

The Need to Understand Local Cultures for Effective Discipleship: The Case Study of the Church of Christ in Nations in Njoro, Nakuru County, Kenya

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Abstract

The cultural perspectives upheld by a community give a clear reflection or distortion of God's image. The modern church operates in an increasingly diverse world, reaching out to people from diverse religious perspectives, socio-economic backgrounds, and languages. The Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Njoro, Kenya, shares the gospel with people from diverse cultures, given its cosmopolitan location. To reach people and make them followers of Christ, the church must adopt strategies that will help it bridge the overwhelming cultural and faith gaps. Anchored in the argument that effective discipleship thrives on strong cultural awareness, this qualitative study employs a case study design to highlight the importance of churches appreciating and understanding local cultures in their discipleship activities. The study involved interviews to gather data that would provide conceptual and descriptive insights. Effective discipleship is possible through recognizing and appreciating the locals' value systems, customs, and beliefs, while interacting with them without judgment or prejudice. This requires churches to establish strong relationships with the diverse cultural groups they serve. An effective discipleship ministry must appreciate how contextualizing the gospel to the local culture, values, and beliefs yields an equitable society. The article establishes that, despite COCIN Njoro's significant strides in its disciple-making activities, its inability to understand local cultures has acted as a significant hindrance to its outreach.

Keywords: Church and Culture, Discipleship, Missions, COCIN, Church Members

Introduction

Discipleship is a critical ministry of the church with foundations in the apostolic church. As Agyei (2023) puts it, the New Testament is about the disciples and for the disciples of Jesus Christ. Further, Onyinah (2017) defines discipleship as a journey of intentional decisions that



lead to one's maturity in their relationship with Jesus. Therefore, discipleship does not occur *in situ*; instead, it takes place in and among communities, revealing the inherent role the local community must play in fostering discipleship. As explained by Dumitrescu (2016), discipleship missions are most likely to succeed when the lead agents, such as pastors and evangelists, appreciate the cultures held by the local communities. However, effective discipleship remains a challenge for Christians and the church. Putman highlights the need for discipleship but also laments over the state of many Christians, "They look far more like the world than they should. They live the same way and chase the same things. Their marriages and families look the same. They are biblically illiterate and care little about sharing their faith with others. Churches are producing people who do not and cannot share the gospel" (Putman 2008,74). Josh McDowell, in his book *The Last Christian Generation*, recognizes that effective discipleship remains a challenge globally. He notes that, "85 percent of kids who come from Christian homes do not have a biblical worldview. Most of them are leaving the faith between ages eighteen and twenty-four" (McDowell, 2006, 14).

According to Onyinah (2017), the modern-day churchgoer may appear to be alive when attending church services, but is, in reality, operating in a state of survival. A study conducted by the Barna Research Group among churches in the United States revealed that, despite the country's over 360,000 churches, only 15% reported positive growth in congregant numbers, with 3% experiencing new conversion growth. It further reveals that the churches experiencing growth are doing so primarily through transfers. Concurring with the research, Shirley (2008) and Sammons (2025) explain that only a smaller percentage of the mega churches in the United States are growing larger, while their smaller counterparts continue to shrink. Dumitrescu (2016) partly attributes this trend to the fact that the efforts of discipling converts in these churches are a reserved chapter that has been shelved, and partly to the lack of contextualization of discipleship efforts to meet the cultural needs of local population groups.

Local communities provide the most significant platform through which the disciple-making journey takes place. Dumitrescu (2016) explains that the sole aim of the church's existence is to foster the edification of the believers, maintain worship, and redeem the world. This article is grounded in the argument that effective discipleship thrives on strong cultural awareness. It is through recognizing and appreciating the locals' value systems, customs, and



beliefs, without judgment or prejudice. However, this may only be achieved when the church's discipleship ministries establish strong relationships with the local community.

The Problem Statement

Christianity has undergone a significant transformation from its traditional Western roots to its current status as a global religion, with its operational centers shifting from the Global North to the Global South. Walls (2015, 22) observed, "Christianity has... throughout history spread outwards, across cultural frontiers, so that each new point on the Christian circumference is a new potential Christian center, and the very survival of Christianity as a separate faith has evidently been linked to the process of cross-cultural transmission."

