

Christian Perceptions of Discipleship Program in Africa Gospel Church Nkoroi in Kajiado County, Kenya

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Abstract

Discipleship is undoubtedly one of the fundamental ministries of the church. For a church to experience a qualitative growth of its members, there has to be a focus on spiritual formation and development programs. This study aimed to understand the perceptions of Christians in Africa Gospel Church (AGC) Nkoroi on discipleship programs. It used a descriptive research design, with the target population comprised 215 church members. Twenty members were sampled and interviewed. The study found that AGC's emphasis on discipleship and spiritual growth has played a significant role in shaping the lives of its members and enabling them to live out their faith in meaningful ways. Also, the involvement of senior pastors and senior church members was found to be crucial in creating an environment where discipleship is valued and promoted. Finally, the study found that AGC Nkoroi's discipleship needs improvement to be more effective.

Keywords: Discipleship; Spiritual Formation and Growth; Africa Gospel Church.

Introduction

Discipleship is one of the areas of need in the church globally (Heywet 2013, 1). Discipleship programs are critical in church growth because they help Christians in spiritual formation. It enables believers to become more like Christ. In Africa, where the church has continued to experience gradual growth, there is a great need to focus on discipleship for well-formed believers and healthy churches. Unfortunately, many church budgets do not reflect this centrality because meagre resources are allocated to discipleship programs that enable believers to become Christ-like (Ingram and Dowdy 2019, 19).

Africa Gospel Church is an evangelical denomination in Kenya whose vision is "The Whole Church taking the Gospel to the whole world" (Langat, 2018-2022, 9). The church was missionary-founded in 1905 before it became an autonomous entity in 1961 (Langat, 2018-2022, 8). The purpose of the Africa Gospel Church is to fulfil God's commandment and the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 12:30; 31 and Acts 1:8), which will be



possible through the following key strategies: Evangelising the Unserved, Establishing Churches, Edifying Believers, Equipping Leaders and Lastly, Exercising Social Compassion (Langat, 2017, 3).

The AGC Nkoroi is in Kajiado County, Kenya. This congregation has established discipleship programs to empower believers to reach out and become mature Christians (The Navigators-Kenya 2014, ix). However, many Christians have not utilised the opportunity to benefit from these programs. Previously, discipleship programs in this congregation have faced challenges due to a lack of commitment from the members. Hence, it is critical to ascertain believers' perceptions of these programs and suggest possible solutions for ministry effectiveness. The researcher analysed the perception from an insider's and an outsider's perspectives, having been a member for more than one year and being a researcher.

Literature Review

Biblical Foundation of Discipleship

The Greek word *mathētēs* refers to a disciple,

In the Greek world, *mathētēs* variously designated an apprentice, one who companied with a teacher in order to learn from him, one who belonged to a certain school of philosophy (e.g., a disciple of Socrates), and one who adhered to the teaching of another, even though that one could be removed in time and place. Groups of disciples continued even after a teacher died. Their commitment to a master/teacher led to passing along his wisdom and sayings. (Bromiley 1995, 947)

Expectedly, a disciple would become a teacher after a period of listening and learning.

In the Gospels, the term disciple referred to the followers of Jesus. However, it also referred to the disciples of Moses (John 9:28), of the Pharisees (Matt 22:16 Mk 22:18), of John the Baptist (Mk 2:18; Lk 11:1), and perhaps Paul (Acts 9:25). Jesus chose and called his disciples (Mk 10:28), even to suffer for his sake (Mk 8:34). To his disciples "Jesus gave the disciples His own interpretation of the OT and His direct teaching, rather than a catena of traditions to which He simply added his own word" (Bromiley 1995, 947). In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded his disciples to go to the world and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18–20). In the book of Acts, the apostles preached the gospel and disciplined them through pastoral visits and follow-up missionary journeys to ensure that the seed that was planted matured.

Importance of Discipleship

The study conducted by Smith (2012) sheds light on the positive perception of discipleship programs among Christians, emphasising their effectiveness in fostering spiritual growth. The findings highlight a significant majority of participants who reported experiencing a deeper



understanding of biblical teachings, increased commitment to their faith, and improved relationships with God and fellow believers through their engagement in discipleship programs. However, while the study emphasises the importance of personalised mentoring, regular Scripture study, and practical application of Christian principles in enhancing program effectiveness, it does not delve into potential gaps or challenges Christians may face in perceiving discipleship programs.

