

# Local Mentoring for the Missionary

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## Introduction

When Tyrel<sup>1</sup>, a newly arrived missionary to the Philippines, was asked to provide marriage counseling to a struggling local Christian couple, he was willing to try. However, shortly into the conversation involving the entire family rather than just the husband and wife, things started to escalate. Strong feelings came to the fore, multiple languages were flung about, and Tyrel was floundering, unable to help the couple, much less the whole family. Suddenly an older local pastor arrived from a church down the road. “I watched him confidently and calmly and relationally bring truth and reason and peace to the situation,” Tyrel recalled.<sup>2</sup>

How does one prepare for the myriad of confusing and, at times, overwhelming, cultural situations missionaries will find themselves facing in their new country? Mission organizations go to great lengths to ensure that missionaries have an infrastructure in place to thrive on the field. They

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed for security purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Tyrel Kilkenny, personal communication with author, January 1, 2023.

arrange consultants for counseling, provide health care resources, and give support for children's education; they set up language directors, team leaders, and organizational mentors. These sources of support have their place and often contribute to missionary longevity. It is common for mission organizations to recommend that new workers seek out seasoned missionaries as mentors (and this is a good thing).<sup>3</sup> However, mission leaders sometimes fail to emphasize one of the greatest potential sources of cultural and spiritual mentoring – the local believer.

Zeke<sup>4</sup> recalled being encouraged by his leadership to seek out locals as friends as he and his family prepared to serve in South Asia, but no mention was ever made of looking for a local mentor. "It's a little sad; I think the underlying message maybe was that a local couldn't be a mentor for me," he said. When he began training local believers as a 24-year-old new missionary, he was teaching local Christians older than himself with more years in the faith and more cultural understanding. It wasn't until he had been on the field for about a year and a half and after unintentionally burning some relational bridges through a lack of cultural understanding that he finally met a local who he could go to with hard questions, someone who would push back on the way he had been operating.<sup>5</sup> He felt that, with more encouragement to seek out the advice of a wise local believer earlier on, he may have avoided inadvertently hurting several local believers.

In this article, I will build a case for why local Christian mentors can play a critical role in developing the missionary's understanding of local culture as well as in deepening their faith within the new context. This should lead to mission organizations encouraging those being sent out to keep their eyes open for local mentors that the Lord may provide.

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Waldrep, "Missionaries Need Mentors Too," *IMB* (blog), June 11, 2019, <https://www.imb.org/2019/06/11/missionaries-need-mentors/>.

<sup>4</sup> Name changed for security purposes.

<sup>5</sup> Zeke Dillon, personal communication with author, August 20, 2023.

## **Biblical basis for mentoring**

While there are many ideas concerning what it means for someone to mentor another person, Edmund Chan has some excellent thoughts on how we should see this role as believers: “Mentoring is not just an impartation of knowledge. It’s about living a life! Mentoring is an impartation of life and convictions. It is about living a life and sharing the journey.”<sup>6</sup>

This concept of mentoring as a life-on-life relationship occurs multiple times in Scripture. The Old Testament provides a number of examples, including Moses mentoring Joshua (Exod 24:13, Deut 34:9) and Elijah mentoring Elisha (2 Kgs 2). In the New Testament Priscilla and Aquilla mentored Apollos (Acts 18:26), helping him gain a clearer understanding of the Gospel. Apollos, though Jewish, had been born in Alexandria, meaning that this particular mentoring relationship was likely cross-cultural to some extent. Barnabas mentored Paul through extensive time spent ministering together (Acts 11:26), and Paul went on to mentor many others, among them Timothy (Acts 16) and Titus (Titus 1:4).