Much of the growth in discipleship activities has recently shifted from the West to the Eastern and southern parts of the globe, particularly in Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Global Christian Relief, 2025). As such, with the growing population of new Christian converts, there has been a need to develop discipleship approaches that are sensitive to the local populations' cultures. Discipleship programs should be tailored to the value systems, cultures, and worldviews of the local populations under consideration. COCIN Njoro has been in existence for the past 17 years; however, the congregation has remained stagnant, with an average attendance of 48 people over the last decade. Even with discipleship programs, concerns persist regarding how converts experience these activities and processes, including the effective elements and those that are not, as well as the discipleship issues that ought to be addressed. This study explores the relationship of COCIN Njoro with the local community. In particular, the article establishes a connection between the slow growth as a challenge facing COCIN Njoro and the culturally insensitive disciple-making activities upheld by the church, despite its local membership. Consequently, this article undertakes an in-depth investigation of the cultural challenges faced by COCIN Njoro in its efforts to pursue growth, while making recommendations on the strategies that uphold the value systems, worldviews, and cultures of the local community.

Literature Review

Understanding Culture

The foundation of understanding culture lies in defining the term itself. Hofstede (2001) describes culture as the norms that form the foundation for expectations within a particular society. Culture presents people with systems that help them develop proper expectations based on established norms. An analogy can help create a deeper understanding of the term 'culture.'



In this case, culture could be considered as an iceberg with multiple layers, with only a third visible above the water, while the other two-thirds remain hidden underneath. Similarly, people may only see a smaller fraction of the happenings in a particular culture, even though much content is hidden. Just like an iceberg, culture has a visible layer that is readily apparent, even though people with lower cultural competency may only depict culture in the dimension of what they can see, including the visible cultural artifacts such as art, language, trends, music, and food. However, Nelson (2021) cautions that uncovering the elements beneath the upper layer requires some effort, as they are not immediately apparent. In his interactions with missionaries who returned from short-term missionary assignments, he posed the question, “What did you notice about the culture where you visited?” and most respondents only remembered the side of the road where the indigenes drove, differences in the languages spoken, and the use of strange-looking currencies. However, this is only a lower level of cultural competency.

The intermediate phase of culture encompasses norms, meanings, and symbols that can be discerned with effort, even though they lie just below the surface. For instance, Nelson (2021) explains that acts such as noticing that a particular community uses hand gestures to convey the amount owed, rather than saying it aloud, and comprehending why people ask if you have eaten as a standard greeting are examples of the intermediate layers of culture. Meadows (2012) warns that one needs intentional awareness, focusing on finding meanings, symbols, and norms, to understand culture at the intermediate level.

The third and highest level of culture, comparable to the bottom of the iceberg, refers to the values, beliefs, and traditions upheld by a community. Ghazaryan (2019) explains that this level of awareness is the most difficult to realize as it requires asking the question, ‘Why.’ In essence, such value systems and beliefs play a crucial role in shaping how people think, behave, react, and experience the world. Upon examining this three-part description, it becomes clear that culture is deeply rooted, all-encompassing, and inherently transmitted.

Culture is deeply rooted in and among people; hence, one cannot be separated from it. Wells (2008) reveals that human needs form the real basis of culture. Varied cultures work towards meeting the fundamental human needs in different ways to meet base-level needs such as freedom, safety, peace, inclusivity, spiritual striving, and a sense of wellbeing, connection, respect, and dignity.



The Context of Discipleship

Christians consider discipleship a mission mandated by Jesus Christ following his completion of his earthly ministry (Matt 28:18–24). As such, discipleship has, over the years, maintained its position as the ultimate commission, incorporating clear steps to be followed by those who make disciples. As explained by Nel and Schoeman (2019), the modern disciple-making process is anchored on teaching and baptism. Nonetheless, this tradition fails to specify the contexts within which baptism and teaching activities should take place. In particular, Ghazaryan(2019) warns that most disciple-making activities tend to neglect the essence of the diversity and worldviews of the local communities within which their churches operate.

Churches, particularly those operating in cosmopolitan locations such as COCIN Njoro, often pay minimal attention to the cultural perspectives and views held by the people in the communities they serve. For instance, minimal attention is paid to the traditional views, social lives, and how they may affect their Christian ways of living. As revealed by Nelson (2021), Western missionaries have faced massive challenges in their efforts to recognize and appreciate the diverse values that anchor the worldviews of the local populations; an aspect that made them (missionaries) label the locals with a myriad of derogatory terms. In essence, the locals' sense of morality was put to the test based on the values upheld by Western missionaries, which led to conflict. Describing this situation, Lingenfelter explains,

People use their cultural values and systems to critique those who fail to live up to their rules, to judge and condemn based upon appearances, and to punish failure to conform by inflicting emotional and physical pain. Kingdom values, in contrast, employ the illogic of grace. When we follow God's way, we focus on loving one another and extending grace to our brothers and sisters in contexts where we have disagreements and conflicts with them. . . . Our relationships are then guided not by logic but by the illogic of love that flows from grace. (2008:50)

Consequently, it is essential to recognize that no culture should be portrayed as superior to another, especially when engaging in the disciple-making process. All cultures embody both the good and the bad sides. Plueddlemann (2009: 65) states that God's image can be found in every culture. However, the effects of our depravity remain evident. To initiate cross-cultural discipline effectively, it is necessary to approach diverse cross-cultural contexts with utmost humility.

