Multi-dimensional Discipling for Diaspora Communities: Partnership between Host Church, Ethnic Church, and Parachurch Organizations

Introduction

Ever has the need for intentional partnerships been more important than now. The challenge that confronts the local church, ethnic churches, and parachurch organizations in a host country with a view to discipling diaspora communities is immense. Whether they know it or not they need each other more than ever.

I’m constantly confronted with the challenge of discipleship across these contexts. The need for contextualized discipling that is multi-dimensional and influences diaspora communities is critical. Even so, there are very few good examples at the grassroots level. We need complementary, not conflicting, models of partnership that express cooperation and trust. The urgency to address this issue can’t be underestimated.

Globally, there is a definite awakening to the potential of reaching the world’s seething number of migrants. Migration and diaspora have become missional buzzwords. This is not surprising when More than 247 million people, or 3.4 percent of the world population, live outside their countries of birth. Although the number of international migrants rose from 175 million in 2000 to more than 247 million in 2013 and will surpass 251 million in 2015, the share of migrants has remained just above three percent (of world population) for the last fifteen years.\(^1\)

More than 20 percent of all international students globally are Mainland Chinese and this is increasing all the time. According to a 2016 report by the Chinese Ministry of Education, 523,700 Chinese students went abroad to study in 2015 and about 70 to 80 percent of the students abroad have returned to China in recent years. The graph on the next page, from the report, shows the figures from 2010 to 2015.
This presents a unique and God-given opportunity as people who live overseas express a greater openness to exploring issues of faith. Being away from their home culture removes social constraints and peer pressure so that they have greater freedom to seek God, trust Christ, and learn to live with the leading of the Spirit.

However, of those who consider or respond to the claims of Christ while overseas only 20 percent or fewer continue to follow the Lord after returning home. When we think of the opportunity presented to us through diaspora ministry, this statistic is frankly appalling. If 80 percent of Boeing aircraft crashed, there would be an immediate investigation. Aircraft would be grounded until Boeing got to the bottom of the problem and corrected it. Similarly, until we address the issues surrounding this fall-out rate we will lose one of the most profound mission opportunities of modern times.

One key factor is a lack of contextualized discipleship designed to prepare returnees to stand firm as Christians back home. That preparation must start in the host culture and for that to take place a multidimensional relational discipleship model needs to be adopted which includes input from the host church, the ethnic church, and parachurch organizations. This paper seeks to present such a model.

This model aims to work backwards, starting with the context of the home culture to which overseas students, businessmen/women, and migrant workers will return. However, since many of them live in and travel to different places—for example, two years in the UK then on to the USA for another few years—before returning home, we are talking of the need for a global mobile movement to equip them to become not only disciples of Christ but also cross-cultural ministers of the gospel who share Christ wherever they go.

**Defining terms**

Before we continue, I will clarify some of the key terms used in this paper. The term “returnee” refers to those who, having been abroad for a number of months or years, “return” to their home country. They may be students, migrant workers, or people involved in business. The key factor is that they will at some point return to their own culture and country, whether this takes a few months or a number of years. It is important therefore, when we come alongside someone who will return, that we intentionally nurture and disciple them from the first meeting with this in mind. While contextualized evangelism is just as important as contextualized discipleship, this paper will concentrate on contextualized discipleship.

When I write about “contextualization” I mean being culturally sensitive and appropriate to the context, history, values, language, and forms of expression of one’s home culture. It’s about seeing all the dimensions of the gospel impacting and relating to all the dimensions of a culture. It’s about sensitively taking all aspects of culture and worldview into consideration when relating the gospel story in order to communicate effectively and make Christ understood. It’s about seeing the gospel within a culture and worldview inform, challenge, and direct it.

When I use the term “discipleship” I am not talking about a program but about intentionally journeying with someone so that Christ becomes preeminent in life and ministry, impacting decisions, choices, focus, and worldview. It is not just about Bible study, although that is critically important, but it’s about the choices and decisions made, and the way time and talents are used. It’s about bringing Christ into the moments and completely trusting in his sovereignty and rule.

It’s about submission to the lordship of Christ. This can only be modelled as we live our lives before men, openly and with transparency. Discipleship is a lifelong journey.

When I talk about “multi-dimensional relationships” I mean that we need to acknowledge that it takes many people to help forge another individual. Each of us is engaged in many relationships that impact us. I talk to some of my friends about family, to others about my ministry, and to yet others about church. There is a smaller group with whom I walk through issues of a more personal nature. There are very few people that I talk to about all areas of life. Every day I am influenced and shaped by many different people who help me enter their experiences and understandings of a wide variety of issues. A healthy disciple needs to be exposed to various kinds of people who bring a richness to the discipleship process and journey that should be embraced.