Johnson's (2016) research highlights the challenges Christians face in discipleship programs, which affect their perception of such programs. The identified challenges include time constraints, lack of accountability, and difficulty finding suitable mentors. Participants expressed the need for flexible program structures, clear expectations, and greater support from church leadership. These findings suggest that there may be a gap between the current program structures and the needs and expectations of Christians, which, if left unaddressed, can affect long-term engagement and lead to less positive perceptions of discipleship programs.

The qualitative study by Lee (2018) shed light on Christians' perceptions of different discipleship program structures. The findings indicated that participants valued formal and informal approaches, indicating diverse preferences within the Christian community. While some individuals preferred structured curricula and organised group activities, others leaned towards organic relationships and mentorship models. This gap highlights the need for discipleship programs to incorporate flexibility in their design, accommodating Christians' varied needs and preferences. By recognising and incorporating diverse learning methods, discipleship programs can strive to bridge this gap and provide a more inclusive and effective spiritual growth experience for all participants.

Discipleship in the Old Testament

Defining discipleship as developing a person's lifelong, obedient relationship with Christ by letting him transform your character into Christ's likeness. The good thing in the Old Testament is that certain prophets had disciples who contributed well to the success of their ministry. For example, Noah found grace before God because he was ready to obey God's command all his life.

Jesus and Discipleship

When Jesus met Peter and his other disciples, he told them, "Follow me." In obedience to this command, they left everything to follow him. The call involved some cost, "Whoever would like to follow Christ must deny himself by carrying his cross" (Matt 16:24). The discipleship



process starts when a person hears God's voice and accepts to become his disciple. In other words, it is a relationship and a process that begins when someone gives their life to Christ (Williams 2008, 8). Some biblical factors can help the church to make disciples include making disciples even when your life is crowded with priorities, disciple-making requires intentionality, making disciples is a process, using everyday situations as opportunities to make disciples and always relating disciples to the Father (Putman & Harrington, 2013).

Disciple-making must involve strategies to produce the very things Jesus commanded: Paul built relationships with the people; he went "fishing men" in the local synagogue, which lasted three months until it was no longer fruitful, and then he moved into a lecture hall of Tyrannus (Greenway & Monsma, 2000). Paul's teaching and evangelism ministry led to many conversions in the city. In Ephesus, they discipled many believers. Scholars have approximated that more than thirty-five named disciples of Paul from other regions found their way to Ephesus during his ministry. Moreover, in Ephesus, there was the reproduction of disciples. It is one of the good things that today's churches should emulate. The church understood that discipleship is about reproduction, so they sent teams to surrounding regions to proclaim the gospel (Harrington, 2014). In other words, Paul built a relationship with people to teach them God's word and to reproduce more disciples.

Bonhoeffer argues that the disciples' response is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith in Jesus (Bonhoeffer, 2012; Kim, 2015). This is crucial in discipleship because obedience to God's will is the secret of spiritual knowledge and insight. It is not the willingness to know but the willingness to do (obey). The will of God brings enlightenment and certainty regarding spiritual truth (Liddell, 1985, 27). In addition, Walter (2009) states that the God of the gospel is a God who calls persons and communities to Himself to engage in praise and obedience. Paul wrote to Timothy, "God who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Tim 1:9).

Bonhoeffer (2012) also states, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." The purpose of evangelism is a part of discipleship where people are invited to enter into a covenant relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Bonhoeffer thoughts demonstrate that the call to follow at once produces a new situation because staying in the old situation makes discipleship impossible. Bonhoeffer further states that "the call to follow implies that there is only one way of believing in Jesus Christ, by leaving all and going with the incarnate Son of God" (Bonhoeffer, 1959, 67). When God calls someone, his way of doing things changes, and he starts doing like his Master Jesus. In the discipleship journey, obedience is



the secret of being conscious that God guides you personally (Liddell, 1985). In addition, Bonhoeffer observed that faith is only genuine when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience (Bonhoeffer, 1958).

