



REFINED BY FIRE

A Unique Privilege

If you're discipling a Muslim-background believer (often abbreviated as "MBB"), God has given you an awesome privilege. While every new believer is precious and someone over whom the angels rejoice in heaven, an MBB may be one of only a small number of believers in their home city. They may even be from an area that does not yet have a church. Thus, the Lord may be using you to raise up leaders to serve in another nation or among internationals in America.

A Difficult Journey

Though discipling an MBB is very strategic and rewarding, it can also be a difficult journey. One key church leader in a Muslim-majority nation has said that it takes two years to really know if a Muslim who has professed faith in Christ will ultimately follow Him for a lifetime. Two years! And that's after the long journey that is required for most MBBs to first make a profession of faith.

Patience Required

But consider this: Someone (actually several people) stuck with that MBB throughout his many struggles—even when he walked away from his faith for a time. And now he is contributing in a big way to the church's growth in his country. Yes, it takes patience to journey alongside a new MBB as he or

she struggles with internal and external conflict. Remember that the long-term results may be truly monumental, and realize that many tools and fellow believers are available to assist you. In fact, this document is an example of the resources that can help you as you disciple a Muslim Background Believer.

Do's and Don'ts

- Do have patience through ups and downs. There may be many, and some of the "downs" may be very difficult.
- Do realize that baptism may present a significant barrier to an MBB—a definitive break with past beliefs. Be sure to really discuss the importance and meaning of baptism.
- Don't push your friend to share a testimony of faith (especially publicly) before they're comfortable doing so.
- Do coordinate with trusted ministry networks to help your friend make supportive connections with other MBBs in America or back home.
- Do encourage your disciple to be very careful about faith-related posts on social media.
- Do encourage your friend to begin telling others about his or her faith in an appropriate context. Spiritual growth is stimulated by an outward profession of faith.
- Don't assume the cultural and spiritual backgrounds of all Muslims are the same throughout the world.

Living out Salvation by Grace Through Faith

Because of their upbringing in Islam, it can be difficult for MBBs to consistently apply the concept of grace to daily living. Muslims believe that both their good deeds and their sins are recorded and that when they die, they will be judged on their overall record. Having grown up with that mentality, MBBs often struggle to operate within a faith-based relationship. It is natural for them to try to earn God's favor through good deeds and to fear punishment from bad deeds. MBBs may experience intense guilt and shame over sin issues, and they may also do good things for the wrong reasons. It is imperative to regularly remind your friend of the freedom and power that comes from God's grace.

Emphasize God's Grace

If you sense that guilt and shame are significantly hindering a person's walk with the Lord...

- **Ask a few probing questions**, with empathy and understanding. While it may feel difficult or awkward, it may also be an important step in bringing the issue into the light, leading to freedom from guilt and shame.
- **Remind them of Jesus' sacrifice**, which is sufficient to cover their sin, no matter how much guilt or shame they may feel.
- **Do a Bible study with them on Romans 8** in order to show them that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, as well as the difference between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh.
- **Refrain from addressing sensitive personal issues in the wrong setting.** Such discussions should only take place one-to-one or in a small group of trusted fellow believers.

The Opposite Extreme

Some MBBs misunderstand God's grace and wrongly apply it to allow for disobedience. Some may decide there is no need to attend church or other fellowship gatherings, to read the Bible, or do anything at all. This misunderstanding can be very damaging to a new believer.

- It is important to emphasize that although spiritual practices (fellowship, prayer, Bible reading, outreach) do not save us, they are crucial to spiritual health and growth.
- It is critical to teach and to model the fact that Christ followers are called to live in obedience to God's commands. Help your disciple understand that this is the path to abundant life in Jesus.



Social and Cultural Issues

Family and Friends

It is quite likely that your disciple's hardest decision will be this: "When and how do I tell my friends and family about my decision to follow Christ?" For MBBs, their Islamic identity can encompass culture, family traditions, family name and community. "Saying no" to Islam is often perceived as "saying no" to one's family, culture, and even one's country. Thus, the individual may be completely rejected by his or her family.

Here are three important ways you can help your MBB friend prepare for the monumental step of telling loved ones about his or her faith in Jesus:

- Expose your friend to various aspects of his or her new community of faith. It is critically important that an MBB knows about the love and support that will come from fellow believers should their family sever all relational ties.
- Assure them that this new family in Christ will fill the void that will be felt if they're cut off from family and friends.
- Join your disciple in careful thought and prayer before the disclosure of his or her new faith, seeking the Lord's guidance for an appropriate time and setting.

And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."

(Luke 18:29-30, ESV)

Workplace and Community

Becoming a Christ-follower can lead to derision, loss of a job or—in certain nations—physical violence. Due to varying policies in different countries, the question of how much to

disclose about one's faith takes both knowledge and wisdom. This is best decided with help from those who thoroughly understand the experience of Christians in a particular nation. When discussing the possibilities of persecution with a new believer, make sure to:

- Explain, with empathy and understanding, the cost of following Jesus but also emphasize that following Jesus is more than worth any cost.
- Describe God's sovereignty and ability to provide for your friend's needs—even when this may seem difficult from an earthly perspective.
- Strike a balance between the sobering challenges that stem from following Christ and the great hope that believers gain from his strength.

Lifestyle/Freedom in Christ Issues

Several key requirements of life within Islam can create tension for MBBs. The importance of these requirements will vary from nation to nation, but the heart response of an MBB is always of importance.