The Philosophy of Discipleship

In the process of disciple-making, Wells (2008) emphasizes the importance of viewing a disciple as a learner. COCIN Njoro heavily relies on a set of doctrinal texts, supported by the Bible, to



foster its disciple-making activities. In particular, the purpose of the pre-baptism teachings conducted by COCIN Njoro and other churches in cosmopolitan Njoro is to instill an understanding of doctrinal statements and to answer faith questions based on church manuals (Shirley, 2008). However, this model is insufficient when analyzed in terms of an individual who is deeply concerned with whether real conversion has taken place in the believer. Onyinah (2017) considers the term ‘believer’ as an indication of acceptance based on Western religious measures. Brosius (2017) explains that when many Hindus are asked if they consider and accept the divine nature of Christ, they give positive answers. Such an acceptance does not constitute a rejection of the deities they had previously worshipped or consider Jesus Christ as a unique Savior.

The Theology of Discipleship

McMahon (2019) claims that the discipleship model, as held by Christians as ‘biblical,’ had been adopted and practiced over the years in other cultures, particularly the Roman and Greek cultures. Brosius (2017) also states that Jesus employed the rabbinical model in his disciple-making pursuits. Irrespective of the origin of the model, effective application of the biblical model in discipleship should not just meet the intellectual educational needs but also present an opportunity for real-life change. Consequently, the discipleship process not only involves the transmission of knowledge but also plays a crucial role in fostering relationships. The discipleship model adopted and practiced by Jesus Christ was informed by the relationships exemplified in the Old Testament by duos such as Elijah and Elisha, and Elisha and Gehazi (2 Kings 5:20–27).

God is the author of discipleship relations as depicted by his interactions with the first humans in the creation story (Gen 1—2). As revealed in Genesis, God regularly met with Adam and Eve every day to share his mission and dominion with them. In essence, God’s relationship with humanity continues even after the fall of Adam and Eve (Gen 3), as He guides the fallen humans and provides a pathway for redemption.

Alitz (2023) explains that a disciple maker’s authority is vested in the strength of the relationship he establishes with the master. As such, a disciple maker must also be a disciple, considering that both the disciple maker and the disciple are followers of Christ. In essence, discipleship should be considered a continuous process passed from one disciple to another until the end of the age. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul instructs his disciple, Timothy, to entrust the teachings



he received to reliable people, who would in turn teach them on to others. This justifies the nature of discipleship as a multiplication process anchored in the strength of the personal relationships established.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research method to examine the importance of cultural awareness in disciple-making activities. Since the article focuses on the discipleship experiences of the Church of Christ in Nations, Njoro, in an effort to assess its slow growth, a case study design is adopted. The study aims to conduct an in-depth review of participants' experiences to assess their levels of cultural awareness when interacting with new members.

The study was conducted in Njoro Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya, targeting the congregants of the Church of Christ in Nations, Njoro. A total of 35 respondents were included in the study, having stayed in the church for the last five years and being adults (18 years and above), which met the study's inclusion criterion. Table 1 below shows the distribution of respondents who participated in the interviews based on their gender.

Gender	Number of respondents	Percentage
Male	7	20
Female	28	80
Total	35	100

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender

The population of the study comprised randomly sampled members of the Church of Christ in Nations, Njoro. The interviewees were only included in the study if they had been members of the church for the past three years and were adults, ensuring they had sufficient knowledge of the topic under investigation. The study employed an interview as its data collection method, providing the researcher with ample opportunity to invite participants who offered detailed and first-person accounts of their experiences and thoughts about the institution's discipleship activities. The interview method provided the researcher with the opportunity to collect rich data from the participants as they narrated their stories about their encounters with the discipleship activities at the church. A semi-structured interview was prepared, with questions serving as a guide to the discussion. The interviews were conducted with the respondents at the church premises during both weekday and Sunday fellowships.



The data used in the study were transcribed and organized accordingly, as most respondents preferred providing oral answers. As such, the entire dataset was read through a second time with the researcher seeking to familiarize himself with what had been collected. Using the descriptive study design, transcripts were read to generate a broader understanding than themes drawn through theoretical thematic analysis.

