

Respecting Hermeneutical Space

# The Model is the Message

by Ronald and Carolyn Klaus

For several years I (Ronald) taught a course in Small Group Discipleship at one of Ethiopia's leading seminaries. The small group model had become fundamental to the growth of movements we were involved with in that region. But I was challenged in conveying it in a more traditional learning context. How I taught the material seemed crucial to conveying what I taught.

I gave out an extensive set of notes, with daily reading assignments and three thought-provoking questions for the students to answer in writing every day. There were no exams. Instead, grades were based on attendance, punctuality, the quality of the written responses to the three questions, class participation, and one term paper. I started every period by facilitating a class-wide group discussion about the assigned questions. Students were encouraged to share their own stories and raise further questions. I responded by sharing anecdotes to illustrate the principles we had talked about.

In every two-and-a-half-hour session, I broke the class down into small groups of five to six in which they could actually experience what they were learning. The students took turns leading the groups. This was followed by a debrief time in which both leader and group members reflected on their experiences.

I shared the break time with any students willing to have coffee with me because I wanted to get to know them more personally. This was a conscious part of the teaching. I wanted to model something of how small group leaders should relate to their participants. Leaders are not there merely to lead meetings. Their job is to love and influence people and pastor them along their journeys toward transformation. I closed each class with a short, motivational presentation that introduced the next set of materials and helped them see why it was important. The students' anonymous reviews of the course were always very positive.

One year I was unable to teach the course because of other commitments. I recommended an Ethiopian friend, someone I had mentored, who had implemented one of Ethiopia's best small group models in his local church.

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He had also read even more widely on the subject than I had. The seminary refused to appoint him because he did not have a PhD.

To make matters worse, the American PhD who replaced me had never been in a small group herself, let alone taught about it. She was very grateful to have my notes. She used them to lecture her way through the course. The seminary never saw anything wrong with this. However, she was modeling the exact opposite of what the students should have been learning by seeing it in action. Instead, the lecture-only model undermined the value of the course. Without realizing it, she taught them that they could train other small group leaders through lectures alone. This may be an extreme case, but it illustrates that we teach not only by talking about the subject we want to convey but also by the structures we use to convey it.

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### ***Marshall McLuhan and a Disclaimer***

Our paper's title is a take-off on Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message*,<sup>1</sup> first published in 1967. He was a visionary, far ahead of his time. The book shows that the way we send and receive information is at least as important as the information itself. With this insight, McLuhan predicted the impact that the internet, social media, big data collection, and other technologies would have on the world decades later.

Over the last two decades, we have had abundant opportunity to observe that in missions the *model of ministry*, rather than the material presented, is often the message that people absorb.

First, a disclaimer. Astute readers will soon realize that the way we are communicating here violates the very principles we are trying to bring out. Lecturing through Zoom and written material is not the best way to model ministry. However, in the context of COVID and the limitations imposed by the conference structure, we thank God and you for this opportunity to share our concerns, and also allow you to hear some of our colleagues in Ethiopia speak for themselves.

### ***Our Learning Model Becomes Our Message***

Fikadu Endale, overseer of the Western Shewa movement in Ethiopia tells us:<sup>2</sup>

I am Pastor Fikadu from Ethiopia. I've been working with Dr. Ron and Dr. Carolyn for the last sixteen or seventeen years. We work in Western Shewa. These people were from an animistic background. We started working with transformational small groups in that area. People sit together in a small number and study the Word of God, especially Discovery Bible Studies whose leaders are trained by us. They come to love Jesus, their family is transformed. Their family comes to know Christ, and their community is transformed. They stop drinking and abusing their wives. They start sending all of their kids to school. Now some of their kids are college students and some of them are college teachers. They discovered all these new ways from their transformational small groups and the Discovery Bible Study.

Right from the beginning, Fikadu and his closest disciple formed these animist people into small groups for personal sharing, inductive Bible study, prayer, accountability, and mission. They discovered for themselves what the Bible had to say, figured out together its application to their lives, and held one another accountable for doing what they were learning.

Once, when we were discussing the problem of illiteracy with him, one of his leaders overheard us and interrupted us to offer us a solution they had already devised. Those who couldn't read sat on either side of someone who could. The literate member held the Bible between his illiterate friends and ran his fingers along the text as he read aloud. Because their printed language is completely phonetic, his companions quickly associated the characters and combinations with the sounds of their language. Before long they were reading—without the help of “literacy experts.”

