

Less is More: Discipling Chinese Believers In A Cross-Cultural Setting

Author: Swells in the Middle Kingdom

Date: 02.08.2010

Location: mainland | China

Category: Indigenous Leadership, Integrity & Humility, Partnership

Based on personal experience, this posting is a slightly expanded form of an article originally published in the quarterly journal ChinaSource.

It is common knowledge in the West that Chinese believers are godly, holy warriors of the faith, having been purified through the fires of persecution.

It is also common knowledge in China that believers from the West are godly, mature exemplars of the faith, having been blessed by centuries of training and nurturing.

These assumptions underlie many Sino-Western Christian interactions. And while examples can be found to support either contention, nevertheless it is more accurate to say that regardless of culture or context, the church wherever one finds it is completely full of sinners. The two assumptions above when placed within the reality of this one deeper reality create tremendous opportunities for confusion and miscommunication in cross-cultural Christian engagement.

This paper is an attempt to address some of the more common misconnects that occur when expatriates engage in discipleship within the Chinese context. Behind this discussion lies a personal conviction that the key to faithful, locally appropriate discipleship must be a determination to seek smaller, less prominent roles for the cross-cultural worker.

Basic Convictions

When considering cross-cultural ministry in China, it is important to keep three observations in mind.

First of all, in most Mainland Chinese contexts it can be assumed that there will already exist some form of local Christian body. While there are exceptions, most places will have already experienced some degree of Christian witness. Many of these faith communities may be small, weak, and struggling, but they nevertheless do exist. This simple fact means that whatever expatriate Christian workers eventually decide to do, their actions and words will likely impact already extant local Christians. Before jumping into ministry, it is important to take time and seek out any existing local groups. The outsiders should learn from them so that they can understand how best to support them.

Second, it is important to keep Paul's admonition in Ephesians 4:1-6 always before us as we seek to build the church. In this particular cross-cultural context this means emphasizing humility in such a way that the unity of the larger local Christian community takes precedence any personal theological or ministerial objectives. At its most basic level, this should cause outsiders to pause and consider before engaging in church planting where there are already existent congregations. Perhaps more fundamentally, we need to recognize that the Holy Spirit's work of binding together his people in a particular place may result in a church culture or form of religious expression that is faithful yet quite different from any given expatriate Christian worker's own personal experiences or preferences. The cross-cultural worker must not underestimate the variety or differences in church cultures around the globe. Good coffee in the foyer, friendly greeters at the door, one style of music or another, standing, sitting, boisterous or reserved worship, joyful or awestruck prayer?;local churches need to be free to seek God's presence in their midst without the constraints of ?what works back home.? And may God have mercy on overseas ministers if their actions or words create division in the local Christian body.

Finally, let me suggest that discipleship rather than evangelism is the more appropriate field of ministry for expatriate Christian workers in China. The Chinese church today has many evangelists and is finding great success at achieving numerical growth. In fact, this rapid growth has yielded a church with too few trained teachers. Recent Chinese history and current demographics have only served to exacerbate the situation, leaving a contemporary Chinese church hampered by a large generation gap. Accordingly, new believers often struggle to find healthy mature models of the Christian faith that have stood the test of time and yet still seem relevant. When language and cultural differences are factored in alongside the years of mentoring and discipleship many Western believers have experienced, it only makes sense for Westerners to put more of their energy into the discipling of newer local believers.

What Do We Mean By Discipleship?

While there are many technical definitions available in the secondary literature, I would suggest that most discussions of the concept of Christian discipleship end up with an explanation that circles around the ideas encapsulated in the following statement: The goal of discipleship in cross-cultural contexts is to train up mature self-sustaining/replicating believers who are healthy parts of local fellowships.

The emphasis on participation in local bodies is important here, for it addresses one of the fundamental realities of cross-cultural work. Sooner or later, one of the parties will leave. And if body-life has not been modeled by the discipler and practiced by the new believer, then there is a real danger of abandonment. One need only think of the strengths and weaknesses of programs involving short-term English teaching in the Chinese context to see the importance of fellowship to discipleship.