Ron emphasises that prayer plays a vital role in making disciples. In his view, when prayer is lacking, several consequences arise. First, opportunities to make disciples are easily overlooked. Second, without prayer, the boldness of the Christian witness diminishes. Third, the absence of prayer results in only a few commitments from new disciples and a scarcity of workers dedicated to making disciples. Lastly, without prayer, the spiritual power needed to make disciples is effectively absent (Ron, 2014).

According to Willis and Snowden (2014), achieving effective discipleship in today's church requires individuals who embody certain qualities. First, it entails living a life fully committed to Christ. Second, it involves being a well-armed person with strength of character. Third, it entails standing for something and living out one's beliefs. Fourth, an effective disciple has a fruitful ministry and can guide others in achieving the same. Further, having a shared experience or common ground with the disciples is essential. That is, living open lives that integrate the spiritual and secular, at home or in public (Hammer, Wade & Cragun, 2020). In summary, effective discipleship calls for individuals who demonstrate commitment, character, integrity, ministry effectiveness, shared experience, a stable home life, and the integration of spiritual and secular aspects.

The Cost of Discipleship

The cost of discipleship, a concept popularised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has been a subject of scholarly examination. In his seminal work, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), Bonhoeffer argues that true discipleship involves a radical commitment and willingness to sacrifice to follow Christ. He contends that the cost of discipleship entails relinquishing personal desires, embracing self-denial, and taking up the cross daily. He emphasises that genuine discipleship requires a complete surrender to Christ's lordship, irrespective of the challenges and sacrifices it may entail. Building upon Bonhoeffer's ideas, scholars like William D. Mounce (2008) have expounded on the theological significance of the cost of discipleship, highlighting the transformative power of embracing the demands and challenges of following Christ. The scholarly discourse surrounding the cost of discipleship underscores the counter-cultural nature of true discipleship, requiring believers to forsake worldly pursuits and prioritise a life of devotion and obedience to Christ.



In Luke 14:26–27, Jesus presented a challenging aspect of discipleship, indicating that those who desire to become His disciples must be willing to prioritise their devotion to God over their closest relationships. This verse emphasises the radical commitment required in discipleship, calling for a readiness to forsake familial ties and even one's life for God's kingdom. Jesus emphasises the necessity of taking up one's cross (Matt 16:24). This imagery suggests a willingness to endure hardship, persecution, and self-sacrifice to follow Christ. These verses highlight the high cost of discipleship, emphasising the radical demands placed upon believers in their commitment to Christ.

However, in the context of this research, discipleship first costs *time* because one needs to read the materials before meeting with others. There is no discipleship without personal time with God and preparation. Every disciple needs their time in prayer, doing his or her devotion and meditating on God's word day and night as the word of God says, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night..." (Joshua 1:8). Second, Discipleship requires *money* to meet necessary financial obligations. Lastly, discipleship requires *relational energy*, investing time to build relationships to make more disciples. One has to be ready to move from one's comfort zone and make new friends. In other words, discipleship calls believers to sacrifice important things for God's sake. Christians are called "first to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness and other things shall be added" (Matt 6:33).

The Importance of Discipleship in Believers' Lives

Discipleship should begin with church leaders and pastors, then the congregations (Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church [EKHC], 2013, 3). Church members need human models and accountability to become what Christ intends for them to be (Willis, 1997, 5). They also need the church community to grow further in Christ. Therefore, discipleship involves practising God's commands of making disciples of all nations. Discipleship helps believers to become mature Christians who will also make other disciples. Dawson states, "The way to reach the world is by making disciples who can reproduce themselves into the lives of the generations" (Dawson, 2007, 12). One of the crucial roles of discipleship is that it helps to become more like Christ, which should be the desire of all Christians. Expectedly, a convert should join a discipleship program to begin a spiritual formation journey after receiving Christ. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as is the case with the African Gospel Church Nkoroi.