The interaction between the host church, ethnic church, and parachurch coming together to disciple returnees puts the emphasis on the individual being discipled, and displays a kingdom perspective in which the global church has a role to play. This multidimensional discipleship allows each entity—host church, ethnic church, and parachurch—to work to their strengths to impact the life of an individual so that the disciple can be stronger than he or she would be otherwise.

As we will see below, when we bring all those definitions together and think about multi-dimensional discipleship for a student or migrant worker, we are talking about the focus being on the breadth of relationships impacting the life of the disciple so that the discipleship itself can be more effective.

The following scenarios help cement the definitions:
The Indonesian migrant worker in Taiwan who is being reached and nurtured by an OMF worker (a member of a parachurch organization providing contextual disciplesh), and is working for a Taiwanese Christian employer (who attends a host church), and meets members of a local Indonesian (ethnic) church has a multi-dimensional disciplesh experience. Everyone involved—the OMF worker, the employer, and the ethnic church members—will bring a unique (while biblical) perspective and breadth to the disciplesh of this worker.

The Chinese student in the UK who is attending an “introductory Bible study on the Christian faith” run by a parachurch organization, and having one-on-one discussions with an OMF worker in his native language (a member of parachurch organization providing contextualised disciplesh), while attending the global café run by the host church which provides a broader experience of Christian community, and the local Chinese (ethnic) church giving cultural context is also experiencing multi-dimensional disciplesh. Each one provides input and plays a critical role in nurturing this student in the faith—the primary focus being equipping the student for future ministry wherever he may go with the aim that he will be able to effectively live as a Christian when he returns to his home country.

The Chinese businessman in Kenya who joins a Bible study group with other Chinese (run by the parachurch organization OMF), and attends an international service run by the local Kenyan church with the help of an OMF member (bringing a host church and parachurch organization together), while also attending the local Chinese (ethnic) church learns through these multi-dimensional disciplesh encounters.

Each of these relationships help enrich the faith journey of these new Christians from different perspectives. Each may emphasise different aspects of what it means to follow Jesus in situations relevant to their own cultural backgrounds. But when put together there is a depth in the disciplesh in which the new Christian learns about unity in diversity, allowing him or her to grow and develop a broader kingdom perspective and worldview.

The Context
In the following section we will consider some of the issues which must inform how we disciple returnees while they are still in a host context. By way of example we will look at the challenges faced by two groups of returnees—Japanese and Mainland Chinese—although returnees of many other nationalities also face the same issues.

Case study 1: Japanese returnees and the context they face

Japanese returnees who come to Christ overseas face numerous challenges. Though there are more, we will identify and explore two key areas: culture and church.

Culture: Anyone who leaves his or her own culture for any length of time adapts in many ways to the new culture. They take on new mannerisms, changing to blend in and achieve a degree of integration. Adaptation comes first in areas which least impact one’s value systems. Deeper levels of culture may change more slowly but will cause greater disruption when the person returns home. For instance, since Japanese society is hierarchical—based on Confucian teaching—older people should always be treated with respect. And though most societies show respect for the elderly, how this is expressed varies. For Japanese, this includes never addressing older people by their first names. Similarly, Japan is a group-oriented society that places a high value on preserving the harmony of the group. It’s important to “read between the lines” and say things that do not disrupt harmony. Returnees who have adjusted to living in a culture that greatly values individualistic behavior, direct speech, and an openness to express personal feelings and ideas may find relearning Japanese cultural norms to be extremely frustrating if not impossible. In some cases, returnees may feel that people at home are less warm simply because they are more reserved and a longer time is needed to build relationships of trust and friendship in Japan. Though these things may appear small and, due to the subtleties of culture, go unnoticed, they can also reveal a bigger problem of what is known as reverse culture shock. When people return to their own culture, expecting that nothing has changed, they may face a larger shock to discover that they have adapted to a host culture all too well and just don’t fit in at home anymore.

Church: The church in any society is a sub-culture of the whole. In churches where no one has lived abroad, there is very little understanding of a returnee’s experience. At the very least there is a cautiousness to what is unknown.