At one point some small groups spontaneously began talking about their problems with alcohol. On their own, they began to daily call on those with the problem to see how they were doing. Every week they celebrated everyone who had had an alcohol-free week. They prayed for those who continued to struggle. Over about six months, alcoholism completely disappeared among them—without any sermons about alcohol. This same process led to the end of wife abuse, female circumcision, poor work habits, etc. We wonder what would happen in the West if instead of only preaching to large audiences, our pastors would train ordinary people to facilitate change, just as the people in this movement are learning to do.

In these small groups, their members also got practice in praying for healing, doing exorcisms, and discerning false prophecy. At one baptismal service we witnessed, we were amazed at the confidence and competence with which these new believers handled a woman manifesting demonic activity. This

same confidence has led to their planting about fifty congregation-size groups which now include approximately 10,000 people in hundreds of small groups. Though their congregational units also meet weekly for worship and teaching, they view the small groups with trained leaders as the essence of the church, the cutting edge of the transformational process. The larger groups exist as supplements and encouragement for people to join the small groups.

They also tell us that they hardly have to “evangelize” in the way we usually think about it. They say that unbelievers come in—often first to one of the small groups—not because someone invited them but because they have seen the difference in the members’ lifestyles. “Whatever you have,” strangers say, “we want to learn more about it.” It is what we have come to call “city on a hill evangelism.”

This is not to say that preaching doesn’t have a role. It is useful for vision-casting, for inspiration, and for communicating new information that people could not dig out of the Bible themselves. It complements, rather than replaces, inductive study.

But if preaching is not intentionally integrated with structures through which people can process what is being preached, the preaching model itself communicates undesirable messages. It communicates that it is enough to hear information, whether or not one remembers the information, let alone does anything as a result. If there is no accountability for what one hears, obedience must not be important.

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If we are interested in *character development*, there is no substitute for Fikadu’s self-discovery in small groups with accountability. It is the *only* way we will develop people who *always* return good for evil, respond graciously to criticism, give needed criticism with gentleness, want others to share in the limelight, want the best even for their opponents, and live modestly. It is the *only* way that we will develop people who *never* flirt with unhealthy sexual attractions, cheat on their finances, steal people from other ministries, or resent the success of others. Such small groups are the *only* place where people can share their struggles and develop better habits,

which are the only means through which character develops. If we don’t develop methods that can guarantee such outcomes, then we are either saying that character development is not important or else we are naïve about how it happens.

Then there is the issue of *skill development*. In nearly every field besides the Church, people learn skills by practicing them in the presence of a mentor until they are proficient. That, of course, requires a lot of skilled mentors.

In sports, our favorite team of 53 players has 24 full-time coaches. All for the glory of getting a piece of leather across a goal line. In the trades, young people apprentice themselves to experienced craftsmen until they can demonstrate competence in all of the skills required for their trade.

In my (Carolyn’s) becoming a doctor, five of my seven years of training consisted mostly of being mentored by my seniors in the care of real live patients and mentoring those who followed me.

Perhaps my (Ron’s) best experience in seeing people acquire the skills they must have to function effectively in difficult situations was my brief brush with the US Army. I was very impressed with the training’s nature, quality, and transformational power. They took their challenge seriously. They had to convert mostly unwilling recruits into effective fighters who could win wars. They understood how hard that process was and invested heavily in training models that could do that. There were lectures, but by far, most training was through in-the-field experiences followed by evaluations and detailed records of proficiencies. No training with a weapon stopped until you were proficient in using it, as verified by officers who watched you and scored you.

This transformation was possible because of the army’s leadership structure. Every single person in the US Army reports to an officer who commands no more than ten people directly (sometimes up to twelve at the squad level). Everyone above that level commands no more than five or six. In the entire army, every person is known *personally* by his or her commanding officer, who can evaluate him or her and make sure they get all the training and practice they need to become effective, no matter how long that takes. They do this by having layered units—squads, platoons, companies, battalions, regiments, divisions—and layered commanders—sergeants, lieutenants, captains, majors, colonels, generals. At every level of leadership, each leader receives specific, well-thought-through, and tested training to prepare him or her for the next level of leadership. Everyone gets ongoing training, support, supervision, and evaluation. This reminds us of the structure that Jethro recommended to Moses in Exodus 18.

Contrast this with what we do in churches. Rarely do laypersons get any systematic ministry training at all, let alone very much accountability for any ministry they have been trusted to do. Pastors and missionaries usually get only hit-or-miss training after they graduate from seminary or Bible school. Few receive help to develop into church planters, mentors of other pastors, or mission leaders; most remain in static positions all their lives. As a result, the Church has very few mentors compared to the number required if every member were to have a mentor who knew them and made sure they were growing.