In addition, Barna argues that transformation into Christ-likeness is the ultimate goal of discipleship, "no one can pass through discipleship class and remain the same. Discipleship changes disciples' way of doing things. Peter and other disciples are good examples. Their lives were transformed, and the impact of that transformation was visible: growing spiritual maturity and finally knowing Christ more deeply" (Barna 2015, 15). Thus, discipleship is all about transformation, not about information. After the discipleship program, disciples should be ready to be involved in different church departments to enhance this transformation further.

Common Excuses for not Joining Discipleship Program

Again, discipleship transforms believers' character into Christ-likeness (Willis, 2008, 5). When believers are unwilling to join discipleship programs, there could be some factors that need to be probed. It could be a lack of knowledge about the programs or negative perceptions of discipleship. In addition, one's church background can be a hindrance; some might have come from churches that offer discipleship programs before baptism. Other factors include a person's motivation to join the church. Lastly, there is a lack of trained facilitators in churches and committed people who can mentor new disciples to God's word.

Examples of Discipleship Models Used in Other Churches

There are several discipleship materials used in different churches in Kenya. Good Shepherd Africa Gospel Church uses *The African Strategic Discipleship Movement*" (ASDM). Its purpose is to collaborate with African denominations to disciple pastoral leaders to effectively make disciples in local churches. It seeks to strengthen local Churches in spiritual maturity and extend local evangelism and mission outreach (SIM, 2018, 8). It is a compilation of 16 discipleship lessons in six categories, including the kingdom's gospel, spiritual transformation, disciple-making, evangelism and mission, relationships, marriage, and family and leading a disciple-making movement (SIM, 2018, 8).

Second, the *Safari Discipleship* program used by Christ Is The Answer Ministry (CITAM). It is a comprehensive discipleship program designed to be a journey for personal growth and transformation (pg. 2). The main component of the *Safari* consists of the five stages or steps in the journey: Enter, Encounter, Embrace, Enlist, and Engage. Note that these five steps seek to equip every individual believer to Know, Grow, Bond, Serve, and Minister (Enlist1, Vii). Therefore, the concern is "Enter, Embrace 2, and Enlist 1."

Third, the *Mizizi Discipleship* program is another model program. *Mizizi* (Swahili word for 'Root') is a discipleship program used by Mavuno Church and Nairobi Chapel. A



ten-week experience to help disciples grow in their relationship with God (What they were created for), know what they believe (Understand their faith better), and make new high-impact kingdom friendships with people who will support them in their faith. It seeks to build habits and practices that will help them grow long after the *Mizizi* program and become a connected and vibrant part of their local church (Wanjau, 2005, 3).

The last model is the one used at Nkoroi Africa Gospel Church. It is called *Growing in Discipleship*. Africa Gospel Church Nkoroi uses the discipleship program to help believers to know God better and to gain the assurance of their salvation by laying the Christian foundation and discovering the thrill of growing closer to God and living the Christian life with joy, freedom, and discipline (The Navigators, 2014, ix).

Methodology

Research Design

The study used qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the perception of AGC Nkoroi members that causes low enrollment in the church discipleship program. Qualitative and quantitative methods are descriptive because the answers to the stated problem are found in the subjective expressions and experiences of the respondents. The study used a descriptive research design to investigate the perception of the church discipleship program among the Christians in the AGC Nkoroi in Kajiado County.

Through qualitative research, researchers can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, to understand the experiences and imaginations of the research participants (Mason, 2002, 9). The researcher was interested in understanding AGC Nkoroi members' perceptions of discipleship. The data collection process entailed strategic inquiry, whereas data analysis required sound reasoning and reflective interpretation as the researcher sought a deeper understanding of the subject matter of concern.

Target Population, Sampling Technique and Size

The target population is the collection of subjects with the same characteristics (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). In this study, the target population comprised two hundred and fifteen (215) members of Africa Gospel Church.

A sample is a subset of a group chosen from a larger population (Salaria, 2012). A sampling technique is a strategy used to select representative, not biased, participants with a minimum margin of error and a reasonable level of confidence to participate in a study (Kothari, 2004). The purposive sampling targeted twenty (20) members with critical



information were selected to participate in the study. The sample included four pastors, four church leaders, and twelve church members.

