country. In the social surroundings in which I live to confess that kind of truth would mean complete ostracism at best and death at worse. If I could go to France, Holland etc. maybe I could believe. I would love to believe, but here in this country I just can't." The worker never saw him again. Only God knows where he is today.

  There are tremendous social problems that arise when people become believers and followers of the Lord Jesus. These need addressing very carefully during discipling. I don't believe we should encourage new BMBs to leave their social medium and emigrate from their country and escape the problems that their social context will cause. We must do everything in our power to encourage them and enable them to continue to live in their social context and be a witness right there for the Lord Jesus.

- **Economic Problems**

  Social problems imply **economic** problems. A young Arab Muslim man had made a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus. As he talked to a worker, the worker sensed that there was something real in his profession of faith. But he said he was working with a transport company in his home city and that his boss had discovered his Bible. He said, "When he found out I was a follower of the Lord Jesus, he fired me. So now I am without work." Things like this often happen. There is a huge potential economic cost to be paid by BMBs when they stay in their local environment.

- **Psychological Problems**

  There are very definite psychological problems as well. All that Islam says about brotherhood and interpersonal relationships in the house of Islam is based upon fear, the necessity to save face, distrust, suspicion and often a sense of isolation. This so often carries over into the life of the new believer. It is not easy for him or her to change these negative attitudes of mistrust and suspicion and replace them with completely new attitudes of confidence and trust and love for other brothers and sisters in Christ.

  A young man came to faith primarily through Christian radio programmes. He was then put in contact with an expatriate believer who put him in contact with a worker. This young man had a warm and open spirit to the Lord. He was hungry to receive the truth from the Bible. He was a delight to work with. Yet when told there were other local believers from a Muslim background in his city, he wanted to know who they were and then he said, "I can never trust my own people with my faith in the Lord Jesus." This shows a deep psychological barrier of mistrust and hate. Islam may not be a religion of hate, but interpersonal relationships are soaked in mistrust and if not actually hate, then certainly in a lack of love.

So there are specific and overwhelming problems in forming communities of believers together.

What are the possibilities?

They are as bright as the Holy Spirit is strong and sufficient! We must never give up hope because we know the Gospel we preach and we know the power of the Gospel through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is absolutely amazing how good and effective a discipler the Holy Spirit is – usually on His own without help from any of us workers! On many occasions I have met BMBs who have been brought to the Lord through the medium of radio, TV or the Internet and have not met with any

other believers or perhaps met with them very infrequently. Yet I have been amazed at their depth of understanding and their maturity in the things of God.

Another Omar came to faith in an oasis mainly through the faith of another national believer. Shortly after this he joined the army. He was sent to a major city for six months basic training to be a medical orderly. During that time Omar had some discipleship sessions mainly with national believers. Then he was stationed way down in the Sahara desert in the middle of nowhere. He was about 500 miles from the nearest known believer. There was sporadic correspondence carefully worded. The workers wondered what would happen to Omar. There he was in total isolation with no one to encourage him. A local believer in one of the main cities was sent down to this very isolated place on business and he found Omar. When he came back he said that Omar's Bible was open on his work desk in plain sight and in talking together, the visitor realised that Omar was doing very well spiritually. A few months later he came back to the major town on business to buy a car. Going with another believer to the car lot Omar began to pray spontaneously right there in the street that the Lord would help them find the right car for the right price! Very clearly the Holy Spirit had been at work in Omar's life. God was with Omar and would never leave him. So the possibilities are as bright as the Holy Spirit is sufficient and strong. We can put our complete trust in Him.

There are many in the Arab World who have made a profession of faith. It is impossible to know how sincere that profession is. Perhaps most of these people are out of our reach – isolated – and yet there is a lot we can do in praying for them. We also need to have a good supply of materials DVDs, CDs and other materials such as Scriptures and books through which the Holy Spirit can work in His sovereign ministry of follow-up even if the person is isolated from contact with other believers.

Obviously it is not the case that we should isolate BMBs and let the Holy Spirit get on with His great work of discipleship! God is doing this in an amazing way, but this is an exception. The Biblical pattern we are given is discipleship in a person-to-person relationship building into the life of BMBs the ability to integrate into a group of other believers from a similar background. Wherever possible, we need to focus on individual personal discipleship one-on-one and then expand the group to a larger number of BMBs.

