

“Disciple Making in Nepal: Developing Indigenous Leaders”

What is our number one influence in leadership? Without any doubt I am convinced that it is culture. Leadership, no matter what training has been received, is always influenced by culture. The greater the awareness of these influences the greater the benefit leadership training will be. Imagine a beautiful front lawn. This lawn cannot remain beautiful without constant care and attention. We choose to plant the best grass seed possible to produce the cleanest and greenest lawn in the neighborhood. At the same time, weeds begin to crop up. The quickest solution is to simply mow down the lawn and in minutes everything looks beautiful again. Much to our frustration, a few short days later, previous weeds manage to surface again. Even with the harder work of pulling up weeds individually by hand a few roots remain. Within a few weeks the same problem occurs. This happens again and again and again. Without continual maintenance, the weeds will eventually grow up and choke out everything that was previously sown. In the same way, culture can choke out training and render it ineffective. Don't misunderstand me. Culture is not bad. This simply illustrates that no matter how hard we try we cannot ignore how culture shapes and influences our leadership style. Rather than work against these influences, or try to root them out, it is important to recognize them and use them in the process of multiplying disciples.

Nepal is a landlocked country sandwiched between India and China. It is the only official Hindu kingdom in the world. The capital of Nepal is the city of Kathmandu where the leaders are devout Hindus and follow a hierarchical caste system. According to the 2001 population census there are about 24 million people in Nepal. More than thirty three percent are under the age of 18. That means that there are more than 8 million young people in Nepal who do not know Jesus. The task to reach them is huge. How do we reach them?

During the 1990's the Nepali church was known as one of the fastest growing churches in Asia. The first generation of leaders did an incredible job of evangelism. The second generation has been a little slower to take the baton of leadership and run with it. Why is that? I would suggest that the method of discipleship used by the first generation of leaders was one of

addition rather than multiplication. Many people were brought to Christ but few leaders were multiplied. For many cultural reasons the process of multiplying disciples has simply not happened. Cultural interference has created problems passing the baton of leadership from one generation to the next. In order to remedy this problem it is important to take a look at who have been the traditional leaders in Nepali society and the traditional cultural values that continue to influence Nepali leaders today. After taking a look at these influences we can then begin to create a strategy to help the next generation of leaders begin the task of multiplication.

In order to better understand how Nepali culture influences the development of leaders, certain generalizations about Nepali culture must be made. The purpose is not to put down Nepali people or simply focus on the negative aspects of Nepali culture but rather to better understand these cultural influences so that solutions may be applied. For this reason I would like to begin by focusing on the potential within Nepali culture that facilitates the making and multiplying of disciples.

As stated earlier, the first generation has done an incredible job spreading the gospel. This single-mindedness of vision still exists in the church today. Almost every church that I am aware of places a strong emphasis on the need in Nepal to reach unsaved people and personal evangelism as a means to meet that need. The Christian church in Nepal has gone to great lengths to abolish the concept of caste within Christian circles. Yes, there is still caste discrimination within the church, but much less so than in some churches within India. This has resulted in an unspoken attitude that the church is one caste in Christ. Even unbelievers in Nepal see Christians as a separate distinct caste. In addition, Nepali believers take seriously the spiritual battle that we are in. The concept that there is an invisible cosmic battle raging around us is consistent and compatible with both a biblical and a South Asian worldview. The potential for Nepali believers to enter into this spiritual battle, reach the lost for Christ, and bring them into a caring community without caste discrimination is huge and exciting. In order for this potential to be realized, there are some very real challenges that need to be addressed.

Who are the Leaders in Traditional Nepali Society?

The traditional leaders in Nepali society include the priestly and warrior castes as well as the king. The priestly and warrior castes are the two highest castes in Hindu religion. According to Hindu religion a person is born into a particular caste based upon their *karma* (good and bad deeds performed in a previous life). The king himself is considered to be an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. What has this traditionally taught the average Nepali about leadership? Leaders are born, not made. As a result of the karma from a previous life a person is either born a leader or a follower. This cannot be changed. Leaders are gods. They cannot be questioned and they do not make mistakes. As a result, there is a huge power distance between leaders and followers.

