

# Disciplemaking in Marseille: A Multidimensional Approach to the Transformation of a City in Movement

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Many “shades of humanity living life loud” exemplifies Marseille, France’s second largest city.<sup>2</sup> This Mediterranean port city has been a cultural crossroads since its official settlement by Ionian Greeks around 600 BCE.<sup>3</sup> France’s more recent colonial history, and particularly the independence of Algeria in 1962, has led to an influx of large numbers of Algerians, Tunisians, and Moroccans, as well as immigrants from other newly independent lands, such as the Comoro Islands. Many have found a home in Marseille, creating an urban dynamic where one is equally as likely to encounter Algerian Muslims as culturally Catholic French on streets or in shops.<sup>4</sup> While Marseille offers all the tourist-centric riches of a multicultural city, true interculturalism is elusive.<sup>5</sup> Our dominant impression is that people share the same spaces as many individual threads that have failed to intertwine to create a cohesive fabric.

In our early days in Marseille, we often felt overwhelmed by the confrontational quality of the city. Unsure where to invest our time

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms used for security reasons.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Peregrine, “48 hours in...Marseille, an insider guide to France’s port city with an edge,” *Telegraph*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/france/cote-d-azur/marseille/articles/marseille-travel-guide/>.

<sup>3</sup> David Abulafia, *The Great Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 123.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 622.

<sup>5</sup> We refer to Al Tizon’s assertion that the term “intercultural” most aptly conveys the idea of mutual transformation between people of diverse cultures and backgrounds. *Whole and Reconciled* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 118–19.

and efforts, we began regular prayer walks. We moved through the city contemplatively, listening to the stories it was telling and seeking God for our focus. Ultimately, these days of prayerful dialogue instilled a love for our new home and led us to specific work for the transformation of our city. Every day brought interactions with dozens of people representing a variety of linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Consistent with the globalizing nature of our world, many who come to Marseille experience transnationality in which “they carry their *symbolic homeland* as they acculturate and territorialize in their new location.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, many experience the physical poverty and social isolation familiar to immigrants in urban environments around the globe.<sup>7</sup> For some, separation from family networks and the exhausting daily effort to navigate foreign social systems in an unfamiliar language and culture lead to anxiety, depression, and other forms of psychological and physical suffering. Those who have immigrated to Marseille from former French colonies often rely on the hospitality of the French government for legal residency, affordable housing, and unemployment stipends to provide for their families. Yet in the midst of these challenges, resiliency and hope are abundantly evident.

## **A Framework for Disciplemaking**

Within this remarkable mix of cultures, where people inside and outside the church are both at home and between homes, three types of community provide a helpful framework for disciplemaking. Oscar Garcia-Johnson proposes that a eucharistic community reflects Christ’s table by facilitating a safe space of welcome where there is no risk of “losing distinctiveness.” A proclamation community is cultivated when the story of Jesus intersects with our personal stories. Finally, a pastoral community is one that has seen and heard the stories of their people and works for tangible transformation in a “restorative-healing community.”<sup>8</sup> These three forms of community overlap and bear fruit simultaneously. For us, the manifestations of eucharistic, proclamatory, and pastoral communities have evolved with particular emphases on relational hospitality, neighborhood transformation, and justice initiatives in response to sexual

<sup>6</sup> Oscar Garcia-Johnson, “Mission within Hybrid Cultures: Transnationality and the Global Church,” in *The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions*, ed. Ryan K. Bolger (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 115, emphasis original.

<sup>7</sup> Christine D. Pohl and Pamela J. Buck, *Making Room* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), chapter 5, section “Different Kinds of Strangers.”

<sup>8</sup> Garcia-Johnson, “Mission within Hybrid Cultures,” 125.

exploitation and trafficking.