Findings of the Study

Most of the participants were female (80%), a clear reflection of the Church of Christ in Nations, Njoro's composition. The findings reveal a notable gender imbalance, characterized by a substantial disparity in the number of males and females. The findings align with the cultural conventions of church attendance in Njoro and Kenya as a whole. The findings concur with those of scholars such as Muli, Kyalo, and Kinuthia (2020), who investigated gender disparities of church membership and attendance in Mbooni West sub-county, Makueni County. In their study, Muli, Kyalo, and Kinuthia (2020) found that gender disparities persist in most churches, both in Kenya and globally, with the number of male congregants significantly lower than that of females.

The study also revealed a higher number of congregants aged between 18 and 25. This result indicated that the church had a higher proportion of youthful members. Table 2 provides a summary of the respondents' distribution by age group.

Age Group	Number of Participants
18–25	22
26–33	9
34–41	3
42–49	1

Table 2: Distribution of participants based on age groups

The findings in Table 2 indicate that the respondents in the sample were relatively young. There are tendencies that such a disparity could have implications for the research since younger respondents may likely have different cultural perspectives and experiences compared to their older counterparts. However, the presence of congregants aged between 34 and 49 acted as a balancing factor in the data collection process.



The participants' level of education played a crucial role in demystifying their perception of the effects of cultural awareness in disciple-making endeavors. Agyei (2023) explains that education acts as an eye-opener in an individual's perception of the occurrences in their environment. The study established that most congregants of COCIN Njoro had a primary school education, as shown in Table 3 below. Only two respondents had attained a bachelor's degree, and eight had a high school education, as revealed below.

Level of Education	Number of Participants
Primary school	23
Secondary school	8
College diploma	1
Bachelor's degree	2
Postgraduate education	0
Total	35

The study attributed the near ineffectiveness of discipleship pursuits to the educational attainment of the congregants. The fact that most members had some primary school education revealed their struggles in fostering and sustaining culturally sensitive discipleship programs. Furthermore, some respondents reported feeling inferior when discipling new converts who had higher educational attainment than themselves.

The Role of Relationships and Community in Disciple-Making

The strength of family and community relations has a profound impact on the ability to disciple. One of the respondents, while narrating how family relations impacted his ability to foster discipleship, revealed that his mother and sister-in-law, who were faithful Christians, had played a significant role in his faith growth. The respondent admitted that he was drawn to COCIN Njoro because he admired his sister-in-law's lifestyle as a Christian and wanted to emulate it. One of the respondents said, "I admired how my sister in-law behaved and professed her faith. In turn, my sister-in-law became my mentor on my journey as a born-again Christian. Watching their faith made it easy to stick to the church."

The fact that the respondent's family members were congregants at COCIN Njoro revealed that they had made it their family church. It was therefore easy for the respondent to identify with the church and participate in it. This response indicates the extent to which family



relations and the cultural ties therein influence one's ability to make disciples and the disciples' ability to remain firm in their faith. The study also established that instances of a lack of initiative from family members played a significant role in weakening a new disciple's faith, as seen in the case of Respondent 2 below. The respondent (a mother of a disciple who left the church) attested that her son left the faith after high school, where he had been an active participant in the Christian Union fellowship and a leader of COCIN Njoro's youth department, when his mother stopped being an active participant in the church activities. The respondent revealed that his mother's decision quenched his motivation for disciple-making and active engagement in church activities. Respondent number eight stated, "I lost my faith after finishing high school. My mother, who had been an ardent churchgoer, had stopped going to church. I also had to relinquish disciple-making and move out of the discipleship class."

The Role of the Church in Discipleship

The study considered the church as one of the most essential avenues for building relationships and expressing culture through interactions. Personal relationships in this social setting are established through the associations among church members, friends, the clergy, and leaders. Church invitations and discipling activities initiated by faithful church members were highly honored. One of the respondents (4) who had stayed in the church for 12 years explained, "I chose to stay in this church because the pastor disciplined me. He walked with me and taught me a lot from the Bible. I learned that God is a God who hears prayer; only sin can make him not hear. All these years, I have seen the faithfulness of God."

Similarly, another female respondent recollected how a friend from her estate befriended her and invited her to join the COCIN church in Njoro for the women's fellowship. The respondent explained that her decision to join the church was due to her relationship with a friend, and she has since remained a member. The respondent (5) recounts,

When I got married, I moved from Nakuru town and came to this estate. My father-in-law was an ardent Catholic, and I decided to join him in his church. One Sunday morning, a lady who was my neighbor and friend invited me to attend the women's fellowship at COCIN Njoro. She further invited me to the Wednesday fellowship. She registered me in the Women's Fellowship group, and from that time, I became a member. This is where my faith has been nurtured..

