[Helping New Believers Find Identity Through Belonging](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/)

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When people from strongly group-oriented cultures put their faith in Christ, they often experience a period of intense struggle to work out their new identity. Missionaries from the West sometimes do not appreciate the depth of this struggle. We can be tempted to insist only that new believers declare their allegiance to Christ and pay the cost of following Jesus but pay no attention to the effects this may have on their sense of identity and belonging. This is an overly simplistic response to a complex challenge.

The Perception of Betrayal

In tightly knit societies, people who leave their religion and become Christians are often understood to be betraying their family and their people group. In our ministry among Turkish people, for example, we discovered that deeply embedded in their mindset is the idea that to be a Turk is to be a Muslim. Becoming a Christian is seen as a betrayal of Turkish-ness. This thinking continues to influence new believers. A new believer from a Muslim background in Bulgaria, for example, recently said: “I know I am a Christ-believer now. But as a Turk I am still a Muslim, right?”

Not only Turks, but people from many other people groups struggle to work out their new identity once they begin following Jesus. One reason for this is that their families and communities interpret becoming a Christian as a rejection and betrayal not merely of their religion but of their ethnicity and culture. Much of this sense of betrayal comes from their perception of Christianity as a foreign religion. Their perception that Christianity is alien is based on much more than the fact that it is new or unfamiliar. In their eyes, becoming a Christian equates with becoming a foreigner. This is because people in many parts of Asia and the Middle East associate being Christian with being Western. In pre-Communist China, this gave rise to the saying “One more Christian; one less Chinese.” Christianity is seen as something that promotes Western values and a Western lifestyle, which in many people’s minds includes things like sexual “freedom” (read immorality) and lack of respect for elders.

This article explores ways we can help new believers navigate their families’ and communities’ sense that they have been betrayed and rejected.

Three Possible Pathways of Identity Negotiation

As new believers work out their new identity as followers of Jesus and part of the body of Christ, they tend to go down one of three paths:

1. They let go of the ties they have with their family and community. This is partly because they are rejected by their family and friends, and sometimes also because they (unnecessarily) distance themselves from their community by their actions. This often creates a huge vacuum of identity in which new believers feel isolated, confused, and depressed.
2. They minimize their contact with other believers because they want to remain close to their family and friends. They keep following Jesus but decide they cannot join an established church, often because the lifestyle of Christians and the forms of worship in these churches are jarringly foreign in relation to the local culture. This path deprives them of the support and encouragement of the church and deprives the church of their participation and gifts.
3. They synthesize a hybrid identity out of their identity as a member of their birth community and as a member of the body of Christ. They find a way to live out their faith among their own family and friends and they also participate in a community of fellow believers.[[i]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn1)

The third pathway is the ideal to aim for. It is the best outcome for the new believer and their family and provides the opportunity for the gospel to spread through the new believer to their community. But taking this path is not easy.

Forming a hybrid identity is a complex process that can take many years. Mazhar Mallouhi, a follower of Christ from a Muslim background, explains that he went through a “deep internal struggle” and faced “a profound crisis of identity” as part of his journey of faith. It took many years before he finally came to rest in a new hybrid identity. For him, this new identity was to be culturally a Muslim and spiritually a follower of Jesus.[[ii]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn2)

Taking the third pathway is often a drawn-out process in which it can seem like the believer is oscillating between two identities—that of their community of origin and that of the church. They may seem to present two faces to the world: their previous religion’s (e.g. Muslim) face towards their families, and a Christian face towards the church and anyone discipling them. The disciple’s task is to work out how to “marry their two faces” so that they can be part of both a group of believers as well as live out their faith among their own people, helping them to see that following Jesus is an honorable path.[[iii]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn3)

How to Help Disciples Towards a Settled Sense of Identity and Belonging

There are three main ways that cross-cultural workers can help new believers move towards a settled sense of identity as both a member of their birth community and a member of God’s people.

Help Disciples Maintain Relationship With Their Families and Friends

The first way is to help new believers maintain warm and respectful relationships with their family and friends. Strategies to help lessen the likelihood that disciples will be expelled from their communities of origin include our doing everything possible to get to know the disciples’ families. We should act in a respectful and friendly towards them. We can reduce the risk that disciples will be rejected by their families and friends by our and their being a good example of living virtuously according to local cultural norms. This can help them come to terms with the family member’s new faith.

On the other hand, unwise actions on the part of a Christian worker can precipitate the expulsion of disciples from their birth community. Mazhar Mallouhi, a Muslim who came to Christ and joined the Christian community in Lebanon, was encouraged by his Christian friends to leave his cultural past behind by changing his name to a “Christian” name and by cutting off contact with his Muslim friends. Wanting to be accepted by his Christian friends, he did just that, and consequently damaged his relationship with his Muslim friends.