**Relational Hospitality.** The ministries in Marseille are an extension of the local church. Christ-followers from individual churches have reached beyond their own congregations to build a network of community centers and grassroots associations that work for the transformation of the city. Nurturing individual relationships in the context of hospitality is at the heart of these efforts. Hospitality models God's extravagant welcome by opening the way to the kingdom of God and, in turn, reflects a kingdom orientation as we welcome Christ by welcoming those in need (Matthew 25:34–40). The cultivation of relationships through hospitality requires “the crucial ministry of presence,” in which task- and success-oriented mindsets and behaviors are sidelined to make space for attentive presence.<sup>9</sup> Our living room couch has become a sacred space as day after day friends and acquaintances come to enjoy food, laughter, and news. Many hours of prayer, weeping, and intimate expressions of joy, frustration, and sorrow have been shared in this quiet, comfortable space. The ministry of presence also recognizes our limitations. Not all problems can be fixed, but careful listening, friendship, and genuine encouragement are powerful healers for isolation and loneliness.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, making and deepening disciples through hospitality calls for a distinctive lifestyle. Referring to Christian witness among Muslims, who compose a large part of our community in Marseille, Evelyne Reisacher found that “the generosity and hospitality of Christians” is a primary factor in Muslims choosing to follow Jesus. Our lifestyles are noticed, and the alignment of our words and deeds is considered.<sup>11</sup> This includes reciprocity in our relationships. Mutual hospitality is essential; otherwise, we risk the condescension inherent in our refusal to be a guest. A dangerous power dynamic is enforced that risks perpetuating the disempowerment of someone in need when we are unwilling to recognize our own needs and another's capacity to be host and provider.<sup>12</sup> In view of this, we have spent many hours in table fellowship at the homes of friends who materially have very little to offer but whose lavish hospitality has taught us much about how to care well for people regardless of circumstances.

**Neighborhood Transformation.** In conjunction with the broader

<sup>9</sup> Pohl and Buck, *Making Room*, chapter 6, section “The Connection Between Marginality and Hospitality.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Evelyne Reisacher, *Joyful Witness in the Muslim World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 110.

<sup>12</sup> Pohl and Buck, *Making Room*, chapter 6, section “Hospitality and Power.”

church, we have also worked toward the transformation of neighborhoods by addressing many physical and social needs. Due in large part to France's long history of religious wars and sectarianism, today faith is viewed as a private matter. As a result, it can be a challenge for churches to engage their larger communities. However, Gambetta, the local French Free Church in Marseille has worked to become a place of welcome for both French nationals and the international community. Internally, the church has welcomed Roma and Filipino congregations to use their space for worship, with great potential for further interactions as these relationships develop. Over the years the church has also warmly received missionaries from the US (ourselves included) and South Korea who have worked together in fruitful partnership. The pastor of Gambetta is intentional about fostering relationships with other churches throughout Marseille. He works to bring pastors together for times of encouragement and prayer for themselves, their communities, and the city. As a result, a growing sense of unity and encouragement is being cultivated among diverse churches.

Gambetta has also developed a strong partnership with a local community association, Marhaban. Marhaban is run by staff and volunteers from the Christian community of Marseille—Catholic, Protestant, and Coptic. Marhaban provides social assistance in a variety of ways, including transitional housing for migrants, student tutoring, food distribution, English language courses, and social clubs that enhance potential job opportunities and build social capital. In its role as a language center, Marhaban offers French language and literacy courses to non-French speakers. For those who seek to make Marseille their home, the inability to communicate effectively in French is a significant challenge. Over the past years, demand for these classes has exceeded Marhaban's capacity, and as a result Gambetta now hosts several courses in their building. Along with our own work with Marhaban primarily as English teachers, individual members of Gambetta serve as an administrator, food distribution facilitator, and French teacher. In all of these efforts, Gambetta and Marhaban are transparent about their Christian motivation in ways that are sensitive to the populations they serve. As a result, Muslims, secular French, and Christians from diverse backgrounds have forged a strong and safe community together.

**Justice Initiatives in Anti-Trafficking Efforts.** Ruban Blanc (White Ribbon) is a ministry that reflects our efforts to make and deepen disciples through justice-oriented initiatives. Initially established by a small, international group of French Christians and Marseille-based mission

