

MentorNet #29

SERVING MOVEMENTS FOR CHRIST WITHIN OTHER RELIGIONS

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Suppose that you have been contacted by secret, 'messianic' believers who are active members of their communities that follow a major, non-Christian religion. How they became believers is not important. Perhaps they learned a little about Jesus from their own scriptures; they may have seen a vision; or they were shown kindness by some Christians who dared to answer their questions when asked. Anyway, you have accepted to meet with some men to talk about Jesus and steps they should take to follow him more completely. What would you say and do?

Such little 'movements' have happened through the centuries and they still happen. The largest movements for Christ in the history of Christianity are taking place now. Thousands of churches are being born and reproducing rapidly in China and India, in places where authorities are hostile toward attempts to bring people to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Most of these churches are illegal, 'unregistered' house churches.

Sadly, well-intentioned Christians sometimes kill such movements! Of course, you want others to rejoice at what God is doing amongst that 'unreached' people group, you want intercessors to pray for their safety, growth and reproduction, and you want others to know that God has chosen you, amongst 1000s of gospel workers, and entrusted your church or denomination with guiding this 'unprecedented breakthrough'.

Indeed, He has chosen you and wants you to serve that movement with wisdom in ways that will protect them and you from enemies of the Good News. Let us review some of the dangers to such movements that come from unwise publicity about them. (Leave it to God to choose right moments for them to be put to a test of faith.)

Ways to serve a Movement in a Major Religious Community and Actions to Avoid

What should you do in order to serve them faithfully and to help their movement to grow without unneeded hindrances? Here are eight recommended guidelines:

1. **Quietly train leaders in the background like Jesus and his apostles did.** Do not go into their religious buildings or try to meet their families, as you would in a friendlier situation. Many new believers do not yet understand how severe can become social pressure and persecution, so they may invite you where you should not go. Provide teaching that they can pass on to others who will do the same, and never have to meet you.

DO NOT publicize what you are doing or whom you meet with, lest religious extremists find the secret believers and dissuade them or destroy them. Also, do not force them to make their faith public, lest their family members threaten them or do worse. When movements for Christ have been given too much attention, nationals who are members of unethical sects have often forced their way into the movement with legalistic teaching.

2. **Make sure that their men remain in leadership from the start.** Let them use their social position and spiritual power to influence others towards the Good News.

DO NOT try to get them to join your denominational power structure. Above all, do not put national Christians from another ethnic group in charge of them.

3. **Get advice from those with experience before proposing strategies.** There are many wise kingdom workers who come from a similar background and others who have worked with folks like them, making a lot of regrettable mistakes and finding effective methods.

DO NOT be so foolishly proud to think that you know enough, until you have had several years of experience with such movements that has proven fruitful. Even those who understand principles of “contextualization” usually cannot predict what forms the Holy Spirit will give to new Christian movements within other faith communities.

4. **Limit your methods to those that they can afford and easily imitate.** Let them meet with others at times and places of their choice. Provide inexpensive materials in their language and forms. Get good advice from the new believers about which forms communicate well without offending needlessly.

DO NOT introduce foreign equipment, nor fund complicated schemes. DO NOT send anyone away for education that might not be suitable or practical in their culture. Western music, methods, money and ministries are seldom relevant to the culture of such societies, and invariably stigmatize the new movement as being *foreign*. Non-believers who see the foreign influence may avoid the believers, sometimes so much so that it has stopped the movement. Also, other believers who have not received funds or equipment from the West have often become resentful; in some cases this has stopped the movement. Funds from the West often attract opportunists who temporarily feign faith in Christ for economic advantage.

5. **Practice principles of contextualization.** Both you and the new believers will have to learn to discern culturally-sensitive ways to obey the commands of Jesus. Although you cannot make such choices for them, you can ask them a lot of questions about how they will obey Jesus in ways that will win others while trying to avoid unnecessary opposition. Answer questions from the Bible and share stories about how ‘followers of Jesus’ do things in other places.

DO NOT presume that cultural and religious forms successfully retained, modified or rejected by a similar movement in another culture zone will be appropriate for the local one.

6. **Keep your teaching focused on the commands of Jesus.** Teach Bible stories and theology that help folks to do so. Do not teach abstract Christian theology unless asked for it, since most systematic theology, while true, has been formulated to address questions and controversies of other cultures and centuries.

DO NOT import the common Western emphasis on material ‘blessings.’ Our Western ‘triumphalist’ and ‘prosperity’ theologies have often proven woefully disappointing where people are very poor.

7. **Keep their movement a secret as long as you can.** If you do send mail and publish articles about the movement, then use pseudonyms for persons and places. Never release a believer’s name or address to any outsiders. If there is a big need for relief and development efforts, then try to keep as far in the background as you can, lest your effort be misunderstood as an inducement to convert folks.

DO NOT let outsiders know the identity of secret pastors or evangelists who are very effective. Doing so has often resulted in well-meaning Western leaders offering salaries or

personal-advancement opportunities, removing the leaders from the congregations that God has given them to tend, to work in the West or other places where they are not as effective.

DO NOT tell all your friends about the ‘wonderful breakthrough’, for careless, exuberant testimonials may become known to our enemies. Do not publish articles that our enemies may read.

DO NOT give secret believers too much attention. Some of them have proudly imagined that they were special and deserved such attention, which lead to failure. Others have become so afraid of exposure by Westerners that they have drawn back and ceased doing effective ministry. Unfriendly civil authorities are quick to notice any attention paid by foreigners and often punish the believers for doing illegal proselytising.

8. **Let believers suffer for Jesus according to the will of God.** We should never seek to be persecuted nor take risks that endanger others. The time will come when the Lord himself will purify and strengthen their movement with some persecution. Teach about persecution and tell stories of martyrs, but do not hasten it.
9. **Practice a deep, spiritual dependence on God.** Those who practice other religions are often more seriously religious than are evangelical Christians, especially evangelicals from wealthy countries. Many of them think that Christians are drunkards and adulterers (they have seen Western movies). You are perhaps the best model they have of how Christians love God, neighbour, each other and enemies.

DO NOT emphasize Western evangelical theologies and practices that seem irreligious, rationalistic, or even disrespectful towards the peoples’ religion. They know the weaknesses and injustices of their religion and will find ways to deal with them, correct them or break with them. For example, avoid stressing justification without works, while underscoring loving obedience to Jesus.

10. **Let the believers themselves make any public break with their religion.** Give time for the movement to spread far within the religious community. Eventually there will be an internal reaction against the followers of Jesus, perhaps with violence and persecution. Meanwhile, even some of their leaders and scholars will become Christians and can provide needed leadership after you have long been expelled from their country or worse.

DO NOT offer to build distinctively Western-looking religious buildings, introduce Western clothing styles, Western evangelical entertainment or Western theological education.

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