Here I want to just focus on one-to-one individual discipleship. Perhaps later we can think about issues relating to small-group discipleship and the whole issue of discipling whole churches. I can't give you "a method". You will have to find a method which already exists or perhaps God will teach you a new method. What I want to do is outline some goals and principles that I hope will prove helpful for you and that you will be able to use as a team in your area. Here are some guidelines I hope will help you to develop your own goals for getting new BMBs launched into a new pattern of life and able to continue with or without the personal attention of a worker or national discipler.

- **Establish a relationship.**

  This is so very important wherever we are, but it is crucially important in the Muslim World. So much is built on strong relationships. If you haven't established a relationship of trust, of openness and of mutual confidence then positive discipleship is virtually impossible. The first time you meet with a new enquirer your primary goal is to establish a warm, open relationship and this will remain a goal throughout the whole of the process as you seek to maintain and strengthen that relationship.

- **Bring your friends into a meaningful understanding of the Gospel.**

  This should be the focus once the relationship has been established. This needs some further explanation. We have seen some of the religious problems a BMB has to overcome as he becomes a believer. But some issues may still be in his mind. In order for the Gospel to be meaningfully applied, first of all he needs to develop a new concept of the character of God. So often new BMBs fail to develop into strong disciples because they don't have a proper concept of God.

We usually start immediately with the Lord Jesus and what He has done for the individual and how he should relate to the Lord Jesus, but we leave the new BMB with his Islamic view of God. The result is that he keeps his Islamic concept of God and puts the Lord Jesus in the place of Muhammad. But having an Islamic concept of God sabotages his growth as a believer.

Many decades ago a man by the name of Harold Spencer wrote a book called, **Islam and the Gospel of God: a comparison of the central doctrines of Christianity and Islam, prepared for the use of Christian workers among Muslims.** It was first published in 1956 and re-printed in 1976.

I read it about 40 years ago and I can't recall all he wrote, but I do remember that it was extremely helpful in understanding the Islamic concept of God. It documented from the Quran and from Islamic history the fact that the Islamic concept of God is of a God without morals who does what he wants, when he wants and how he wants without any regard for moral principles. So you won't be able to develop a healthy relationship with God if that is your concept of God. This concept needs to be changed by careful discussion based on Biblical revelation.

- **Help your new BMB friend to understand <u>who he is</u>.**

This involves a thorough understanding of the person and work of the Lord Jesus and what sin is. His understanding of these things needs to be transformed if he is to have a meaningful understanding of the Gospel.

I can't give you a "method" of how to do this, but here are some tips on how to **begin** to get over this high hurdle.

1. Start at Genesis 1-3. This will help to develop a new concept of God, of man and of what happened to mankind and what it did to his relationship with God.
2. Next go to Genesis 5:1-2 and the simple statement that Adam was created in the image of God and Adam's son was created in his image. So it is easy to understand that man's relationship with God was broken because of sin.
3. Next look at Ephesians 2:1-10 to show that according to the Bible this is the present state of mankind including yourself and the person you are talking to.
4. Next look at the first few chapters of John's Gospel to show what the Lord Jesus has done to deal with our situation.

So new BMBs need to understand God, man, what God has done to save mankind and something about what happens when a person invites the Lord Jesus to take control of his/her life. They need to see the process of re-establishing that link with God which existed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden and was broken because of sin. I hope you find this a helpful beginning!

- **Teach your BMB friend how to develop a viable pattern for spiritual growth.**

This means developing a pattern that will enable him to continue to grow spiritually without the need to be constantly fed by yourself or by another individual. In much of the Muslim World we never know how long we may be able to stay in touch with our new BMB friends. You might see him once, but something may happen in his family or with the authorities that breaks your contact and terminates your relationship.