A Japanese OMF colleague recently shared what returnees generally experience:

The local church member welcomes returnees by treating them as they would anyone else, cautiously, with this message: “Forget what you experienced in the West. Concentrate on what you have in front of you.” Returnees feel rejected, and although they may have things they want to share, the sharing is unwelcome. While overseas the returnee had been welcomed into a church with often-targeted enthusiasm, taken on outings, put onto a “host” scheme, and was set apart from the beginning. Yet at home in the local church they seem almost invisible.

Another area of tension is that pastors in Japan prepare baptismal candidates in great depth so they will be able to stand firm in a secular world in which 99 percent of the people claim to be Buddhist and Shintoist. Pastors find it hard to accept the seemingly poor level of preparation the returnees had while abroad. It is the returnee who feels the full impact of such insightful judgments by Japanese pastors, which unfortunately, are often quite correct. Some churches distinguish markedly between church members and non-members. Returnees are initially considered as non-members, thus accentuating their feelings of isolation at church. If they had been nurtured in English overseas, it is difficult for them to go on to read the Bible and pray in Japanese, let alone understand Japanese Christian jargon, something which increases the sense of isolation and difference.

Even returnees from Japanese churches abroad have a hard time trying to settle into local churches in Japan as they are required to show loyalty to church and to the
denomination in equal measure. They often wonder where loyalty to God really lies. In Japanese churches overseas, returnees are encouraged to help in church life soon after baptism, because the churches are small and relationships are closer. In Japan, they are expected to watch and learn for a while—at least a year—and then are slowly given tasks. Japanese face reverse culture shock in general.

Case study 2: Chinese returnees and the context they face

Sometimes we find that our new Chinese friend had become a Christian in China. However, more often than not, their every relationship—whether with family members, friends, or co-workers—is with non-Christians. While overseas, Chinese students are attracted to Christian groups because of their need for community. When they return home, it works in the opposite direction as they are flung back into a network of relationships which may now entail conflicts due to changed values arising from their Christian faith. This increases stress and isolation. The cross-cultural friendships that they enjoyed in Christian groups overseas are all gone. All of the available social activities are now hosted by non-Christians. Adjustments need to be made at every turn: living with parents and other family members again, losing privacy and independence, discovering how much everything changed while they were away, and experiencing deep feelings of not belonging and not fitting in. Finding and keeping jobs, joining the fast-paced world of work, and climbing the corporate ladder can be all consuming and overwhelming.

It is within this backdrop that returnees have to make many major, life-changing decisions in the first year after returning. These range from finding a job where one’s relational networks are diminished and competition is brutal to getting married—frequently facing great pressure to marry a non-Christian. Then there is the decision to identify oneself as a Christian or not! These may be compounded by questions and doubts about the faith and other issues. Was that just part of the overseas experience? Where is there a church anyway? Those who find a church and seek to grow as a Christian often face long work hours, not to mention a long commute. Opposition from people holding other beliefs and value systems is encountered in the workplace as well as the family. Since their personal values have changed with their newfound faith and through their overseas experiences, it is no longer possible to agree with the old way of doing things.

What could make a difference to returnees who are facing such pressures? What could change the experience of Chinese returnees looking for jobs? What could change the experience of the local church in Japan when a returnee joins their fellowship? What difference would a multi-dimensional model of discipleship make with the above case studies in mind?

The role of the host and ethnic (Japanese and Chinese) churches in the host country and the parachurch organization

Example 1: Reaching out and welcoming in

There can be no doubt that the host church is making a huge impact on reaching out to international students and workers. It is often the place where they go either to learn the language of the host country or observe culture. Many churches have an excellent “welcoming ministry”. However, in their exuberance to reach out and make international visitors feel welcomed and wanted, many churches have inadvertently started them on a journey which one day will alienate them from their own people and church when they return home.

Although the host church may have shared with the diaspora visitor how Christian community can function, it has only shared part of what life in community is, not the whole diverse story. This is because community includes the daily serving of others, which is often a role in the shadows. There also comes a point in church life when one moves from being a “visitor” (who is treated as such) to someone who is part of the community, and then moves into a relationship in which they become like the host who considers the needs of others and serves them.

An ethnic Japanese or Chinese church might have much to teach new Japanese or Chinese Christians about how these transitions take place within their culture. The Japanese church in the host culture, although different from the Japanese church in Japan, is at the very least one step closer to what they will return to. The subtleties and nuances of culture and communication within the Christian context is a necessary learning curve for the returnee. Things such as Christian terminology and the nature and expression of service are not easily learnt in a host church. In the long term, the returnee’s transition home will be greatly aided by being effective and fully grown in the things of Christ in their home language and cultural context.