We are not endorsing the military or its goals. However, winning wars requires the structures that armies have developed. What does it say about us when we, who are involved in the greatest cosmic battle of all times, use learning models that human armies would consider woefully inadequate?

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### *Our Training Model Becomes Our Message*

The next colleague from whom you will hear was once the director of missions for a large denomination in Ethiopia. Over time he came to believe that their traditional model of missions was not working well enough. About nine years ago he came to us and asked us to help him start a different kind of movement toward Jesus among people from another Abrahamic faith who had been hostile to Jesus.

We began with ten men whom he had evangelized. After several years of trust-building and secret training, we believed the time had come for outreach to begin. We covenanted together with these brothers that this emerging movement would be contextualized, that they would stay within their communities no matter what the opposition or persecution, and that they would not accept either teaching or money from outsiders. The Jesus followers who were religious leaders began to share about Isa al Masih from their own holy book. When people became interested, they met with them privately for further study and discussion.

Our colleague visited them monthly. At times we joined them outside of their region for more concentrated training and discussion. At first, this effort was very much underground, and those who started to follow Isa suffered some persecution. However, everyone admired their exemplary lifestyles and their helpfulness to their community. An important turning point came when the Jesus-following leaders were able to make peace with a neighboring tribe that attacked them and killed some of their people.

People then started to become followers in larger numbers. The Jesus followers are now routinely called on to resolve village conflicts. The entire area has opened to the good news, and there are Bible studies in all of their twenty-six villages. Our colleague was recently made an honorary member of the tribe. He is also coaching leaders in another rapidly expanding movement in a similar cultural group in another part of the country. Here is what he has to say about how he trains.

In the south and western part of the country, I train only the top leadership of the movement. In this training I help them understand about prayer, having fellowship with the Lord, reading the Bible, and studying it among themselves. They also learn to solve problems by themselves. In the west, when there were rumors and some problems within their movement, they brought them out and discussed and solved them by themselves. In the south, when there was tribal violence, their top leaders were able to make peace. They became famous for being able to make peace in their communities. They are also growing vegetables and other crops. They are, therefore, growing strong economically. What they have experienced, they pass on to others and, therefore, grow in number.

Our colleague's training model has been entirely based on relationships, with intense discussions in small groups about God's word and its application to their local situations. Because of that, the movement members find it logical for them to pass on the Good News in the same way. There are no Bible Schools and no full-timers. Yet these are among the healthiest movements with which we work in Ethiopia. Their fervor and willingness to sacrifice are amazing, and they are entirely lacking in dependency.

### **Bible Schools and Seminaries**

Again, our traditional training models communicate powerful messages about which many of us rarely think. To begin with, in these models a person can decide for him- or herself to have a *career* as a pastor without any evaluation of their spiritual maturity or gifts. Anyone can get into Bible school or seminary if they apply. There is no requirement for proven ministry as a non-professional. In situations where there is high unemployment, being a pastor can be a good path to a respected career with a guaranteed salary.

A second dangerous message is that the mere existence of outside training schools can communicate that ministry requires advanced training. Ordinary people can't do it. If only specialized training qualifies a person for ministry, this kills the priesthood of all believers. If a church wants to train its leaders, it should do it locally, so that attendees can continue both their local ministry and their jobs through which they support their families.

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A similarly dangerous message is that what qualifies a person to minister is the information he or she gains, not their own walk with God. Many seminaries and Bible schools offer relatively little training in spiritual formation.

I was once invited to teach a course in spiritual formation at a leading US seminary. I did it by having students write personal journals, submit them at every class session, and receive my written feedback at the next class session. After a slow start, they finally started amazingly deep written conversations. I spent about twenty hours a week responding to their journal entries. Their entries—only a few months before they would be ordained—contained doubts about the Bible's truth and whether God loved them. Some reported unresolved conflicts with spouses and leaders of their ministries. Some confessed lack of spiritual vitality. One of them seemed to have a serious mental illness.

The students were very grateful for the experience. No one had ever asked them about such things before. They reported their enthusiasm to the seminary administration and requested that this course would continue. But the seminary never asked me back. After this one experience, they dropped the course.