Though Scripture contains many examples of mentoring, Jesus himself sets the highest bar. During his brief three years with his disciples, he taught them both directly (Mark 2:23-28; Luke 8:9-18) and indirectly (Matt 9:9-13). They witnessed his actions towards others (Matt 8) as they lived side by side with him. They were challenged by him (Luke 9:57-62) and they experienced his love personally (John 13). The outstanding feature of the disciples was not their education or intelligence (Acts 4:13), but it was their teachability.<sup>7</sup> God used these twelve men to help change the world through their time spent with Jesus. Though every human mentor will be flawed, Scripture makes clear the impact that a good mentor can have in the life of a Christian in

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<sup>6</sup> Edmund Chan, *Mentoring Paradigms: Reflections on Mentoring, Leadership, and Discipleship* (Singapore: Lifestyle Impact Publishing, 2008), 57.

<sup>7</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism: 30th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993), 29.

spurring them on towards deeper understanding of their faith and greater obedience. Mentoring is no less necessary now than it was then, and it is vital in situations where we have entered a new culture.

### **Differences between a local partner and a local mentor**

Isn't a mentor just a ministry partner with a different name, one might ask? Most missionaries do come to the field and seek out local partners to varying degrees. They desire to learn from those partners and gain cultural insight. They often form deep friendships. Missionaries may find a local partner and then proceed to train that partner in the strategies and methods that the missionary has predetermined are going to be effective.<sup>8</sup> However, it seems to be rarer that we are willing to consider the local believer as someone who could speak authoritatively into our own lives. Three key aspects differentiate a mentor from a partner: First, mentors have experience, knowledge, and skills in a particular area that their mentees do not yet possess. Second, mentors bring their mentees into a new world that was previously outside the mentee's experience.<sup>9</sup> Third, the assumption of authority is reversed from that of the traditional missionary and local believer relationship. Though missionaries may prefer to avoid the conversation about power dynamics between themselves and local believers, those dynamics are real, and they often skew towards the missionary (particularly in developing world locations), intended or not. Granting permission to the trusted local mentor to speak authoritatively and opening oneself up to receiving that instruction marks a clear distinction between a local ministry partner and a local mentor.

The authority granted does not necessarily apply to every aspect of the missionary's life. A mentee grants the mentor the right to speak authorita-

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<sup>8</sup> This type of partnership is likely not an equal one, however, given that most of the ministry direction proceeds from the missionary.

<sup>9</sup> Vigen Guroian, "Literature and the Real Meaning of Mentorship," Baylor University Institute for Faith and Learning, 2008, <https://ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2022-12/friendshiparticleguroian.pdf>.

tively into their life within a particular area of expertise. Kelly Seeley, IMB missionary in Europe, states,

(L)ocal leaders need to be given the real ability to shape the ministry of the missionary. Of course, the local person is not to shape all of it, but the missionary's leaders need to seek the voice of local partners. Their voice does not just need to be heard, but it ought also to be influential concerning the ministry development decisions for the missionary and what they need to work on in the language, culture, and ministry approaches.<sup>10</sup>

One missionary shared his family's experience of having to decide where to live after moving to serve among a people in Micronesia. One option was isolated with a beautiful view of the ocean. The other was crushed in the midst of a village, surrounded by people, noise and litter. When the missionary expressed his intention to live on the isolated beach with the view, his cultural helper gently said, "If you want to learn to speak our language, the other place is better for you."<sup>11</sup> Missionaries should keep themselves open to the real possibility that the Lord could provide a local believer of such substance, depth, and competence that the missionary and the work could greatly benefit from submitting some of one's decisions to his or her wise advice.

## **Challenges in seeking out local mentors**

Many missionaries live and serve in zero-to-one situations, where there may not be even one Christian among the group they are seeking to reach. These circumstances generally do not lend themselves to finding a local mentor.

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<sup>10</sup> Kelly Seely and Stephan Pues, *Servant Partnership: A Practical Guide for Gospel-Motivated Collaboration in Your City* (Frankfurt: Gemeindegründungszentrum e.V., 2019), 29.

<sup>11</sup> Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: A Model for Effective Personal Relationships*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 15.

However, one possibility remains within this scenario that may still allow for a rich mentoring experience. There may be a local believer from a near culture who could serve as an effective spiritual mentor. This person might even understand the target culture well enough to offer sound explanations and advice regarding cultural dynamics. The potential richness of this kind of mentoring relationship should not be overlooked, since learning this new culture is vital to seeing ministry success down the road. “While the externals of clothing, food, music, transportation, and the Internet are changing and making the world more homogeneous, deep cultural values seem to be ever more stable and enduring” states one mission leader.<sup>12</sup> Time is never wasted with someone who can help unravel the deep ministries of the new culture in which a missionary is embedded.