Contrast this with Western leadership where the power distance between leaders and followers is much narrower. Leaders are CEO's and board members, elected officials, prime ministers, presidents, etc. Western leaders are chosen by the people, not by some external power. These leaders are approachable and accountable to the people for their actions. They are human beings who make mistakes and their leadership can be questioned. In the west, a person is fully aware that with proper training, they can become a leader. In the past, this has not been possible in Nepali society.

The difference in relationship between leaders and followers in the western and Asian contexts is one of power. D. Michael Crowe in his doctoral dissertation entitled "Spiritual Authority Across Cultures" cites a study concerning power distance between leaders and followers. In this study a measurement called a Power Distance Index (PDI) is used to demonstrate how this distance in power affects leadership values. Crowe offers this insight:

"In low PDI countries, emotional distance is smaller with greater interdependence between leaders and followers. In high PDI countries, emotional distance is greater, and subordinates either prefer *dependence* on an autocratic or *paternalistic superior*, or reject it entirely." (Crowe, 193 emphasis mine)

We enjoy a great deal of equality in the west. The majority of training used in leadership seminars around the world reflects this leadership value. However, the relationship between leaders and followers is very different in Nepali society. It is less equal and much more

dependent. Traditionally, leaders have been looked up to as father figures who do not make mistakes and cannot be questioned. This is a very different leadership value. Does this value affect or hinder the task of multiplication? It definitely affects the task, but it does not have to hinder it as we will see later.

What are the traditional cultural values that continue to influence Nepali leaders today?

There are many traditional values in Nepali society that flow directly out of traditional leadership styles. In order to better understand Nepali cultural values and how they affect leadership a must read is *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization* by Dor Bahadur Bista. In this book Bista offers two traditional values that greatly affect Nepal's struggle for modernization. I believe that his study offers insight into the challenge of multiplying disciples in the Nepali context. These two cultural values include *fatalism* and *dependency*.

What does fatalism mean in Nepali culture? Bista defines fatalism as, "...the belief that one has no personal control over one's life circumstances, which are determined through a divine or powerful external agency." (Bista, 4) The idea is that everything is fated and cannot be changed. Upon arriving in Kathmandu one of the first Nepali phrases I learned was, "*ke garne?*" It literally means, "what to do?" This phrase reflects the value of fatalism. Bista continues:

"This deep belief in fatalism has had a devastating affect on the work ethic and achievement motivation, and through these on the Nepali response to development. It has consequences on the sense of time, and in particular such things as the concept of planning, orientation to the future, sense of causality, human dignity, and punctuality." (Bista, 4)

This concept of fatalism has certainly explained the frustration I have often felt over what I considered to be a lackadaisical approach to applying principles learned in training. I am often tempted to throw up my hands and utter under my breath, "*ke garne?*" However, it must be made clear that not every Nepali succumbs to the influence of fatalism and that there are many reasons to persevere in the multiplication process which will be explored later.

Dependency is another value that was briefly touched upon earlier. It is inherent in viewing leaders as father figures. As I stated earlier, this is not necessarily a hindrance to the process of multiplication. It simply means that the role of leadership will be different from that of the west. Bista explains, "Being placed in the role of the father figure, the father-surrogate is expected to provide the nurturance of a father, *including physical sustenance* and general concern for the welfare of that individual." (Bista, 89 emphasis mine) It is the expectation of meeting physical needs that is often frustrating for western leaders. In the west, we tend to view disciple making as more educational (the discipler/teacher imparts information to the disciple/student). In the Nepali context the disciple making relationship is more holistic. The discipler is responsible for all the needs of the one who is disciplined, that is, if the discipler is viewed as a leader. In the past, missionaries who provided training to Nepalis were expected to provide training for free along with food and transportation. This expectation has been difficult to overcome for many present day missionaries. I certainly found this expectation of my leadership extremely frustrating when I first arrived in Nepal. Why is it my job to feed, clothe, and take care of everyone's needs? After all, I can not possibly meet everyone's expectations. A few years later, a student that had taken some training from me had decided to go abroad for Bible College. He approached me expecting some help for his journey. Indeed, he would have been greatly offended if I did not help in some way. Rather than be personally annoyed by his suggestion for help I decided to accept this as an affirmation of my leadership. This student saw me as a genuine leader and simply expected that I would do what leaders do: help him get further education (I did this by providing clothes and advice, not money).

In Nepali culture there are two practices that are tied directly to the values of fatalism and dependency that also affect the task of multiplication. They are *chakari* and *afno manche*.