Perhaps more helpful than any definition, it is vital that we are clear about just what discipleship is not. When reaching across cultures to build into another believer the discipler's purpose should not be to replicate either their own faith or their own church experience in the new believer. It is essential that the cross-cultural worker have a deep understanding of the local believer's faith before asking or expecting them to imitate any portion of the discipler's own religious life. Expatriate Christians should be humble when confronted with the work of God in another human being's life, rather than seeing them as another opportunity to peddle a particular type of religious experience. 1 Corinthians 1 should serve as a powerful reminder of our relative role in the lives of other believers.

In a similar vein, discipleship is also not the process of turning Chinese believers into good Western Christians. While this seems obvious, far too often have expatriate Christians unintentionally held up a standard of Christian faith and church practice that is entirely modeled on their own experience. By sharing a favorite worship song from back home, they can be sending less than subtle cues that this kind of music is truly spiritual, and that this is the proper path to spiritual growth. Even without words, actions and attitudes can convey personal preferences to impressionable new believers in such a way that they carry far more authority than was intended or is appropriate. This is why it is so essential that the cross-cultural worker seek out healthy local fellowships, and strive to discover and encourage vibrant local Christian practices. While variety is part of how God reveals Himself and how His people experience Him, some forms of expression fit better in certain contexts than others. Be wary!

Finally, cross-cultural workers should be careful to remember that a program or technique that yields fruit in one culture may not be so successful in a different culture. Discipleship is not about spreading the good news of the expatriate's home fellowship's latest ministry fad or flavor to believers in China. On the contrary, the deep things of the Christian faith are often ideas and practices that have stood the test of time, having been passed on through millennia to peoples all over the globe. True discipleship requires an awareness of the difference between the novel and the eternal. Cross-cultural discipleship should focus on the most basic things first; the essentials.

Practical Tips

Many of the principles outlined above are painfully obvious. But what would discipleship look like if we applied these ideas in a more careful way? Are there particular things that we would do differently, special emphases or techniques that would emerge as valuable in light of these concepts? Below are a few practical tips that can help cross-cultural workers in China develop more faithful discipleship models.

Whenever possible, it is wise to facilitate discipleship settings where two or three local believers study together with one mentor. In contrast to the more common one-one-one techniques, smaller groups encourage local believers to share with each other; something that in China is not natural across group boundaries. If the group is too large, then it is often difficult to engender the kind of trust that is necessary to engage more personal concerns. Needless to say, same sex groups should be cultivated to avoid any implications of impropriety, though couples groups for spouses may be effective in some situations. Meeting as a smaller group can also provide newer believers with a basis for fellowship when (not if!) the cross-cultural worker leaves. In this setting local believers are also able to learn from each other, often resulting in them developing applications of principles that would not have occurred to the expatriate discipler. All of this is especially true for women in the Chinese context. Social networks and the role of gossip in Chinese culture mean that Chinese women in particular often seem to learn while chatting. This collective reflection upon the ideas discussed is especially valuable in Chinese culture; the concerns of the group often set the boundaries or priorities for discussing the concerns of any given individual member of that group.

It is also wise in the Chinese context to develop discipleship opportunities that rely upon and take advantage of locally produced materials. The last few years has seen an explosion of Christian titles and Christian bookstores throughout mainland China. While not everything is available, there is a lot out there, and more and more of it is legal. Using materials that are locally available means that whatever training is presented is more easily replicated by locals. In some cases, there may already be particular titles that are recognized and trusted by local believers; this can lend authority and influence to any discipleship work that involves those titles. The existence and use of locally available literature also means that believers need not be quite so secretive about what they do or where they do it. At the same time, the cross-cultural worker's willingness to use local materials sends an important if subtle message that the Chinese church does not have to depend on the outside world if she wishes to grow and develop; increasingly, she has resources of her own.