Another interviewee stated that the growth he experienced in his prayer life as a disciple was greatly influenced by the interactions he had established with the clergy, particularly the lead pastor. In the words of the respondent (6),



The pastor introduced us to prayer and fasting. We conducted prayer and fasting sessions at the beginning of each year... I have a personal relationship with our pastor. He even asks us to pray for him. Nowadays, when I need to tell God something, I can pray and fast by myself; I don't need to wait for the beginning of the year to participate in the group prayer. I believe the training I received from the pastor played a significant role in strengthening me as a disciple. I was raised in a family where it was customary to follow a leader's instructions. School also nurtured me to be obedient to instructions. I think this trend has contributed to my growth in Christianity.

The response from this interviewee reveals the essence of strong relationships in the church as the cornerstone to effective disciple-making. However, leadership and interactions between the disciple and the disciple-making agency should be culturally sensitive and conducted with the understanding that the disciple belongs to other communities, relationships, and social groups that influence their value systems, morals, worldviews, and ways of life. For instance, one of the male congregants revealed that his male friend had left the church because he felt that the teachings (particularly in women's fellowship) were against his upbringing; that the church teachings pushed women to revere the pastor more than their husbands, an aspect that was against his beliefs. He believed that husbands should be honored and that the show of reverence among women should begin with their husbands. The respondent (7) explained,

My friend was a very strong member of this church. However, he left the church after marrying. He told me that he felt his wife had more respect and honor for the pastor than for him. He felt that the teachings in the women's fellowship were detrimental to his marriage. He complained to the pastor, but all was met with objection. That is how he left us and joined a neighboring church.

The finding above reveals the extent to which cultural insensitivity can wreak havoc in discipleship programs, and therefore, the need to enhance awareness. This highlights the importance of disciple makers being tolerant when interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Lastly, the study revealed that COCIN Njoro's programs were highly inconsiderate of the fact that they dealt with a mixed population drawn from different tribes in Kenya. For instance, there was a consensus that most of the songs sung during praise and worship sessions were in English, Kiswahili, Kikuyu, and Luhya (the lead pastor's tribe). It is through incorporating these elements that leadership is considered sensitive to cultural variations within the church. Members from other communities felt excluded. One of the respondents said, "We have lost some members because of the songs we sing. Our praise and worship team lacks sensitivity in



incorporating songs from other tribes, such as Kisii, Kalenjin, and Luo. Most of our members are Luhya and Kikuyu. We have lost members from other tribes.”

Summary of the Findings

This study aimed to conduct an in-depth investigation into the cultural challenges faced by COCIN Njoro in its pursuit of growth, and to recommend strategies that uphold the value systems, worldviews, and cultures of the locals. The study reveals that most attendees of COCIN Njoro are women, a common trend observed locally. This finding highlights the need for the church to restructure its discipleship programs to attract men as disciples. Further, the study reveals that men tend to be pushed away from the church by the culturally insensitive programs put forth by the leadership. Just as the study conducted by Onyiah (2017) found, most members who left the church felt that the leadership had overstepped its cultural boundaries. In particular, there is a need for pastoral teams to provide leadership, particularly when dealing with younger disciples. Dumitrescu (2016) considers leaders as sources of direction to their followers. While taking their roles as leaders, pastors ought to embrace cultural sensitivity to prevent pushing their congregants away from the church.

Conclusion

The importance of discipleship in the church cannot be ignored as one navigates through the gospels. The study is grounded in the premise that culture provides people with systems that help them develop proper expectations based on established norms. Similarly, discipleship has, over the years, maintained its position as the ultimate commission, incorporating clear steps to be followed by those who disciple others. Discipleship ministry plays a vital role in growing churches and advancing God’s mission. This study undertook an in-depth investigation of the cultural challenges faced by COCIN Njoro in its efforts to pursue growth, while making recommendations on strategies that uphold the value systems, worldviews, and cultures of the local community. The study employed interviews to collect data, aiming to gather rich insights into the experiences and understandings of the interviewees. The analysis involved an in-depth examination of the collected data to obtain conceptual and descriptive insights, followed by the identification of patterns that generate major themes. It is through recognizing and appreciating the locals’ value systems, customs, and beliefs, while interacting with them without judgment or prejudice. The study revealed that most attendees of COCIN Njoro are women. The church should consider developing outreach strategies that cater to all genders. The study also



established that disciple makers were likely to remain culturally insensitive if they had lower levels of educational attainment. Key to fostering effective discipleship included the level of support accorded by immediate family members, friends, and church members. Similarly, one's previously held beliefs played a crucial role as the foundation for discipleship, as they offered a point of comparison.

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