Data Collection Procedures

The research was analytical and emic with the importance of in-depth interviews and questionnaires (Starcher 2003, 65). In this study, the researcher collected data by interviewing selected members of Africa Gospel Church Nkoroi, seeking to find out their perceptions of discipleship.

Data Analysis

The study aimed to understand the perception of the church discipleship program among Christians in AGC Nkoroi, Kajiado County, in Kenya. The researcher used qualitative and quantitative methods, including "observation, interviews, and questionnaires" (Creswell, 2009, 186–187).

Data from the open-ended questions was crosschecked for completeness and were analysed using the SPSS software. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, median, minimum, and maximum were used to summarise continuous variables, while categorical variables were summarised using proportions. The analysed data was presented using charts and tables.

Findings

The findings are presented based on the study objectives. The first section outlines the response rate and social demographic and socioeconomic information before embarking on the study's objectives.

The study was conducted in Kajiado County, targeting twenty respondents. All the twenty respondents successfully participated in the study, attaining a response rate of 100%, which was considered adequate for analysis (Kothari 2004).

General information

Table 4.1: Participants' Gender

Gender	n	%
Male	11	55.0
Female	9	45.0
Total	20	100.0

N=responses



According to the data, the male gender represents the majority in the sample, accounting for 55% of the total sample size, while the female gender represents 45%. The data indicates that the gender distribution is relatively balanced, with only a slight difference in the sample's number of males and females. This suggests that the sample may be more representative of the population as a whole, as it reflects the gender distribution in the broader population.

Table 4. 2: Participants' Age

Age	N	%
18-25 Years	10	50.0
26-33 years	5	25.0
34-41 years	4	20.0
42-49 years	1	5.0
Total	20	100.0

According to the data, the largest age group in the sample is 18-25 years, which accounts for 50% of the total sample size. The next most significant age group is 26-33 years, which accounts for 25% of the sample. The third age group, 34-41 years, comprises 20% of the sample, and the smallest age group, 42-49 years, represents only 5% of the sample. The data indicates that most individuals in the sample are relatively young, with half being aged between 18 and 25. This could potentially have implications for the research or analysis being carried out with this sample, as younger individuals may have different perspectives or experiences than older individuals.

Figure 4. 1: Participants' Level of Education

The majority of the respondents (68.75%) had a Bachelor's degree, 18.75% had a Diploma qualification, and 12.5% had a Masters qualification.

Table 4. 3: Membership Duration

	Descriptive Statistics	Values
	Participants	19
How long have you been a member of Africa Gospel Church Nkoroi members	Minimum	2
	Maximum	23
	Mean	9.42
	Std. Deviation	5.113



The minimum length of membership in the church is two years, while the maximum length of membership is twenty-three 23 years. The mean length of membership is 9.42 years, and the standard deviation is 5.113 years. The data suggest that the length of membership in the church varies widely among the individuals in the sample, with some members having been part of the church for only a few years while others have been members for more than two decades.

Table 4. 4: Respondent Attitude Towards Discipleship Programs

The attitudes of individuals toward several aspects of the church program were measured using a five-point scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Very Great Extent."

Attitudes	Not at all		Little Extent		Moderate Extent		Great Extent		Very Great Extent	
	N	%	N	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
Increased pastor's commitment to the program	0	0	1	5.0	1	5.0	12	60.0	6	30.0
Increased sharing of church vision by congregations	0	0	8	40.0	1	5.0	7	35.0	4	20.0
The church family has consistently continued to reach new converts with the gospel	1	5.0	5	25.0	6	30.0	4	20.0	4	20.0
The congregation honours the set times for discipleship meetings	2	10.0	10	50.0	3	15.0	2	10.0	3	15.0
There is increased assimilation into the body life of the local Church	0	0	4	20.0	12	60.0	3	15.0	1	5.0
The number of members attending the discipleship has increased significantly since the start	1	5.0	9	45.0	3	15.0	5	25.0	2	10.0



Looking at the data, we can see different attitudes and responses. For instance, regarding increased pastor's commitment to the program, most respondents (60%) indicated a "Great Extent" of positive attitude towards it. In contrast, on *Increased sharing of church vision by congregations*, the majority (40%) indicated a "Little Extent" of positive attitude towards it.