## Churches

Churches also communicate strong, unintentional messages when only ordained ministers share ministry on Sunday mornings. Except for occasional dramatic testimonies of healing or deliverance, most churches rarely allow anyone else to share spiritual insights or exhortations in a service. Non-professionals quickly learn that their role is to do the church chores, take care of children and youth ministry, prepare the

refreshments, and manage the finances. Spiritual matters are left to the professionals. This is a loud message that the priesthood of all believers is obsolete.

## *Our Model of Community Becomes Our Message*

Here is what our colleague Mezgebu Tsemru has learned about community.

We used to preach and think that we were a community. But practically we were not. At one time we sent out messages to find out how our people were doing because we did not have a small group ministry at that time. We found that we didn't know our people. One of our leaders visited one of our members and found out that he died a year ago. It showed that we didn't even know whether our people were dead or alive. That showed that what we thought we were and what we were saying about ourselves did not match the reality on the ground.

As Mezgebu has testified, churches made of large passive audiences communicate that intense relationships between people are not necessary. "Community" means that we bring meals to one another when we are sick and perhaps help one another pack boxes when we move. This is not bad but falls far short of what biblical community means.

The typical church "fellowship hall" is a place where people chat over coffee or food, but where a deep conversation is highly improbable, if not impossible. Few people know each other's vulnerabilities, let alone engage with them.

Producing a real community requires many leaders who are willing to take the time to engage with the real issues of people's lives and are trained well enough to be helpful. It also requires that church leadership be willing to cut out enough of the church activities so that everyone can be in a group in which they have deep relationships focused on their personal spiritual growth. Not doing this communicates the message that we don't have to practice the 59 "one anothers" in the New Testament. Our practice says, in effect, that these are optional.

## *Our Payment Model Becomes Our Message*

This is the contribution from our colleague Shimeles Dejene, who has experienced several models of payment for ministry.

I'm Shimeles Dejene from Ethiopia. For twelve years I was a full-time minister with a denomination, and then for eleven years, I was full-time with a parachurch missions organization. Five years ago, I resigned and began a disciple-making movement in Addis Ababa and the surrounding towns, particularly focusing among the rapidly multiplying condominiums. I have been supporting our family from a small shop that sells milk from our cows and from my salary as a part-time administrator for a small medical college. Here is what I have learned about payment for ministry. When I was being paid by the church and mission organization, it

was difficult to implement fully what the Lord had called me to do. In fact, sometimes I had to compromise in order to speak out about problems. Now that I am financially independent, I can freely say whatever God is giving me to say. When I was being paid regularly by others, it was hard for me to tell those I was discipling to trust God for their finances. It was also hard for me to convince them that they did not have to be full-timers to be fruitful in ministry. Now that others see that I do ministry even though I also have secular work, they have become bold to do ministry in their off-hours. Therefore, I encourage others to do the same for better ministry success.

In addition to what Shimeles shared, our training models that include Bible schools and seminaries have created an entitlement mentality around the world. Much of the Church has been taught to believe that those who have been through such schools deserve full-time financial support.

In our early days in Ethiopia, we worked with a church planting movement that told us they had about 200 young men waiting to be “sent.” Our first thought was that this was an amazing example of dedication. But then we realized what was going on. Either they were unemployed or they wanted to get away from the difficult work of farming. Someone else was raising the funding. They were looking for jobs.

Instead, we should be communicating that anyone wanting to do ministry should start immediately while they earn their own financial support. They should first aim to disciple five to ten people and teach them to form and disciple their own small groups, something a person can do while still working a full-time job. Only when they are successful at that should they be considered for any further training. When their off-hours ministry is so fruitful that their elders believe that doing it full-time would multiply it *and* when their converts and mentees are tithing enough to support them, then they could become full-timers. If we don’t accept that model, the world will never be evangelized. We will never have enough full-timers to do it. World evangelism awaits a huge army of self-supporting skilled disciple-makers.

### ***Our Lack of Commitment to Long-Term Mentoring Becomes a Message***

Our primary Ethiopian colleagues are very gifted apostolic leaders who were fruitful disciple-makers before they met us. From the beginning of our relationships, they saw the value of the model of small group shepherding that we taught. Through it, they learned to be more

effective themselves and were able to train and raise up others. However, our role as alongsiders continues to be helpful to them even after seventeen years.

First, they were at the beginning stage of a movement model that we had already experienced in the US. We were in a place to give some guidance as they encountered pitfalls and problems that we had already encountered. Just as the apostle Paul discovered that the foundation of some of his early churches later required fixing and strengthening, we have also found that our colleagues’ movements sometimes started in ways that were not ideal and sowed problems that cropped up afterward.