Within Hinduism, *chakari* is an essential concept which means to wait upon, to serve, to appease, or to seek favor from a god. As a social activity, its most common form is simply being close to or in the presence of the person whose favor is desired. Instead of efficient fulfillment of duties and obligations, persistence in *chakari* is seen as merit, and with enough merit, favors may be granted. The objective is to demonstrate dependency with the aim of

eventually eliciting the favor of the person depended upon. Bista comments on the dangers of this practice:

“The strategy of chakari and the concept of productivity in those who practice it are alien to modern economic thought and systems, and can in no way support genuine development. Chakari is an indication that Nepal not only needs to learn new things in order to progress, but must also unlearn old things. Chakari may not be easy to eradicate, but it needs to be purged if economic success is to be a reality in Nepal.” (Bista, 5)

This cultural practice in essence ties the hands of a leader. The qualifications of the one performing chakari are not even considered. If the person is persistent enough, then the leader feels obligated to show favor in some way. Indeed, the leader feels that he has no choice. The reward could be land, money, or position of some kind.

The second practice is a social institution of much importance called *afno manche* (in Nepali this simply means ‘one’s own people’). It is a term used to designate one’s inner circle of associates and refers to those who can be approached whenever need arises. Anyone outside this circle is considered a ‘non-person’. Bista uses the example of a bank teller that takes longer to cash a check if the customer is a ‘non-person’ but makes a special effort if the customer is a member of his or her inner circle and therefore *afno manche*. (Bista, 98) A leader in the Nepali context will choose subordinates not based upon academic qualifications, training, working discipline, integrity of character, or other qualities, but based upon whether or not this subordinate belongs to his or her particular circle. *Afno manche* is practiced in government, business, and even in churches.

It is easy to see how these various cultural values affect the process of multiplication. Imagine creating a ministry team using only the practice of chakari and *afno manche* as the criteria without any consideration given to internal heart qualities. I see this happen all the time, even in some of the bigger churches in Kathmandu. In addition there are other ways that I have personally observed that I believe are the result of some of these cultural values:

I have seen whole Sunday School departments in bigger churches staffed with *afno manche* while those who actually have training to teach are ignored. Pastors feel obligated to spend hours each day jumping from one committee meeting to another while neglecting the needs of their own congregation. These same pastors, while looked up to as benevolent father

figures, are often accountable to no one but themselves. Again, afno manche are given positions of influence and leadership without having the benefit of education or training. The disciple making process is placed into the hands of these leaders alone. The average believer is not expected to be involved in the process of discipleship beyond personal evangelism. Only leaders are expected to be involved in disciple making and this usually is done through church planting. Other ministries such as children, women, and youth are rarely considered by those who would be leaders as permanent ministry positions. The result is that multiplication is effectively stopped.

I do want to emphasize again that these are generalities. Not every leader is affected by these cultural influences 100% of the time. There are definitely effective ministries within the Kathmandu Valley and Nepal that are affected by these cultural influences to a very small degree. That is the goal that we are after. We desire to make disciples and multiply leaders who are aware of these influences so that they can effectively manage them and operate within them in the midst of the disciple making process.

A strategy to help the next generation of leaders multiply disciples

There is a great scene from the movie *The Untouchables* that I often think of when I consider the multiplication process. In this scene Elliot Ness is forming his team to take out Al Capone. There is only one problem. He cannot find anyone to recruit that has not already been corrupted by Capone. Ness is almost ready to give up in frustration when Sean Connery's character (Jim Malone) offers this suggestion: "If you want a good apple, don't get it from the bottom of the barrel, get it off the tree." The very next scene they are both at the police academy ready to recruit rookies who have no experience in police work, but who have also never been influenced by Capone's corruption.

The youth of Kathmandu are fresh off the tree. They do not have much experience in ministry but they also have much less cultural baggage. As east meets west in the Kathmandu Valley change is taking place at a rapid rate. Consider just some of these changes over the last fifteen years: The rise and near collapse of democracy; the assassination of a beloved king; the introduction of the virtues and vices of the internet; the Maoist insurgency; the increasing

autocracy of the current king; the growing concern over HIV and AIDS; and of course the ever increasing influence of MTV India. It is enough to make your head spin. This is where the young people of Kathmandu live. As they become more and more exposed to western values and more and more frustrated with the current situation and current leadership, young people are beginning to cry out in frustration: "Isn't there another way?"

