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From New Believer to Church Leader: The Value of Intermediate Steps

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I think I understand now," he said. "I am saved from my sins by God's grace, not by my own actions." I could hardly contain my joy as Hamdi, after months of discussion and investigative Bible study, had confessed his faith in Christ. Yet as we sat trying to finish dinner, I could not help but wonder: Where do we go from here? We would continue to study scripture and I could involve him in a house fellowship where he could worship, have fellowship with other believers and be nurtured by national church leaders. As a laborer in the church movement in North Africa—who also has a vision to see released and empowered leaders serving the national Church—how would I help Hamdi go from being a new believer to a mature servant in the church?

In a strategy session with other foreign and national believers, we recently discussed the delicate question of when it was time to "pass the torch" to new leaders in the church. While everyone in the meeting was clearly opposed to a paternalistic model and dependency on foreigners, we have nevertheless observed potential leaders with great promise who have not stepped up as leaders or, in some cases, have disappeared altogether. While Tom Steffen urges a rather swift passing of the "baton" of leadership (1997, 169-86) and David Garrison encourages the "torch" never being in the hands of a missionary or church planting specialist at all (1999, 31), a disciple on the journey from new believer to leader is surely in need of the care of a mentor and some unhurried time to grow.

My goal here is to remind the Christian worker of the value of a disciple going through a season of "intermediate steps" before assuming leadership—that is, a period of time in which the disciple is entrusted with tasks of increasing responsibility corresponding to his or her faithfulness. I will address three major questions: (1) Why are intermediate steps necessary? (2) What models exist in the early Christian movement? and (3) What are some practical examples of intermediate steps?

THE NEED

Although Garrison (1999, 55) advocates an ambitious program of discipleship that would support churches being planted in a matter of weeks, most new believers I have met—particularly those from an Arab-Muslim background—need some time to let the truth of the gospel (as well as the conviction to serve the body of Christ) sink in. Indeed, we want to follow the Holy Spirit's spontaneous work and pour into new believers thirsting to grow and serve; yet, we cannot impose a "fast track" plan of discipleship and leadership development on a believer who is simply not ready. Hence, along with a program of discipleship that includes biblical teaching and modeling the Christian life in the context of the community of believers, we can encourage a new believer to take initial "baby steps" of service that by faith would become bigger steps toward eventual leadership.

Why are intermediate steps necessary? For the four reasons listed below:

1. Entry level efforts of service allow the new believer to be strengthened in his or her faith. Some North African believers whom I have met feel unworthy and unqualified to do anything for God. Others have significant spiritual and emotional issues to be resolved. Still others, fearing the response of family and friends, are intimidated to take on the task of starting a church. Yet, as we impress upon these young brothers and sisters the value of serving (no matter how big or small the task), their faith and confidence will be strengthened, thus preparing them for a greater task.
2. For those young believers who are bold and eager to serve, assignments of increasing responsibility will strengthen their skills and abilities as leaders. Instead of asking an enthusiastic new believer to preach at a house fellowship, perhaps he or she could initially read the scripture passage (and observe examples of preaching) or help serve drinks afterward. Having the person perform more mundane tasks will teach him or her the importance of ministry on any level, as well as set him or her up for success in his or her initial attempts at serving. As disciples are faithful in these lesser tasks, they will be prepared for the next challenge (Clinton 1988, 35).

3. Intermediate steps will determine if the disciple is serious about serving. The culture I live in is one in which many subjects, including ministry, are discussed at great length. Therefore, it is possible that a well-meaning mentor could talk through many areas of ministry with a disciple and have lively, analytical discussions over a period of months. Yet, unless there is deliberate involvement in tangible expressions of ministry, both mentor and disciple alike could be misled about the disciple's current ability for leadership and ministry.

4. As a disciple experiences some intermediate steps of service, the mentor is able to make a good decision about the disciple's preparedness for leadership. As the disciple's faithfulness and abilities are put to the test repeatedly over a period of time, many of the mentor's questions and concerns can be resolved.

EARLY CHURCH MODELS

Before charging forward in mission, it is often helpful to look back and reflect upon some exemplary models of leadership development in the early Christian movement. Let us briefly consider three North African church leaders of the third, fourth and fifth centuries who valued having their disciples pass through intermediate steps of service.

1. Cyprian. Although Cyprian of Carthage (AD 195-258) was ordained as bishop just two years after his conversion in AD 248, he particularly admired the fact that his contemporary, Cornelius of Rome, had progressed through each of the ranks of clergy before being set apart as bishop (Cyprian, Letter 55). From two of Cyprian's letters, we learn that he desired to ordain two men as presbyters in Carthage; yet, due to their age and lack of experience in ministry, he appointed them as readers for a season with the hope that they would eventually become presbyters (Letters 39-40).