As one colleague shared,

Whether consciously or unconsciously, it’s not uncommon for returnees to exhibit a superiority complex. After all, not everyone has had the opportunity to study abroad or get an advanced degree, and not everyone has gone through such hardship in the process. Even if you don’t really know a lot, at least you’ve been to a foreign country and you’ve seen and experienced more than others. Thus, you gain a special identity on returning to your own country, hometown, or church. Yet without a “humble attitude”, it
will be very difficult to identify with others or be accepted by them.

Surely there is a special role here for the ethnic church. There is a way of being which is often overlooked by the host church, a posture which is culturally embedded. Humility can be felt as much as it can be seen.

People with cross-cultural experience who work with parachurch organizations can act as a bridge between the host and ethnic churches, serving both as a conduit of communication and trust. We should not minimize the critical role of bridge building—it is a requirement in our multicultural communities.

I will say more about the role of the parachurch organization below.

**Example 2: Discipleship issues**

One issue which always comes up in my conversations with church leaders in Asia is baptism. This should not be treated as one-size-fits-all concept in view of the fact that baptism needs to reflect the symbolism of dying to the old life and putting on the new. As many local churches in the West know little of the context of an “old life” (which includes the unspoken beliefs and values of a culture), there are limitations to how fully they can disciple regarding the issues concerned or prepare new believers so that they can live the “new life” in their home settings.

Discipleship needs to take place in a context. There are broad brushstrokes which the local church in a host country is fully capable of making when discipling diaspora communities. For example, the foundations of the faith are universal and part of the reality of being members of the body of Christ is experiencing diversity. I am convinced that God’s purpose in taking people “overseas” from their home country is to expose them to a diversity of experiences as part of the process of knowing him. This is highlighted very clearly in Paul’s sermon at the Aeropagus. “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:26–27).

However, what does the Western church in general know about ancestor worship or the complex responsibilities of the oldest son? How can we best help a new believer from overseas see this through Christian eyes? How can we help them to develop a biblical perspective and worldview that will enable them to be both members of their home culture and faithful Christians? What about the complex issues of harmony and respect for elders? How can the Western church help a new believer from Asia wrestle with such issues from a Christian perspective when it plays a diminished role in our own culture? How can the Western church address the issues of the spirit world and animism when it rarely acknowledges the spirit world in Scripture? As new believers prepare to return to their home countries, how do we help them wrestle with these complex issues?

Western discipleship methodology is often far too prescriptive and often relevant only to our limited context. In many cases, little thought has been put into the day-to-day lives of those we disciple even in our own context. Do we disciple people on issues pertaining to the workplace and the marketplace? How does the church equip people to live out their faith in a non-Christian family? Do we consider the context of those we disciple regardless of background? Do we ask what they need to live fruitful lives for Christ in their home society, family, and workplace? If such questions are important for people from our own culture, they are even more critical for those living and working in a very different context from our own.

Ethnic churches in the host country are more likely to have thought through issues of baptism and discipleship for their own diaspora community (although not always with the view of candidates returning “home” in the near future). They know what to look for and the subtleties of expression needed to guide new disciples into areas of freedom from the past and to prepare them for the future. Returnees need to see how Christ is expressed within their own culture, how being a follower of Jesus is modelled and lived out on a daily basis, and how their own cultural community expresses Christian community. This in no way diminishes the role of the discipler who is not of the same cultural background in the discipling process. What it does say is that the more culturally relevant the discipler can be, the deeper the understanding and application will be for the disciple. We all learn in community. We learn about ourselves and about others. We learn more about the different aspects of the character of God in community. The ethnic church can bring new believers a step closer to contextualized community living by helping them engage with issues of importance to their culture so that they can take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.

**What can be done? A kingdom building partnership**

Many other issues make life for the returnee both challenging and exciting. But when the host church, ethnic church, and parachurch organization work together, they can make a greater difference than if they work separately! The kingdom perspective does not say “this returnee belongs to this church (or this organization), therefore…” but “what does this returnee/new Christian need to live for Christ and serve him wherever he or she goes?”

While host churches might not know what specific questions to ask in relation to the old life and how to prepare for specific aspects of the new life for the returnee getting ready to go home, they can and do play a significant role in welcoming and discipling diaspora believers in the foundations of the faith. In this way host churches are conduits of real grace and unconditional friendship. They are often less mono-cultural in their missiology, something which is greatly needed in our multicultural communities.