I have found that the young people of Nepal are extremely open to doing things another way. This provides fertile ground for creating a movement of multiplication. Yes, the cultural influences will always be there. However, young people are already critically evaluating these influences and experimenting with new ways of doing things. A little guidance will go a long way. As a result of this study I offer a very simple strategy:

1) *Lead like an Asian*: Strong leadership that is benevolent and consistent with the concept of leader as father would be very powerful and effective in the Nepali context. This is not a western model. Leaders who would multiply disciples in Nepal need to take a more nurturing and holistic approach rather than a western educational one. This approach is much more time consuming and takes much more emotional commitment than a western approach. Crowe, as a result of his study of leadership in Asia makes this observation:

"Strong Asian style leaders often have large and dynamic churches, and sometimes suffer the criticism of Westerners as being 'over-bearing' and 'autocratic'. Initially I thought their success was because they were from the same cultural background. Later I observed that Asians who follow more egalitarian approaches often have weaker churches, and Westerners who follow Asian styles of leadership, often have strong and growing churches." (Crowe, 219)

It would be best to have indigenous leaders adopt this model when engaging the multiplication process but, according to Crowe, it is not absolutely necessary. I have a lot to learn about this style of leadership. The concept of leader as father is not comfortable for me, but it does challenge me to broaden my role in the disciple making process beyond that of simply an educator and a trainer.

2) *Create your own afro manche*: Rather than try to recruit current indigenous leaders from the outside to come along side in the disciple making process it would be better to multiply

leaders from within this process. In other words, "...get it off the tree". We have begun to do this more and more with our ministry in Kathmandu. There are close to twenty churches that have gone through our training course. We have intentionally tried to build close relationships between our leadership and these churches. Our next step is to build the relationship between the churches themselves. With time, I believe that leaders will naturally surface who will be willing and eager to multiply disciples in other regions of Nepal and possibly places in India where the Nepali language is spoken.

3) *Take this circle and deepen it:* We have attempted to do this through one on one coaching with mixed results. This year we are going to refrain from training additional churches and deepen the relationships we have with existing churches. This may take the form of further coaching with some. With others it will simply take the form of encouraging. Some of the churches are not yet ready to implement training on a deeper level. We are still committed to continue the relationship with them by simply showing up to their events and observing. We then want to dignify their efforts by encouraging them to keep going. Others are ready and willing to be challenged at deeper levels. We may offer more and deeper training to some of these churches in the future.

These ideas are nothing new. It is the approach Jesus used almost 2,000 years ago. Rather than recruit "trained" leaders from the ranks of the Sadducees and Pharisees, Jesus multiplied leaders from within. Jesus was much more than a trainer. He was a benevolent father figure to his disciples. They were with him for three years, dependent upon him for everything, including physical sustenance. In a sense, Jesus created his own *afno manche*. He built a close inner circle of twelve disciples and provided deeper training that was unavailable to the others.

Leadership development in Nepal is no easy task. These simple ideas are only a beginning. A greater understanding of the Nepali culture can only help to facilitate the disciple making process. It is important to understand traditional leadership styles in Nepal and how traditional leadership values influence current leadership. Without this understanding ministry in Nepal will be slow and arduous. Deeper consideration of these cultural influences upon the process of discipleship will yield an even more detailed strategy based upon multiplication rather

than addition. If successful, the result will be a sustainable, reproducible, indigenous youth movement that will result in a transformed second generation church engaging and transforming their culture for Jesus Christ.

Annotated Bibliography

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--Focuses mostly on the influence of Brahmanism in the Kathmandu Valley and how these influences impede development. An extremely helpful source.

Crowe, Michael D. *Spiritual Authority Across Cultures: The Cultural Contours of Pneumatic Leadership—East and West*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 2001.

--The author was instrumental in developing the Bethany School of Mission in Singapore. This dissertation is extremely helpful in understanding the expectations that followers have of their leaders in various Asian contexts. Currently he works with Church Resource Ministries (CRM) helping to contextualize training materials for Asian leaders.

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--This survey was conducted in over twenty different youth fellowships in the Kathmandu Valley. The results of the survey show the widening generational gap between current church leaders and the youth they minister to.