Ramadan

The month during which Muslims fast presents a significant difficulty. Some MBBs may be hesitant to admit they are not fasting, especially to their family and friends. Others may choose to hide their new faith, so they will continue to fast. If an MBB expresses a desire to fast, it would be wise to discuss the biblical purpose of fasting and why one might choose to fast or not fast during Ramadan.



The Hijab

Wearing the hijab can pose an important question for some Muslim-background women. In certain countries, the wearing of the hijab may be more of a cultural norm than a religious requirement. In other countries, women may be required by law to wear a head covering. Some MBB women may not feel “fully clothed” without wearing it. Discuss with your disciple why she may or may not choose to wear the hijab. Help her to consider both her own spiritual belief and the impact her choice may make on her witness to others.

Pork

The eating of pork often creates a question in the mind of a new MBB. This issue and other “doubtful things” can be addressed by studying 1 Corinthians 8 and 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Help an MBB to understand that in these issues, we have a newfound freedom in Christ but we may sometimes choose to limit our use of that freedom for the sake of others.

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

(1 Corinthians 9:19, ESV)

Dating and Marriage

Marriage is held in very high regard in Muslim cultures, and singles often feel pressure to get married—from family and friends and also from society at large. In many cases, it is considered a problem to be unmarried if older than one's late twenties (and perhaps younger for a woman). In some parts of the Muslim world, arranged marriages remain common and in other areas a less formal type of matchmaking is considered the solution to the “problem” of singleness.

One of the biggest pitfalls for MBBs is the temptation to date and marry a non-believer. It is likely that there are few believers within the person's location and culture who are single and of marriageable age. This situation creates intense pressure to date a nonbeliever, even if the MBB would agree in theory that it is not a good idea. Therefore in discipling MBBs, it is important to:

- Impart a biblical vision to an unmarried friend concerning the honorable state of singleness (see 1 Corinthians 7). Of course, this may not seem that helpful to someone who is longing to be married, yet it should help that person to live fruitfully for the Lord while trusting Him for a godly spouse.
- Impart that same thinking to a married friend so that he or she can support single MBBs and not add to any pressure they already feel to get married.
- Teach the command from 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 that

- a believer should not be “unequally yoked” with a non-believer. Note the series of rhetorical questions that reinforce the basic point of this passage.

Preparing MBBs to Return Home

If you are discipling an MBB who will be returning from a Western nation to a Muslim-majority nation, realize that your friend will need to acquire a variety of skills and attitudes before departure. Therefore, it is best if you begin right away to:

- **Teach this believer to pray and read Scripture in his or her native language** and develop a spiritual heart in praying for his or her home nation.
- **Help your disciple to avoid developing a critical spirit.** Be aware that some MBBs fall into bitterness and become critical toward Islam and/or their home countries—the natural response to persecution. Although this is understandable, it is harmful to your friend’s walk with God and ministry to countrymen. Urge this person to focus on Christ and the positives of following him.
- **Facilitate key fellowship linkages for your friend.** It is important that he or she begin to network with believers at home as well as individuals in the West who can help create such connections.
- **Help to prepare your disciple for the reality that some believers back home may not extend a warm welcome.** Newcomers often have their intentions questioned in persecuted societies, but this issue is usually resolved over time as trust is built.

The Difficult Reality of Government Persecution

For some MBBs, returning home may mean facing severe government persecution. In some of these countries, such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, converting to another religion is prohibited by law. These countries are ruled by Sharia law and “apostasy” (abandoning one’s religious belief) is punishable by death. Because of this, the church is very much underground in these countries. Although your friend may qualify for asylum in America if he or she comes from such a nation, don’t regard this as a guaranteed solution. Asylum can be both expensive and complicated (expert counsel is a “must”)—and those who remain in America have limited opportunities to share the gospel with needy souls at home.

The Spark that Starts a Fire

God may be using you to raise up a future key leader in a country that has precious few Christ-followers. It’s entirely possible that a student who becomes a Christ-follower while

studying abroad could represent a home area that has no church of any kind. Imagine what could happen if that student had a vision to see people in their home reached for Christ. Your ministry could be the spark to establish a Christian witness in a new area, one that could last for generations. The challenges facing MBBs are often sobering, and their persecution may be harsh, yet God is powerful to overcome.

“But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”

(1 Peter 4:13-14, NIV)

Resources

While general discipleship materials may be used with great benefit when discipling Christians from a Muslim background, the following resources have been designed to address the unique issues and challenges they may face.

- **Reachinginternationals.com** - This site houses many ministry resources including several dealing directly with discipleship like PODS and Reaching Across Cultures: Discipleship. **For more info:** reachinginternationals.com
- **Campusresources.org** - This site has many resources which focus primarily on Muslim ministry and has a section on discipleship. It is a protected site and requires approval prior to accessing it. **For more info:** Campusresources.org
- **Cubs to Lions** - A week-long discipleship training for Christians from a Muslim background offered by Horizons International. **For more info:** <https://www.engagingislam.org/cubs-to-lions>
- **Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities, by Don Little.** This book is a summary of extensive interviews done with those who have discipled Christians in Muslim majority countries. While it’s focus is primarily on discipleship done inside a Muslim country, it offers great insights for those in the West who are preparing new Christians from a Muslim background to return to their homeland.
- **Servants in the Crucible** - This is a report by Nik Ripken about the persecuted church based on his interviews and personal experience with believers who have suffered for the gospel. It emphasizes the vital importance of preparing new believers for the persecution they will face when they return to their home countries. This document can be accessed through the campusresources.org site.