Many missionaries serve in situations in which the church is very young and there are no mature believers yet. In these cases, I have only this to add – perhaps our version of a mature believer is not exactly how the Lord sees it. There may be more potential than we initially observe in some of those believers to mentor the new missionary. At the least, they can serve as great cultural mentors. Keeping an open mind in these situations could pay later dividends in terms of ministry effectiveness.

Finally, most missionaries go out with a commitment to bring the most important Truth, the Gospel, to a place and people that lack it. There is a potential that, in our zeal to bring the Truth, we may close ourselves off from considering the ways in which local believers can teach us and even speak with authority into our lives.

### **Different types of mentoring relationships**

As previously mentioned, there are various areas in which a local believer may serve as a mentor. One person may be an amazing cultural mentor and

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<sup>12</sup> James E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 73.

assist in understanding how to contextualize communal faith practices in the new country, but not have as much to offer on personal spiritual disciplines. Others may be amazing as a personal spiritual mentor but not be as far along in their own understanding of evangelism. Looking for one person to fulfill all the potential roles a mentor could play is probably not the optimal route to take. The search for a mentor is likely more fruitful if the missionary focuses on finding someone to learn from in a few particular areas.

I have personally benefitted from having two different women as mentors during my 18 years serving in Southeast Asia, and they each played quite different roles. With the first one, we were close to the same age, but this local friend had a deep faith combined with excellent cultural understanding of her own people. I fed off her wisdom in those early years when I was often floundering in my attempts to understand locals. Her spiritual maturity meant that I could ask very direct questions about the ways local Christians understood and practiced their faith without the risk of offending her. She knew my heart by that point and gave me wide latitude to confer with her about situations that were confusing to me or scenarios where I had no idea how to react to local Christians' strange or even, to my perception, sinful behavior. As a strong believer, she also was able to view her own culture from a biblical perspective, and she granted me insight into the process when I was afraid that my understandings might be more cultural than biblical.

I met my second mentor at a service for a new church plant. She seemed to bridge my two worlds, coming from the Southeast Asian nation where we serve, but having also lived internationally. I noticed how she interacted with others, and I was drawn into her sharp-witted, faith-drenched orbit. We have met monthly for most of the last six years. Often, we have read books on faith together, but the most valuable insights from her have come from hearing how she has navigated situations with other nationals, both believers and non-believers. We share openly about challenges we each are facing in ministry, and I have gleaned much from hearing how she has handled situations in her church. She has the kind of faith that is willing

to challenge local norms. As a non-local, I am not always confident as to whether my take on a situation is more informed by my culture or the gospel. For those times when I have been unsure, this friend has been an excellent guide.

Regarding mentoring of missionaries by locals, Rachel, a long-time missionary from the UK, states:

I think it's happening more now... We can look to other westerners and there are certainly things other westerners can give but there are the deep insights that local believers have ... it can really change their perception [the missionary's] about the country, about their worldview, about the way they look at things when they first arrive, if they have a wise and trusted mentor who is a local believer.<sup>13</sup>

And a mentor does not need to be someone who is similar to the missionary in order for this to work. The mentors that both Tyrel and Jack worked with were from different backgrounds, culturally, socio-economically and educationally. It was because of those differences, in addition to the spiritual maturity of those men, that Jack and Tyrel both learned from them.

### **Benefits to having a local mentor**

Seeking out a local mentor may provide multiple benefits to the missionary, ranging from cultural expertise to contextualized spiritual insights. Developing this kind of deep relationship with a trustworthy local believer would likely bring benefits beyond those mentioned here, but they are reason enough to ask the Lord to provide a local mentor.

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<sup>13</sup> Rachel, personal communication with author, February 2, 2023.