Cyprian was also deliberate about involving each of the ranks of clergy in the work of the church. Acolytes, readers, sub-deacons and deacons in particular were entrusted with the important work of delivering Cyprian's pastoral correspondence (Letters 29, 34, 44-45, 47, 49). Readers recited the scriptures during church services as well as in baptismal training classes (Letters 24, 29, 38-39). Cyprian's deacons visited the sick and imprisoned, ministered to the needs of the poor, handled church finances, assisted in the liturgy and baptisms and distributed the cup during the Eucharist (Letters 5, 12-13). While assisting the bishop, presbyters in Carthage also cared for the poor and imprisoned, instructed new believers preparing for baptism and accompanied the bishop to church councils (Letters 1, 4, 14, 16, 29, 38; Seagraves 1993, 97-98). In the absence of the bishop, presbyters also presided over the Eucharist and listened to confession (Letter 29). Due to the imperial persecution of the Church under the Emperors Decius (AD 250) and Valerian (AD 257-58), Cyprian was forced into hiding and was later exiled. As a result, he entrusted even more leadership to his presbyters, essentially directing them to do his job (Letters 5, 14, 76, 81). While persecution and the absence of a leader like Cyprian did accelerate the involvement of leaders, Cyprian was already in the habit of delegating increased responsibility to leaders over time as they advanced in the ranks of the clergy. Hence, by the time a reader was promoted to bishop, he had certainly matured spiritually and had much ministry experience under his belt to prepare him for this final stage of leadership.

2. Valerius. While little is known about Valerius (d. AD 397) of Hippo (modern Annaba, Algeria), his greatest contribution was ordaining and mentoring a talented young believer named Augustine (AD 354-430). Having learned about the reputation of this skilled communicator and writer pursuing a monastic existence in nearby Tagaste (Souk Ahras), Valerius coveted his abilities for the church of Hippo (Possidius 4.1). Seeing potential for spiritual leadership that Augustine did not see in himself, Valerius ordained Augustine as his presbyter in AD 391 (Augustine, Sermon 355.2). Valerius must have been pleased that Augustine's skills in ministry developed quickly as he began to hold public debates with heretics, preached in the church (a role generally limited to bishops) and even instructed the gathered bishops on the Nicene Creed at the council of Hippo in AD 393 (Possidius 5.3, 7.1). In AD 395, Valerius set apart Augustine as his co-bishop and the two served as peers in ministry until Valerius' death in AD 397.

The account of Valerius and Augustine is an excellent example of a mentor seeing potential in a disciple, calling him to ministry and seeing his gifts and abilities flourish quickly for the benefit of the Church. Although Augustine was extremely gifted and Valerius did nothing to stand in the way of his development, there were, nevertheless, some significant intermediate steps in Augustine's ministry from the time of his initial ordination as presbyter in AD 391 until his consecration as the sole bishop of Hippo in AD 397. First, as Augustine was quite reluctant about being ordained and felt ill-prepared to serve as a presbyter, he asked Valerius for an initial period of study to immerse himself in the scriptures. Valerius consented (Augustine, Letter 21.4). Second, Augustine's initial duties as presbyter included instructing new believers (catechumens) preparing for baptism (Sermons 214-16; Brown 2000, 134). Third, although Valerius was innovative and "pushed Augustine in" as a preacher, Augustine's biographer, Possidius, reminds us that Augustine only preached under Valerius' supervision (Letter 29;

Possidius 5.3). Although Augustine went on to be one of the most significant leaders and thinkers in Christian history, not to mention a faithful church leader in Hippo until his death in AD 430, he was also in need of some intermediate steps in ministry under the care of a mentor like Valerius.

3. Augustine. When Augustine became bishop of Hippo, he also followed the example of Valerius and involved emerging leaders in increasing levels of responsibility. Like Cyprian, he delegated responsibilities in the worship service to members of every rank of the clergy (Zumkeller 1986, 44, 193). While involving large numbers of clergy in delivering his pastoral correspondence, he also invited a handful of leaders to co-author letters with him (Letters 41, 53, 62-63, 69-70, 88, 110, 125, 128-29, 137, 141, 159, 162, 170-71, 186, 188, 219, 254). In the case of his own successor, Eraclius, Augustine entrusted him with church administration, solving legal disputes and some preaching before having him ordained bishop (Letter 213.5-6). Finally, while Augustine was the key figure in the North African church councils between AD 393 and AD 427, he seems to have purposefully involved his former disciples from Hippo (who were now serving as bishops around Africa) in a more active manner in the councils of AD 403-404, 410-411, 416 and 418-419.