practitioners, Ruban Blanc is a nonprofit association that aims to offer hope and support to people in situations of sexual exploitation, seeking to share the love of God and to work toward the reduction of suffering. It was formed on a foundation of Christ-centered values, understanding that transformation of the whole person can occur only when the needs of the whole person are addressed. Members meet regularly with women and men, both professional sex workers and those who have been trafficked into the sex industry, at the places where they work during the day and night. We often make initial contact on the streets and then connect these men and women with social care networks as desired. In our interactions, we seek permission to be welcomed into the spaces where they are working. After this initial act of hospitality on their part, we offer refreshments and a listening presence—showing up with open hearts and minds in places many refuse to go. First-time contacts often ask why we are there. This provides an open door to share about our model and motivator, Jesus Christ, and to express our availability for any needs. Trust, acquaintanceship, and even deeper friendships have developed through consistent visits and meetings outside of working hours. These encounters are characterized by encouragement, prayer, laughter, dream-sharing, and connections that provide social support that enables basic needs to be met and movement toward healing and wholeness.

### **Disciplemaking in View of the Whole Gospel**

Disciplemaking in Marseille requires fluid and adaptive responses to meet individuals within the uniqueness of their stories. In all our work, and in our own growth as disciples, we are shaped and motivated by the good news that we have been given access to God's great mercy through Jesus's death and resurrection. We share the conviction of scholar-practitioners like Al Tizon that the substance of this mercy is all-inclusive, multidimensional reconciliation that is manifested in relationships of peace with God, ourselves, others, and all of creation. This is the essential nature of the whole gospel.<sup>13</sup> The working out of this whole gospel conviction is disciplemaking, in which our words and efforts are given to building Christ's church in the discipline of practicing justice and mercy. Moreover, disciplemaking is the heart of the commission that Christ gave his disciples in Matthew 28:18–20 and the propelling force of all mission practice.<sup>14</sup> This is in stark contrast to the outmoded—though still

<sup>13</sup> Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled*, 87.

all too frequent—assumption that the work of disciplemaking is simply evangelism, which in turn is reduced to producing converts.

While events such as responding decisively to Christ and baptism provide meaningful anchor points in a person's faith journey, the work of disciplemaking through the lens of the whole gospel is deeply transformative. Evangelism by proclamation is vital, but it must go beyond what Nabeel Jabbour describes as "presenting a set of facts to a person and asking that person to commit to these facts or endorse them." In contrast, Jabbour proposes that evangelism is most often simply helping people "move one little step closer to Christ."<sup>15</sup> The journey toward Christ is not linear; rather, it is full of twists and turns that are influenced by verbal sharing, just action, and decisions to turn to the Lord. In Marseille, moments of evangelism have looked many different ways as we continue to be shaped as disciples ourselves and as we practice the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). We strive to live our daily lives as a message of our hope in Jesus within our context. We are God's people placed in a specific location and among specific people in order to live and speak as witnesses to God's desire that we all experience abundant life in its entirety.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this ideal, there are ways we fall short in our witness to the whole gospel. As we practice disciplemaking, particularly through hospitality and justice-oriented efforts, we are challenged as caretakers of the environment in which we live. Stewardship is an essential part of the vocation of the church in that it reflects God's loving care for the earth and its resources.<sup>17</sup> One task of the local church as it cultivates pastoral community is to assess local realities. In urban environments like Marseille, stewardship should extend to proper care for buildings and the city's physical infrastructure so people can live in safety. We have often observed the dangerous living situations of individuals who are at the mercy of state housing or unscrupulous landlords. Flooding, infestations, and weakening physical structures characteristic of an historical city are common occurrences. The state of these dilapidated buildings can lead to tragedy when ignored too long. In November 2018, Marseille made world headlines when two buildings collapsed in a well-known neighborhood near the city center, killing eight people. Many blamed city officials who,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>15</sup> Reisacher, *Joyful Witness*, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 155.

<sup>17</sup> Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled*, 174.

despite warnings, largely ignored the state of the neighborhood mainly inhabited by Muslim populations and ethnic minorities. The *New York Times* reported that this tragedy led to a safety audit that concluded that up to 44,000 residential units were at risk, mainly in lower-income areas. In 2015 a government assessment estimated that 100,000 people in Marseille lived in housing that was a risk to their safety.<sup>18</sup> This is not insignificant considering the population of Marseille proper is estimated to be just under 900,000.<sup>19</sup>

These realities should be a wake-up call for the church. It is unacceptable that any of our neighbors, friends, or church members should live in such a state, particularly in a country with an abundance of social resources. How can we use our voices and actions to lobby for fair renter rights and equal opportunities in housing? Will people see that Christ-followers have advocated for fair housing both *before and after* such tragedies? Although referring specifically to Muslims within a British context, Ida Glaser's challenge is apt: "[T]he question is not *whether* we share the Gospel [with Muslims] but *what kind* of Gospel they are going to hear."<sup>20</sup> At the intersection of stewardship and justice, the church must work harder to care for the environment in which we live; our witness depends upon it.