Another way we can inadvertently cause disciples unnecessary angst about their new identity and broken relationships with their birth community is to urge them to do things that are taboo in their culture or religion and which are not essential to being a Christian. This is often done in the mistaken belief that doing these things will help them express their freedom in Christ. Mazhar Mallouhi’s friends, for example, suggested that he stop fasting during Ramadan, that he pray using a new posture, and that he eat pork to prove he was a Christian. He followed their advice but then struggled for years with the feeling that he was betraying his heritage and his Muslim family and friends.[[iv]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn4) We know several other Muslim-background believers who have been similarly pressured. As a result, some were cut off from their families. Along with being confused about their identity, they have experienced a deep loneliness and sense of isolation.

The way that intercultural disciplers teach new disciples to share their faith can also influence whether or not their family and friends see their faith as a betrayal. It is vital that disciples share their faith with gentleness and respect (see 1 Peter 3:15). They should not be rushed into a public confession of faith but allowed to let their witness unfold as they grow in their faith. Their family and friends often need to see evidence that their lives have changed for the better before they will listen to their new beliefs (see 1 Peter 2:12; 3:15–16). One intercultural discipler working in India, where disciples from a Hindu background in a rural area experience a lot of opposition, advises:

A new believer should be warned against making an abrupt announcement to his or her family, since that inflicts great pain and inevitably produces great misunderstanding. Ideally, a Hindu will share each step of the pilgrimage to Christ with his or her family, so that there is no surprise at the end.[[v]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn5)

Don Little, a missionary to North Africa, tells how a new believer there winsomely shared his faith with his Muslim family. Rashid had been an army officer and had for years treated his mother and sister terribly. But when he came to faith in Christ his behavior towards them began to change dramatically.

Finally, one day, his sister followed him into his room, locked the door and told him that she would not let him out until he told her the reason for his character transformation. She was astonished that Rashid had been treating her and their mother with gentleness, respect, and love for months. She absolutely loved her “new” brother and insisted on having an explanation. In response, he took out a Bible, laid it on the coffee table in front of her and said, “This book has changed my life. Read it and you will understand.” He then left the room and did not talk to her about his faith for quite a long time, until she had read in the Bible and had questions for him.[[vi]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn6)

Another way to help disciples maintain good relationships with their family and friends is to support group conversions. Sometimes cross-cultural workers encounter a whole community who wants to follow Jesus together. This corporate rather than individual way of making decisions occurs in some tightly knit societies. When the group agrees to follow Christ, it is not that everyone immediately is born again (though some may be). Rather, as they learn more of what it means to follow Jesus, individuals in the group come to personally share in the group’s decision and give their lives to Christ. We must not look down on these group conversions. People are taking their first steps of faith as a group, and, in time, many will make personal commitments to Christ. We need to encourage them and teach them so that they can each commit to following him together.[[vii]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn7) A similar dynamic may have been at work in the New Testament when heads of households, such as Cornelius and the Philippian jailor, became believers and their whole households converted with them (Acts 10; 16:25-34). Even if not everyone in the group ends up believing, as a group, they respect and support those who do.

Help Disciples Develop Strong Relationships with Fellow Believers

Helping disciples develop a strong sense of belonging to a community of believers is very important to their wellbeing and spiritual formation. Through the local church community, new disciples are encouraged and strengthened in their faith. As they participate in a church they learn from the teaching and example of more mature believers and leaders (Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12; 1 Timothy 4:12; Hebrews 13:7). They are able to share their needs, be prayed for, talk about what they are discovering, and learn to serve others (1 Corinthians 14:26; Colossians 3:12–16; James 5:13–16; Ephesians 4:1–5:2). Disciples who do not become part of a local Christian fellowship usually find continuing to follow Jesus very difficult. According to one worker in the Middle East, “The growth of a new follower of Jesus depends more on his/her warm personal relationship with a mentor and with fellow believers than on the particular teaching content of the discipleship program.”[[viii]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn8)

Christian workers should also do all they can to help people who are considering following Jesus to experience what being part of the community of believers is like.  One of the hidden questions potential disciples have is “If I become a Christian, what kind of group will I be part of?” They want to experience what it is like to be a Christian, including what Christian community is like, before they commit themselves.

An Australian friend who visited a church in China describes how that church enabled a Tibetan newcomer who was not yet a believer to feel what it is like to belong:

At a BBQ at the leaders’ home one day, one young lady openly admitted that she didn’t know Jesus yet, but obviously felt she belonged—that she was part of the community. The following day, the leaders announced that there would be a prayer meeting that night in their home for the church. People came in dribs and drabs. As people arrived, they got fed. There was a knock on the door and the lady on the doorstep was invited in. She said, “I heard about this group. I’m not a follower of Jesus but I want to know more.” They invited her in. She was fed. The prayer meeting started. There was sung worship. People shared about what Jesus was doing in their lives. And this lady herself actually felt free enough to tell her story—that she didn’t know Jesus, that she wanted to know more. It was quite obvious that she already felt part of this community. And the community loved her and treated her as one of them.