The church family had consistently continued to reach new converts with the gospel, and the responses were relatively balanced, with no one-response option dominating the others. The congregation honours the set times for discipleship meetings, which shows that most (50%) respondents have a "Little Extent" positive attitude towards this aspect. There was increased assimilation into the body life of the local church; the majority of the respondents (60%) indicated that they have a "Moderate Extent" to "Very Great Extent" of positive attitude towards it. The number of members attending the discipleship increased significantly since the start; the majority (45%) indicated that they have a "Little Extent" of positive attitude towards it.

Christians' Perception of the Discipleship Program

Based on the points provided, discipleship of Africa Gospel Church Nkoroi membership was influenced by various aspects of church tradition and practice. First, regular Bible study meetings and teachings from the pastor have played a crucial role in helping members understand and follow the teachings of the Bible. It has also contributed to the spiritual growth of members, enabling them to deepen their faith and knowledge of God. Second, the church's outreach and evangelism programs have helped members actively share their faith with others and bring new people into the community. Further, it has also facilitated fellowship among believers, which has created a sense of community and unity among members. The church's emphasis on accountability to one another and responsibility to the gospel has encouraged members to take their faith seriously and strive to live out the teachings of the Bible in their daily lives. Finally, the church's willingness to engage with members at different stages of life, including vocational Bible school, visitation through compassion ministry, and sermons during main worship services and announcements on discipleship, has made it easier for members to participate and grow in their faith.

Factors Influencing Perceptions of the Discipleship Programs

The respondents were asked to state how senior pastors' championing and personal involvement in discipleship programs have influenced how Christians perceive discipleship programs. The study found that senior pastors were critical in championing and personally



involving themselves in the church's discipleship program. By doing so, they set an example for the rest of the church members to follow and create an environment where discipleship was valued.

The findings also found that senior staff's involvement and commitment to the discipleship program are essential for building an organisation-wide commitment. By actively participating, communicating the program's vision and goals, and providing opportunities for discussion and feedback, they can ensure that the program is successful and beneficial for all members. Establishing a discipleship centre and a year-long program can help drive the course of discipleship and ensure members are growing and maturing in their faith.

Strategies for the Effective Discipleship Programs

The respondents were asked to explain strategies that Africa Gospel Church Nkoroi Church needs to implement for effective discipleship. The respondents mentioned several strategies the church could implement: direct more resources and time toward the program, provide training materials, including fostering cell groups, hold more discipleship events, and make family discipleship a top priority. Also, they suggested that Christians should be equipped to carry out outreach and discipleship. Additionally, there was a suggestion to strive to change the perception that such programs were just for the old and to create sustainable and age-customised discipleship programs and materials.

Conclusion

Discipleship is an essential aspect of spiritual formation. As the study shows, Jesus spent time taking his disciples through a spiritual journey that shaped their values and worldviews. This formation period became crucial after the ascension of Jesus when the disciples of Jesus were required to proclaim the gospel and disciple congregations. The discipleship mandate is fundamental for the church today to ensure that there is not only quantitative growth of the church but also qualitative growth aspects. As highlighted in the study, The study also concluded that the discipleship program is vital to Christian communities. The involvement of pastors and senior church members is crucial in creating an environment where discipleship is valued and promoted. A clear vision and plan for the program are essential, along with establishing a discipleship centre and a comprehensive program. A Christ-centered emphasis is necessary to help members understand the program's purpose and expectations.

Africa Gospel Church Nkoroi has a community of committed believers who should be equipped for outreach and discipleship ministries. The church's emphasis on discipleship and spiritual growth has played a significant role in shaping the lives of its members and enabling



them to live out their faith in meaningful ways. Regular Bible study meetings, teachings from the pastor, outreach and evangelism programs, emphasis on accountability and responsibility, and willingness to engage with members at different stages of life have all contributed to this end. However, the church needs to ensure that discipleship programs are portrayed positively to avoid wrong perceptions among the members. Studies should be conducted frequently on how to better the discipleship ministry in the church. Such studies can also examine specific factors contributing to how Christians in different age groups perceive the discipleship program.

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