## 1. Cultural Insight

Western culture these days, and American culture in particular, leans heavily toward the idea that being ourselves is sufficient for connecting with the rest of the world. “This is a formula for cross-cultural disaster,” writes Plueddemann.<sup>14</sup> Given that we are all, to some degree, a product of our environments, missionaries from the West moving into new cultures will need to perform the hard work of finding a new way of being and interacting in their new home, rather than assuming that good intentions and a sunny disposition will be sufficient to cover the cultural gap with locals. “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some,” states the Apostle Paul.<sup>15</sup> Though most missionaries seem to arrive on the field with a commitment to learn the new culture, this commitment can fall by the wayside when the cultural rub becomes too uncomfortable.

Most cross-cultural workers can learn about the new culture through every-day interactions with locals. However, spending significant amounts of time with a local mentor creates potential for levels of understanding that are harder to come by in more casual connections. Having a local mentor who will take the time to explain the “why” of cultural differences offers the opportunity to do a deep dive into cultural learning that is connected to a meaningful relationship, adding impetus to the effort required in the learning process. This process deepens the missionary’s trust in the mentor and opens him or her up to receiving criticism or observations from the mentor about ways in which the missionary can improve their interactions with locals.

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<sup>14</sup> Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:22, ESV.

## 2. Deepened understanding of suffering

Most Western missionaries who head to the developing world are fairly inexperienced when it comes to suffering for their faith or from the maladies that affect many developing world nations. Local believers may suffer from persecution, poverty or the effects of a dysfunctional government. “While the Bible does not dwell on the why of suffering, it often talks about how we should face suffering. It teaches many things that give us strength to face suffering,” observes Ajith Fernando, one of the Youth for Christ directors.<sup>16</sup> Finding a trusted local believer who has already walked that walk and applied the teachings of Scripture to their own suffering offers the wide-eyed new missionary a front row seat to how one can remain faithful in the midst of significant suffering. Though the chances are low that the missionary will suffer in the same manner as a local believer, learning directly from someone who has walked through suffering deepens the missionary’s understanding and ability to meaningfully support others experiencing similar circumstances.

The evidence of suffering in the life of Grajang, a Thai pastor, was visible in his leprosy-ravaged fingers. He was a poor man who had experienced the physical isolation of living with a disease that terrorized the population. As a rare Christian in an overwhelmingly Buddhist country, he also experienced social isolation. He offered up the gifts of this suffering and the resulting spiritual maturity to Jack, a fresh-to-the-field IMB missionary in the 70s. For a number of years, Jack spent several days a week with Grajang, eating and sleeping in the same quarters, sharing the gospel house to house in the villages together. He watched Grajang wake up at 4:30 am every day to pray, saw his compassion in how he engaged with Thai villagers, and had his own understanding of the Thai people shaped by these experiences. “I saw a godly man communing with the Father, the source of his ability to minister

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<sup>16</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Discipling in a Multicultural World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 97.

to others. I learned how to share the gospel with the Thai. I continued to learn from Grajang as long as I worked with him,” Jack shared.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Contextualized Faith Practices

Local mentors can provide insight into cultural or spiritual aspects of life; in many cases, they will provide both. Most missionaries are quite open to the idea of looking to local friends to provide cultural insights (and those who do not meet at least this low bar of cultural adaptation are unlikely to survive many years on the field). But seeking a grasp on the mingling of culture and faith and the myriad ways in which one can influence the other is also a critical piece of the missionary learning arc.

What does church look like in a culture where men and women generally operate in separate spheres? How do church authority structures differ, but remain biblical, between cultures with low versus high power distance? How should biblical accountability work in a culture with strong face-saving values? Falling back on cultural practices from home, which we may presume to be the biblical way, leaves the missionary vulnerable to bringing in practices that do not serve the new context well and may in fact have much more outside culture attached to it than the missionary realizes.