As soon as possible get to your friend to the point where he can carry on without your help. For this to happen he needs to receive constant nourishment from the Word of God on his own. Right from the beginning seek to get your new friends reading for themselves and managing to draw out for themselves spiritual truths and principles from what they read. This is better than going through a programmed method that just requires them to respond to questions you ask. Don't encourage looking up single verses from all over the Bible. It is much better to think

through a passage of Scripture by reading the verses thoughtfully and consecutively and learning to draw truth from the Word.

A key factor in the growth of new BMBs is them knowing how to feed themselves on the Word of God – reading it, memorising it and applying it into their lives. This will not only feed them but also enable them to feed others.

- **Show that a vital part of developing spiritual growth is communion/prayer with God.**

  We so often say that God speaks to us through His Word and we speak to God in prayer. But prayer is a two-way communication. We speak to God and God speaks to us. It may not be helpful to give any pattern of prayer that the BMB is familiar with from his old life. Try and get him to understand and develop spontaneous and meaningful prayer. He must understand that prayer is not reciting memorised prayers or using certain forms. It is speaking with God and it comes from his/her heart.

  So a viable pattern for spiritual growth is getting your friend established in God's Word and helping him/her to have a viable continuing communion with God in prayer so he/she will continue whether or not you are able to stay in touch constantly encouraging and pushing him/her.

- **Show the necessity of a commitment to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.**

  It is common when you first meet with a BMB that their understanding is that they have changed from one religion to another. They have changed one set of doctrines for another or one set of practices for another. So one of the first questions they ask is "What do I have to do now as a believer?" "How do I live as a BMB?"

  They don't think about what sort of character they have to develop, but rather what religious duties they have to perform. So it is really important early on to get across the understanding that being a disciple of the Lord Jesus is not just assenting to a number of doctrines. It is fundamentally a relationship with a person. Until that relationship is established a person is not a believer and unless that relationship is maintained and developed a person will not grow as a believer. Your friend must understand as quickly as possible that this relationship with the Lord Jesus, in the light of who He is, must involve a complete and total commitment to His Lordship. We can explain that this is true submission. In fact this is the true Islam – not their previous fabricated version of it. It is submission from the heart to God through the Lord Jesus!

- **Establish the new BMB in a viable pattern of Christian witness.**

  This won't be an indiscriminate verbal proclamation to all and sundry of his/her new-found faith. Those of us who become believers in western/free societies are often told, "Go out and tell your story about how the Lord Jesus has changed your life." Romans 10:9 says, ***"If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."***

  I believe this! But new BMBs returning to their family and social environment and immediately, indiscriminately proclaiming their faith in the Lord Jesus (i.e. apostasy from Islam) will always cause a very negative reaction – a complete rejection of the person unless he/she immediately returns to Islam. It will certainly not be a viable witness.

  If you're talking with a BMB, ask what happened when the family first found out he/she had become a believer in the Lord Jesus. Many tried with all their hearts to convince their loved ones of the truth of the Lord Jesus and how they must believe in Him or they would go to hell for all eternity. But the family could not/would not receive the message. Often the BMB's relationship with his family was so bad he had to leave quickly often only with the clothes he was wearing.

This is very sad, but what is often more difficult is the BMB's expectation that he/she can come and live with you and become part of your family. It is very hard to say to a new BMB, "Go back to your family and be salt and light".

Perhaps you should advise him/her at this point to stop talking to the family about his/her faith in God but rather go home and demonstrate how life has been changed since he put his faith in the Lord Jesus. As he/she acts towards the family with gentleness, with love, with patience and with helpfulness, the family will notice the life change. **At this point** they will ask, "What has happened you are so different to what you used to be?" That will be the opportunity needed to share about his/her faith bit by bit. It is better to wait until the curiosity of the family is aroused.

So **a viable pattern of witness** is not an indiscriminate sharing of his/her faith. This is not only because of almost certain rejection resulting from that kind of witness, but also the great danger that the opposition unleashed would be too great for the new believer to bear and this could destroy him/her spiritually. With God's help, a viable pattern of witness should always produce a positive effect.

A very useful book is **Lifestyle Evangelism** by Joe Aldrich. He shares a very useful principle: *"Affirmation of the Gospel is necessary to being effective in proclamation of the Gospel."* Certainly this is vital in the Muslim World. The affirmation of a changed lifestyle due to a changed heart and positive evidence of what the Lord Jesus has done in the life of an individual in changing attitudes, speech, actions and relationships must precede the proclamation of the Gospel.