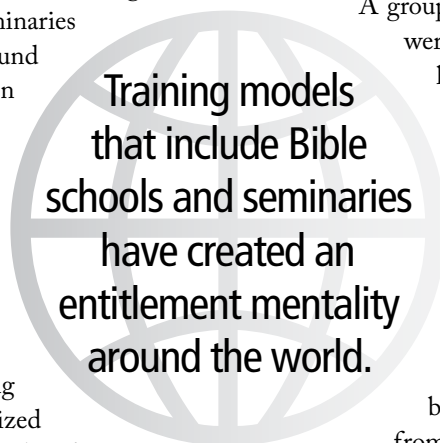
A group of Argentine brothers whose movements were about five years ahead of ours in the US helped us anticipate and thereby navigate the problems that we encountered. We have tried to do the same for our Ethiopian brothers.

Second, our colleagues’ movements have encountered new challenges as their environments have changed.

A few years ago, it was *jihad*; now it is COVID, drought, and civil war. We have been able to connect them with resources from other parts of the world to help them deal with these things.

Third, our colleagues have repeatedly required strong encouragement as they have encountered more and more opposition. The pressures from surrounding traditional churches, let alone from those outside their movements, have been enormous. We need to understand this and plan for increasing support to fruitful leaders as they become targets for our enemy. He attacks them more severely as they begin to succeed. They also have had to learn to pass that encouragement on to people they oversee, who have faced the same trials. At their levels of leadership, our apostolic colleagues don’t have many people to talk to about their issues, both personal and ministerial. Our being available to listen and provide such encouragement and counsel to them may have been our most important contribution to them over the years.

Fourth, apostolic leaders have to grow in their thinking and training skills as they have more levels of leaders they must train and oversee. Leading a grass roots small group is different from coaching small group leaders, coaching coaches, overseeing entire congregations, or overseeing groups of congregations. Churches that have planted other churches that have planted others up to several generations, face challenges in keeping their movements vital that younger churches do not yet face. The US Army recognizes the need for ongoing training for all officers specific to their level of leadership.



Even the high-ranking officers who have large commands must go to the US Army War College to develop skills on a strategic level.

If the church were to develop such a mentoring structure, it would communicate that every person, whatever their place in the body of Christ, is worth investing in because they are destined to play an important role in God's army. It would be saying that every individual should be continually growing, should have specific opportunities to move to their next level of competence, and should be expected to change the lives of others in positive ways. It would say that every person should get whatever help they need to overcome whatever obstacles keep them from fruitfulness. This kind of layered networking with ongoing training would eliminate or at least delay the corruption of movements that have occurred throughout church history.

However, if our model of ministry does not assure this kind of long-term mentoring for every believer, we are behaving like parents that don't care whether their children advance in school. We are saying that individuals neither are valuable in themselves nor have the potential to become significant in God's kingdom. We are saying that it is acceptable for discipleship to get watered down as movements institutionalize over the generations. We are denying the seriousness of our ongoing real war with the devil. We are promoting the illusion that people can meet his challenge without continued growth in their character and skills. In other words, we are setting ourselves up for failure, saying that God will have to wait for another generation to demonstrate his kingdom to all peoples.

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### *Conclusions*

We have tried to offer a fresh awareness beyond a singular focus on the content of our communication. We must understand how our models of ministry can undermine the content we teach, that it will require we review our models of learning, training, community, payment for ministry, and commitment to long-term mentoring.

Thank God that many kingdom movements blossoming throughout the world today generally model some of the key messages we've been talking about, and especially during their beginnings. They espouse not only the idea but the practice that learning from God's word is for everyone, not only those who have had specialized training. Ministry is for everyone.

But tragically, apart from persecution, abundant evidence from history shows that most movements that start well will, over time, devolve into larger institutions that abandon the very methods that made them successful at their beginning. We plead with the missions community to consider how their models of ministry may contradict the very things they are trying to teach. This may point to the need for some radical changes in the way we structure our relationships, meetings, and training programs in the body of Christ. Our failure to pay attention to these things could delay the progress of the kingdom of God in our generation. It will leave to those following to take more seriously the challenge of our enemy's relentless warfare against God's kingdom. **IJFM**

### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> It's interesting that the book was actually called *The Medium is the Massage* due to a mistake by the typesetters. McLuhan felt his popular notion "the medium is the message" had become almost cliché, and when he saw the error in the book's title, he loved it and kept it as it was typeset.

<sup>2</sup> These are actual quotations from the video presentations made by some of our colleagues during the presentation of this paper.