There is also great benefit to be gained by having cross-cultural disciplers participate in the life of local fellowships and sit under local teachers, though variations in local security environments mean that it is not always wise or feasible. Notice that the idea here explicitly excludes situations that involve expatriates pastoring local fellowships. The context and impetus for discipleship (whenever possible) should be the local church, with an eye to avoid any sense of planting foreign churches on Chinese soil. To the degree that the cross-cultural worker is part of the local Christian community, his or her teaching is that much more likely to make constructive contributions to the local body. In blunt terms, outsiders must learn what local Christianity is really like, and help new believers to fit in. This is not to deny the need for timely prophets to challenge the religious status quo, but rather a humble admission that the cross-cultural worker is most likely NOT the best prophet to speak God's words of reform into the local community. How does the typical church react to newcomers that demand change as soon as they walk through the door? And, of course, remember that the cross-cultural worker in the Chinese context is always on borrowed time. What will he or she leave behind? Factionalism and division? Or unity and growth?

Finally, it should always be remembered that the local church, local values, and local believers are different from what the cross-cultural worker may have experienced in his or her home church setting. Expatriate Christian workers simply cannot assume that what worked in their home churches will work in China. All cross-cultural workers know this to be true, and yet their actions often betray stubborn biases. One local Chinese church recently began developing their music ministry. With Westerners available to assist, the ministry expanded quickly but soon diverged in many different

directions, each reflecting the tastes and preferences of the main foreign advisers. When one expatriate returned to his home country, his portion of the ministry foundered. In another case, expatriate Christians actively sought to take a less visible, less directive role in the music ministry, resulting in the development a form of musical outreach that varies from what is typically seen in the West and yet is a powerful, biblically faithful, locally appropriate form of ministry. By meeting regularly with a handful of the more committed local church musicians and teaching fundamental principles rather than Western programs, the cross-cultural disciplers were able over time (three years!) to help the local Christians find their own musical voice, and their own form of service. Faithful discipleship often involves active restraint on the part of the outsiders, offering less of their own preferences and instead focusing on essential, basic principles while leaving practical applications to be shaped and even discovered by local believers in their local context.

Conclusion

If we are truly committed to seeing God's Kingdom grow and increase its influence in China, then we need to actively engage in discipleship and do it well. This means doing what is best for the local church; not what is best, or easiest, or most convenient, or most rewarding for ourselves. The longer I am engaged in cross-cultural discipleship, the more I have come to embrace one simple truth: in discipleship, less is more. Less of me, means more of God for more of them. Or, as John the Baptist stated the same principle in John 3:30, "He must increase, but I must decrease." While at times it may be difficult to see how our "sacrificial service to the Lord" can be anything other than a blessing to the local body, we expatriates are fooling ourselves if we do not recognize the pride and personal gratification involved in even our most "intentional" ministries.

Over the years I have received a few invitations to preach from the local Chinese congregation with which I worship in my city. This is a registered fellowship with a few thousand worshippers. The thought of standing before them and sharing God's word thrills my heart. In many ways, I can think of few things that would be more validating to me and my ministry. The photos of me in this context would be priceless, fulfilling all the dreams and expectations of the people who have supported me these many years. But?

What would this mean to the local fellowship? Is this the best thing for them? Are western homiletics better for China than "long" or "wandering" indigenous styles of oratory? The process of securing approval and the attention it would bring might prevent me from continuing to associate with the church in the future, perhaps even making it difficult for local believers to continue to associate with me. Once behind the pulpit, the novelty of a Westerner speaking Chinese would likely overpower whatever message I presented. If I was poorly received, how would those I have discipled over the years react? If I did well, how would this reflect on the local pastors and how they are viewed by local believers?

I have said no to this request each time it has arisen, and I continue do so because I realize that for the sake of God's Kingdom in China, all my efforts need to involve less of me. Instead, I struggle to walk with local leaders along their path to maturity, making whatever guidance and wisdom God has given me available to them. This means more listening than talking, it involves participating in events that I find "boring", joining in activities that were not planned with my scheduling needs in mind, singing songs I do not know, praying in a tongue that is not always a heart language for me, attending meetings that are "poorly organized", listening to sermons that have more than three points, and helping with tasks that seem unimportant to me and that give me little personal satisfaction. Ultimately, these local brothers and sisters are the future of the church; it is their faithful yet fully Chinese application of the deepest truths of the Gospel that will shape God's Kingdom in China. By choosing the less gratifying, less prominent path to service and discipleship, cross-cultural workers can go a long way towards ensuring that the church God is building in China is a Chinese one, able to speak faithfully the word of God with power and conviction into the lives of the people of China.