Another way we can help disciples feel they belong to the church is to encourage local believers to create a process or ceremony to mark various turning points in disciples’ journey of faith. Examples include a formal welcoming ceremony to mark the incorporation of a disciple into the church, baptism, and a clearly defined pathway for disciples to learn about the beliefs and practices of Christians. In addition, we and the church can help disciples with practical needs that their family and friends may no longer be willing to help with. They may need to find new friends or a new job, and they will need social activities, education, marriage partners, and care in their old age.

It can be quite traumatic for disciples with no previous exposure to Christianity to attend a Christian meeting. There is no doubt a spiritual dimension to this fear, but some of it stems from simply being in an unfamiliar group of people who do things they have never done before and that they have been taught all their lives are bad or wrong. We have observed people from non-Christian backgrounds coming to a church for the first time and trembling violently because of the distress they feel at being in such an unfamiliar environment.

If disciples find coming to church meetings too uncomfortable, they may find a seekers’ group to be a helpful bridge to the church. When a disciple joins a group of seekers and fellow disciples on their journey to faith in Christ, even if only one or two of them have committed their lives to Jesus, it is often a catalyst for that disciple coming to faith. After some time of following people up one-on-one in North Africa, Don Little formed such a group. They used to sing together, do an inductive Bible study, share their needs and pray together. He points out that for newcomers to the group “the power of corporate worship, honest and vulnerable sharing and caring and praying for each other was often a stronger attraction to Christ than weeks or months of one-on-one conversations and individual discipling.”[[ix]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn9)

Help Disciples Express Their Faith in Local Cultural Forms

The more that disciples are able to express their new faith in familiar cultural forms, the more readily their family and friends will be able to appreciate this new faith. This also makes it easier for disciples to come to a settled sense of identity in Christ. For example, some Hindu background believers feel they cannot join the established churches because they are culturally too alien in the ways they worship and live. For them, joining these churches would be like joining a foreign culture. Not wanting to be alienated from their families and hoping that by staying with them they might win them to Christ, they meet in small groups that use familiar cultural forms instead.[[x]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_edn10)

The symbol of the cross, for example, leaves many Turks feeling cold because of its association in their minds with the Crusades and foreign imperialism. Insisting on using this symbol, rather than other alternative symbols of what Christ has done for us, is unwise. Another example of this occurs when Christian workers give new believers a “Christian” name, reinforcing the perception that Christianity is a foreign religion.

Conclusion

Working out how to find appropriate cultural forms to express Christian meanings is not a new challenge. The very first Jewish and Gentile believers had to work out the role that circumcision and Mosaic law should play in their lives. Some Jewish believers insisted that Gentiles believers become circumcised and keep the Old Testament law. If this was adopted, it would have miscommunicated the basis on which people are made right with God, but it also could well have meant that new Gentile believers could be rejected by their families on the basis that they were betraying their Gentile identity to become Jews. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, insisted that Gentiles must be able to become Christians without having to become Jews first, and eventually the church leadership agreed (Acts 15).

Like those first Christian leaders, we must allow disciples from many backgrounds to become Christians without having to adopt our culture first. One of the greatest mistakes a cross-cultural discipler can make is to insist that new disciples must reject their own culture and adopt the discipler’s in order to be a Christian.

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[[i]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref1) Tim Green, “Identity Choices at the Border Zone,” in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?*, ed. David Greenlee (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013).

[[ii]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref2) Paul Chandler, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path between Two Faiths* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

[[iii]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref3) Roland Muller, *Tools for Muslim Evangelism* (Belleville, CA: Essence Publishing, 2000), 95–96.

[[iv]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref4) Chandler, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path between Two Faiths*, 105–07.

[[v]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref5) R.K. Agarwal, “Understanding Discipleship in the Hindu Context,” *St Francis Magazine* 9, no. 1 (2013): 105.

[[vi]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref6) Don Little, *Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities: Scripture, History and Seasoned Practices* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2015), 195.

[[vii]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref7) Thomas Hale and Gene Daniels, *On Being a Missionary*, Rev. ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 317.

[[viii]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref8) Edward Evans, “Discipling and Training for ‘Muslim Background Believers’: Programme Design,” *St Francis Magazine* 5, no. 2 (2009): 2.

[[ix]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref9) Evens, “Discipling and Training,” 58.

[[x]](https://missionexus.org/helping-new-believers-find-identity-through-belonging/#_ednref10) Herbert E. Hoefer, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2001).

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