So to develop a viable pattern of witness we should actively discourage a new BMB from immediate verbal proclamation of his/her faith to family, friends and neighbours – i.e. his/her Muslim context. When the Lord Jesus was speaking to His disciples He said, ***"Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*** Mt. 5:13-16. He also said, ***"You are the salt of the earth"***. How does salt exert its influence? It doesn't make any noise. You can't see it in your food. It is totally invisible and yet its influence pervades a whole dish of food.

Again how does "light" work? If you are in a dark room and someone comes in and turns on the light, you are immediately aware of it. If the Lord Jesus is in a BMB's heart, then a light has been turned on within his heart. Back in the family context the family members will note that a light has come.

We read in 1 Pet. 3:15-16, ***"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. 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 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander"***.

So tell your BMB friend to always be ready to give a reason for the hope that he/she has to anyone who asks with meekness and fear. When they see the change in a BMB's life, they will ask questions. That will be the moment for him/her to share ***"the hope that is within them"***.

This is a viable pattern for witness in the Muslim World especially for BMBs in their own contexts. It does produce fruit. Families do come to put their faith in the Lord Jesus although this often happens slowly. Once it does happen you have the core of a house church.

- **Instil in your BMB friend the need for a meaningful commitment to the Body of Christ.**

  Show that corporate fellowship with other BMBs is vital. So often there is a strong commitment to being a believer in the Lord Jesus at a personal level and that may be lifelong, but there is no commitment to other local BMBs – to the Body of Christ. This is probably the case with the majority of BMBs in the Arab World. It is hard to integrate them into local churches made up of Christian background believers. They usually grow much more successfully in BMB fellowships.

So these are some of the principles of "follow-up" of new BMBs in the Muslim World. The goal is to see them reproducing within their Muslim context so that **God** can gather them together in functioning local "communities of Jesus followers".

Finally, a basic understanding of the Old Testament is vital for BMBs to understand the New Testament and the Gospel. Try to get a complete Bible into the hands of an enquirer or a new BMB as soon as possible. If the enquirer is to make good use of that Bible, he needs to know something about how it is structured – the time lines etc.

When you give a person a Bible do three things:

- Take the Bible in hand and give him a short introduction to the composition of the Old and New Testaments. Go through the basic parts of the Old Testament and the basic parts of the New Testament and then explain the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments in terms of the Old Testament preparing the way for the New Testament.
- Impress on the new BMB the unity of the Bible. Start with Genesis mentioning very briefly the Creation and the Fall. End with the last few chapters of Revelation and help him/her to see that once again heaven and earth are going to be established as "very good" in God's eyes. There will be no sin any more. Man will be in a right relationship with God. Everything will be back to God's original design. So you have explained to him the beginning and the end and everything in between as a record of what God has done to bring a restoration about.
- Wherever possible give a reading list appropriate to reading the Bible for the first time. There is a great danger that a person will just read Genesis and then Exodus. That is fine, but then he will find himself in the Law of Moses and will say to himself, "I can't understand all this! The Bible is too hard to understand" and he will stop. Here is a suggested reading list for a first reading of the Bible:
  - ✓ The whole of Genesis
  - ✓ Exodus 1–20
  - ✓ Psalms 1–150 (particularly the Messianic Psalms – 2, 23, 69, 110)
  - ✓ Certain sections of Isaiah (9:1–7, 53, 64–66)
  - ✓ Daniel 1–6, 9 (very helpful on the issue of persecution)
  - ✓ Malachi

  This gives a taste of the different styles of literature in the Old Testament as well as an overview of its message particularly in regard to the coming of the Lord Jesus.

  Moving on to the New Testament:
  - ✓ Luke
  - ✓ The Acts of the Apostles
  - ✓ Romans
  - ✓ 1 John
  - ✓ Revelation 19–22

  This is an overview of the message of the New Testament. Now your friend will be able to read the whole of the Bible and put the various sections into the context of the whole of the Bible. He will have seen and understood the beginning and the eternal "end".