In Marseille, we are confronted daily with the reminder that the world is not homogenous. In this globalizing, urban environment where much of the population is transnational, the local and global church are much closer together than many realize. The networks cultivated by people both within the church and without have a truly international impact. In such a context, ministry without intercultural partnerships would fall profoundly flat. Gambetta, Marhaban, and Ruban Blanc are led and served by staff and volunteers from a multitude of national, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. We have been humbled, trained, mentored, and encouraged by those we are privileged to serve alongside. Intercultural partnerships serve as witnesses to the truth that God welcomes and gifts all people as the Spirit works through and beyond all cultures to demonstrate the creative glory of God.<sup>21</sup> This is an important

<sup>18</sup> Agence France-Presse, "Death Toll in Marseille Building Collapse Rises to Six," *New York Times*, November 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/07/world/europe/marseille-building-collapse-toll.html>, accessed September 13, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> "Population de Marseille en 2019," <http://ville-data.com/nombre-d-habitants/Marseille-13-13055>, accessed September 16, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Ida Glaser, "Millennial Reverie: Muslims in Britain," *Anvil* 17, no. 3 (2000): 180.

and necessary example to the people we serve. The broader multicultural community must see that God's people do not dismiss cultural or ethnic differences but revel in the unique characteristics and skills individuals bring to their mutual efforts. Intercultural partnerships within the local church are a gift to their local communities as they represent a microcosm of the global church, showing outside observers that there just might be a place for them in the church as well.

## Lessons for the Global Church

In light of our work with a church that strives in its diversity to embody the whole gospel through hospitality, community transformation, and justice initiatives, we commend the discipline of perspective-taking as a practice for the global church. Kevin Gushiken describes perspective-taking as requiring “patience and discernment as bi-directional dialogue occurs creating back and forth interaction between assessments of one’s own culture with the engagement of another’s resulting in a richer blended viewpoint.”<sup>22</sup> Every culture and person has been formed and shaped by their own myths, stories, and histories. These narratives are reflections of the “Christ soaked world” that surrounds us, acting as both the hiding place and revelation of God.<sup>23</sup> Perspective-taking allows one to truly engage with another person and perceive the places where Christ is present in a culture or a person’s life—even if they do not name it as such. Perspective-taking requires the capacity to humbly cross boundaries, though this ability is rarely automatic.

The church must develop the ability to join God most effectively in the task of making and deepening disciples. When the church engages in discipling, it should do so with the recognition that crossing boundaries is also integral for our own ongoing journey of discipleship. We can play a role in discipling others, but another person’s journey can often shape and lead us to see God’s presence and activity in new ways. This is equally as vital to the outflow of ministry as to intercultural partnerships. Our lives and work are truncated when we do not make room for viewpoints and experiences outside our own.

<sup>21</sup> Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, “What is Transformational Discipleship?” *Ecumenical Review* 71, nos. 1–2 (2019): 224.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin M. Gushiken, “Cultivating Healthy Discipleship Settings in Multi-Ethnic Churches,” *Transformation* 32, no. 1 (2015): 23.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Rohr, “An Incarnational Worldview,” Center for Action and Contemplation, February 22, 2019, <https://cac.org/an-incarnational-worldview-2019-02-22/>.



The ministries highlighted here are examples from a diverse Christian community seeking to move closer to a reconciled relationship to God, peace-filled relationships with our neighbors, and loving care for creation in the unique urban context of Marseille, France. Even as we fall short in our witness to the whole gospel, we work to be in tune with the pulse of our city. We adapt daily to new forms of interaction in order to participate fully in the give and take of human relationships in trans-migrational flux. In all contexts, as the global church lives out its vocation as the people of God, our local witness may have effects reaching farther than we can imagine.