The Old Testament contains examples of God transforming Near Eastern covenant forms and practices for his own purposes. For example, circumcision already existed outside of Jewish culture when God established it as an early covenant practice.<sup>18</sup> God did not simply dismiss all cultural forms as he established his relationship with the Israelite people. As the church is established in new contexts, missionaries should anticipate that part of their task is to sift through what stays, what goes, and what can be transformed. The line between syncretism and contextualization can be thin, and yet we

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Kinnison, personal communication with author, August 18, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson Wu, “The Doctrine of Scripture and Biblical Contextualization: Inspiration, Authority, Inerrancy, and the Canon,” *Themelios* 44, no. 2 (2019): 312–26.

cannot ignore the importance of removing as many barriers as possible to understanding the Gospel. Contextualization is one of the keys. If at all possible, a critical piece to this sifting should be the trusted guidance of a local mentor in understanding these cultural forms.

#### **4. Bridge for Communication**

When Tyrel first arrived in the Philippines, he often thought he understood conversations and cultural signals that happened during meetings, only to discover that he had missed important pieces. The local partners with whom Tyrel ministered were mostly younger than he and thus did not seem like classic mentors. However, Tyrel observed, “when we finished meeting with people in a community or talking with church leaders, I couldn’t wait to debrief it with them to learn all the cultural and linguistic cues I had missed in the conversation.”<sup>19</sup> Tyrel continues, “This carried over in all areas of ministry as I learned the value of asking questions and not assuming I understood situations.”

These young ministry partners who served as mentors for Tyrel were safe people for him to ask cultural questions. They interpreted local situations for him and could stand in to speak for Tyrel, too, if others misunderstood his intentions. As a person of good repute in the community, the mentor is a human bridge who can ease communication miscues that can so easily happen between those of differing cultural backgrounds. As a trusted friend with the authority to speak into the life of the missionary, he can guide the missionary into better ways of communicating that sidestep previous mistakes.

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<sup>19</sup> Kilkenny, personal communication with author, January 1, 2023.

## 5. Humble Posture

Seeking a local mentor puts missionaries in the uncomfortable position of feeling incompetent (at least in some situations). Becoming a baby again, linguistically and culturally, is humbling on its own, but confessing our ignorance to someone else who recognizes it and who is simultaneously more knowledgeable takes a high degree of humility. Lance Borden shares the positive potential of having a local partner speak into the missionary's ministry:

Whether interacting with the culture as a whole or with our partners, we need to be able to understand how we tend to be viewed, and act and speak in ways that demonstrate humility coupled with passion and really powerful faith. We do indeed bring many valuable aspects, and our partners recognize and appreciate them. Our partners can guide us on when and how to contribute them most powerfully.<sup>20</sup>

When missionaries are willing to be open with trusted local partners and allow them to speak into how we function in our new culture, the friendship can begin to shift towards a mentoring relationship. This results in the missionary taking a posture of humility, which not only benefits ministry effectiveness as it opens up space for local believers to feel heard and play a larger role in ministry, but it also benefits the missionary personally as she more deeply reflects the image of Christ who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. . . .”<sup>21</sup> Opening herself up to correction by a local mentor requires that kind of death to self that can move the missionary into deeper levels of Christlikeness.

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<sup>20</sup> Seely and Pues, *Servant Partnership: A Practical Guide for Gospel-Motivated Collaboration in Your City*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Philippians 2:8a.

## Conclusion

I can't give the reader a reductionistic list of five ways to find a local mentor. The truth is that this is a rather ambiguous enterprise. There aren't nearly enough local mentors to go around for all the missionaries who could use one. And finding them isn't a straightforward process even when there is potential. This effort falls into the same category as so many other things within the life of a missionary – trusting in the Lord to provide what and who He thinks we need. “Great leaders do not control people, nor do they attempt to control their own lives. They are able to live with the ambiguity of not knowing what comes next. They choose to become radically open to the twists and turns, the ups and downs, the obstacles and opportunities, that comprise the elements of an extraordinary life,” writes Alvin Ung.<sup>22</sup> This is one way in which we can open ourselves up to the provision of our great God and be amazed by what He does in and around us – but let's begin by asking him to provide.

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<sup>22</sup> Alvin Ung, *Barefoot Leadership: The Art Heart of Going That Extra Mile* (Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Nasional, 2012), 19.

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