According to Possidius, the fruit of Augustine's ministry of mentoring was that he sent out spiritual leaders to serve the North African Church: "I myself know of about ten holy and venerable men of continence and learning, some of them quite outstanding, whose blessing Augustine gave upon request to the various churches" (Possidius 11.2-3). Men were prepared to leave the training environment at Hippo and serve the Church throughout Africa in part because Augustine had taken time to involve them in intermediate steps of faithfulness and responsibility over time.

PRACTICAL INTERMEDIATE STEPS

Discipleship and leadership development is complicated because humans, even precious new believers, are complicated. Through significant relational contact, church planters and mentors must discern where potential leaders are in their journey to leadership and determine what they need to become (spiritually) and acquire (skills) in order to lead. Some will blossom quickly while others need more time; yet, all will need intermediate steps. While much prayer for wisdom is needed and no formula can be offered, I would like to share what we are learning about intermediate steps in our context in North Africa. Below are seven important components.

1. Praying. We can begin praying with disciples about their families, friends, communities and how God can use them. One time, I sensed that Abdel was afraid to reach out to his classmates at the university so we started to meet once a week on campus simply to pray for the school, students, administration and that God would use him to reach them. Another time, I was driving Hamid to another city where he had found work. When we passed the sign for the city limits, I began to pray for the city and its people and that God would use Hamid to be a light there. I was pleasantly surprised when Hamid started to pour out his heart to God for some of the same things!

2. Modeling. If I am praying that Farid will become an evangelist, then I need to model what that looks like in my own life. Shortly after Farid trusted Christ, I began inviting him to go with me to share with others. As I stepped out in faith (with fledgling Arabic and all), Farid began to contribute to discussions, often summarizing what I had just shared. I knew that his convictions were developing when one day he invited me to join him as he shared Christ with a friend.

3. Including basic tasks. Our home group decided to start having a meal together after Bible study. Although we were hosting it and providing the main course, more ownership was felt when we asked different people to contribute by bringing a bottle of coke, a loaf of bread or some fruit. What was initially a joke turned into another opportunity for ownership as the guys favorably responded to the challenge that "real men wash dishes"—a small miracle in North African culture!

An evangelistic website for young people was launched last year, and to promote it we printed pocket-sized calendars that also contained the web address. I was amazed at how many young believers responded to the simple challenge of taking a stack of calendars and giving them to their friends. Others were willing to at least "lose" them at the bus stop.

4. Creating opportunities. One of my passions in ministry is to create an opportunity where emerging leaders can exercise their gifts. Once, I was invited to give a lecture on North African Christian history at a cultural center in our city and Farid agreed to accompany me. While the lecture itself was a great opportunity, the highlight was watching Farid share his faith with a small group gathered around after the lecture. At Christmas, a group of friends and neighbors filled our home for an evangelistic Christmas party. We shared our traditions, sang Christmas carols and even recounted the Christmas story; yet, the highlight was when two young

believers sang a worship song in Arabic and then shared their faith.

5. Supporting their initiatives. When a disciple catches the vision to minister, I have found it very important to support them in their ideas even if they seem a little crazy. Hamid thought it would be great to have an evangelistic Christmas party and invite all of his friends from work. He spent a week decorating his apartment to where it resembled a cross between a storefront church and a classroom for Vacation Bible School! Indeed, about ten of his friends showed up and the program consisted of prayer, worship songs and a message that Hamid gave from the book of Jonah. To my surprise, his friends enjoyed themselves and happily received either a New Testament or the *Jesus* film. While the Lord seemed to use this Christmas party in the lives of Hamid's friends, the greatest outcome was that Hamid's faith and resolve to serve were strengthened. It was great to affirm him in this step of faith.

6. Debriefing. Although crazy ideas and faithful disciples should be supported, it is also appropriate to debrief and learn from these experiences. What went well? What would we do differently next time? Was Jonah the best passage for Christmas? How will we follow up this outreach? Hamid is bold about his faith, yet at times he is rather argumentative and finds himself in unnecessary tangents in presenting the gospel. Hence, it has been important to dialogue about staying focused on the main things and communicating with gentleness (2 Tim. 2:24; 1 Pet. 3:15-16).

7. Considering what's next. As a disciple is being faithful and responding to the challenges of intermediate steps, it is important that we constantly think a few steps ahead. What will Farid become in three months or a year? One of Valerius of Hippo's strengths as a mentor was that his vision for what Augustine could do was continually being enlarged (much to Augustine's fear and trepidation!). At the same time he believed at every point that Augustine could be released as a church leader.

CONCLUSION

In many parts of the world, church planting movements are exploding and last year's unbelievers are today's church leaders. To God be the glory! Yet as servants, we must do our best to keep the movement from imploding because of a failure to make a good choice in leaders or by setting them apart too soon. My persuasion, based on personal experience and a study of scripture and the early Christian movement in North Africa, is that a disciple should spend a season going through intermediate steps of responsibility and faithfulness before being set apart to significant leadership in the church.

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