Diaspora Chinese or Japanese churches differ from their counterpart churches in the home country. The simple fact that a church is in a diaspora setting will effect changes which separate it from its cultural roots. Even so, it is closer to the culture of an international student or worker than is a host church. They therefore provide a bridge between host and home cultures and provide a good place for new Christians to learn the subtleties of...
how to express their faith appropriately in their own cultural context.

Since parachurch organizations exist to serve, they can often take a less “territorial” view where church is concerned. Looking in from the periphery, they can embrace both the host and ethnic church perspectives and act as a bridge between the host and ethnic churches. In so doing they can facilitate trust and respect between each group as they function in the life of the diaspora communities. Parachurch organizations can facilitate an objective coming together, a platform for communication, discussion, and true, valued partnerships. Often host churches need objectivity when it comes to cross-cultural contextualization. At such times, a parachurch organization with much experience serving a particular community (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian, etc.) can potentially bring that objectivity to bear. They can also train and equip host churches in specific aspects of a culture so that their communication will be culturally appropriate and understandable. They will also come with specific cultural understanding regarding church, family, and the spirit world of the culture in question.

Working together, the host churches, ethnic churches, and parachurch organizations can nurture and disciple diaspora believers so they can grow as members of the Christian community. The question should not be which church or group they belong to but how we can disciple them so they do not become cultural misfits. Our goal should be to see them living and working in whatever arena God has called them to, be it their own communities or another where they bring transformation through a powerful demonstration of the Spirit of God seen through contextualized theology and methodology which impacts society.

With this in mind, we need to see a greater commitment by all three parties—the host church, ethnic church, and parachurch—to come together. Effective partnerships take time and patience; often any initiative takes longer as more discussion is needed to bring everyone to the same place. Though we are often rushing to accomplish something, and partnering across cultures takes time, patience, and trust, we should continue to work together because the potential for rich rewards are great.

Could we see prayer groups coming together with members from the host church, ethnic church, and parachurch in cities where significant diaspora work is taking place—praying for the needs of the diaspora we are all working with? Could we also see multicultural forums held between these groups where discussions can build on the part we are all playing in the discipling of the internationals God has brought to us in our cities?

Could we invite representatives of the host church and ethnic church to events we run for those we disciple to build trust and kingdom perspective? Could we invite ethnic churches to join the host churches in outings they organize? If ethnic churches have special teaching weekends could they extend a welcome to host churches to send some representatives to join them, providing translation if needed? Could we see the special awareness training run by a parachurch organization—like OMF and the OMF Diaspora Returnee Ministries (DRM) Field—bring together host and ethnic churches?

I would like to close with two examples of host churches, ethnic churches, and parachurch organizations working together.

The first is a Chinese Returnee Retreat run by the OMF DRM in the UK and the USA for Chinese who will return home within the following year. Each retreat includes a small group of no more than twenty-five returnees. When we plan these events we invite members from the Chinese church and Chinese parachurch organizations in the host country, members of another parachurch organization, and representatives from host churches. Together we create a context in which we can all learn from each other and have effective and contextualized input into the lives of the returnees.

The second thing that OMF DRM engages in is cross-cultural training in all our centers. This includes participation from the host and ethnic churches and parachurch organizations.

We all know that there are more opportunities than we can cope with, as everyone is busy, churches have full programs, and the time we can spend with any one person is limited as demands on our time stretch us. For this reason, having a kingdom approach is critical. If we make efforts to help any student or contact gain access to other churches and groups then the input they will receive will be greater. If they can gain exposure to biblical teaching, mission training, and Christian community, does it really matter if this crosses the ministry lines of several groups or churches in one city? Surely the focus should be to encourage diaspora believers to engage with the wider community as much as they can while still overseas and experience more deeply what it means to live in community as a member of the body of Christ. There is no room for anyone saying only the Chinese can reach the Chinese, or only the Thai can reach the Thai. That is not kingdom theology or a biblical model of mission. We all need to come together as a family ordained by God to love one another and to reach out into our communities with the love of Christ in the power of his Spirit.

Conclusion

The need for multi-dimensional relational discipleship has never been more crucial. Only in relationships will the trust be built that is needed to work together with a kingdom perspective. The one-dimensional discipleship where the returnee only has the view of the host church, the ethnic church, or the parachurch increases the risk of returnees falling away from the faith. They need the much richer perspective that comes through multi-dimensional discipleship to help them learn across cultures and get nurtured from the perspectives of both the host and ethnic cultures. In this melting pot of cross-cultural experience and nurturing we can think missionally as we prepare returnees to go home. MRT
