

Discipleship in Cross-Cultural Mission Contexts: An Orthodox Perspective

Archpriest David C. Rucker
Victor Downing and Students of St. Herman Theological Seminary
Orthodox Church in America
Orthodox Christian Mission Center
Lausanne Orthodox Initiative: Discipleship and Christian Formation
Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Boston, MA USA
7 June 2018

My brothers and sisters, greetings in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Glory to Jesus Christ!

Native Alaskan peoples are very conscious of being disciples of disciples since 1794. Those who came to them in 1794, set a record, making the longest missionary journey in the history of Christianity to reach a specific unreached people group. Those missionaries left Valaam Monastery on December 21, 1793 and did not arrive in Kodiak until September 24, 1794; It took them 291 days to travel 7,300 miles by foot, donkey, horse cart, and finally ship and kayak. As Orthodox Christians, they, also, were very conscious of being the disciples of disciples who traced their lineage to the twelve in the context of ancient Orthodox Christianity.

This story of Alaskan Native people groups being brought into the Kingdom of God through faith in the living Christ is little known and rarely shared, particularly in Protestant Christianity. The missionaries who gave their lives for them were way ahead of their time by Western Christian standards, utilizing sound missiological practices. Our time is very brief together, so allow me to introduce some of the principles they exercised.

Orthodox Cross-Cultural Discipleship Precepts

1. The fulness of the teaching of Who God is: Trinitarian Theology
2. The fullness of the teaching of Who we are created to be/become; the deep well of Orthodox anthropology, based on Trinitarian theology.
3. Preserving, teaching and living the doctrine of the incarnation of the second Person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus, the Christ, the God-man; the foundation and the method of all discipleship.
 - a. There is no real understanding of the incarnation of Christ without understanding the Virgin Mary as Theotokos (the title accepted by Luther, Calvin and Wesley). In the words of Billy Graham to the missionaries in Hong Kong before the Hong Kong

Crusade, “It is time for us as Protestants to give Mary her due.” If we forget the Virgin Mary and the fullness of her as Theotokos, we will eventually forget Who Christ is, and we cease being Christian.

- b. The Church year begins and ends with contemplating the incarnation through feasts of the Theotokos and the Cross.

The relational character of the ministry implies that the only acceptable method of mission for the Church is the *incarnational* one: the Church relates to the world through and in her ministry by being involved existentially in the world. The nature of mission is not to be found in the Church’s *addressing* the world but in its being fully in *com-passion* with it (Zizioulas 1985:224).

4. Orthodox Christians are enculturated into the Kingdom of Heaven while participating in this enculturation process with others. This is what Orthodox Christianity calls making disciples, or *theosis*, or deification. It makes sense, therefore, that the following are Christ’s first and final words relating to His mission: “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt. 4:17).
5. The Church is the “pillar and foundation of the truth [Reality] (I Tim. 3:15), and there is no salvation outside of the Church as the Body of Christ, or God’s household. The Church is manifested in actual historical, intentional, Orthodox, Eucharistic communities from the book of Acts to this day. Separating salvation and discipleship from the Church is as inconceivable for an Orthodox Christian as severing an arm or leg from the torso of a living body and expecting it to grow and function. It will eventually, if left alone, rot.

The word [for Church] *ekklesia* was chosen to manifest the identity of the first Christian communities... a collectivity of people who want to live together within the struggle to attain true existence, to make existence *become true*, as their common goal. By their living together they want to realize that *mode* that knows no limitations of decay and death... for Christians it was the mode of those relationships that liberate existence from the necessities, limitations, and predeterminations of *nature* or *essence*... They wanted to transform the necessity of *nature* into the freedom of *relation*, into love (Yannaras 2013:22-23).

6. The Church as resident hospital made discipleship a life-long healing process. We are all in recovery, i.e., the process of being saved.
7. Trinitarian baptism is the initiatory right of passage, confirming a Trinitarian theology, influencing every aspect of Christian life and practice, from the “little church” (family/household), to the local parish, to the entire *ecclesia*. All of life is the living out, the fulfilling, of our Baptism and Chrismation.

8. The Holy Mysteries (sacraments) manifest eternal Reality (Truth); the Mysteries are vital tools for discipleship (*theosis*).
9. The local parishes were founded by imitating Christ's ministry on earth, taking responsibility for each generation:
 - a. Real flesh and blood Persons in authentic relationships, making both individual and group-decisions to follow Christ;
 - b. A transfiguration of death through resurrection;
 - c. Teaching (entrusting), mentoring and doing, using the language of the people (dynamic equivalent translation) and culturally appropriate analogies;
 - d. The adults of the parish were to accept their God-given responsibility for the children and youth, from baptism onward. The Holy Mysteries (sacraments) were many and connected to the Church Year, particularly Pascha, the Feast of feasts, Ascension and the resulting Pentecost, all encapsulated in the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Eucharist each Sunday;
 - e. Genuine love proven by suffering, beginning with servant-leaders (deacons, presbyters, bishops); Servant-leaders practice hierarchical-conciliarity, fighting against clericalism (St. Silouan's "upside-down pyramid").
10. Constant attention to core dogmatic theology to guard against "drift" from the vision, purpose and mission of the Church (all Orthodox dogmatic theology is translating the Reality, the Truth, of Who God is and Who we are created to become, through the God-man, Jesus Christ, Who brings us to the Father, by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit (Ro. 1). On the Creed, there was no compromise.

The Fruit of these Principles in Alaska

The fruit of these principles, when they were practiced, was a rich harvest. For generations the Archdiocese of Alaska, the mother-diocese the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), has successfully evangelized major tribal people groups. By census standards, Alaska has the most Orthodox Christian of any state in North America, with over 90 local parishes. St. Herman Theological Seminary in Kodiak specializes in the spiritual formation and equipping of servant-leaders for these parishes. There are also four Cathedrals of the OCA in Alaska and one Antiochian Cathedral. The footprint and sphere of Alaskan missions drives the entire OCA, the only autocephalous Orthodox jurisdiction in this hemisphere.

Three Enemies of Discipleship: Ignorance, Forgetfulness and Sloth

St. Innocent of Alaska wrote in his catechism in Aleutic in 1833:

...in order to follow Jesus Christ, first of all you need to have a special desire and resolve to do so; and in order to have a desire follow Him, you must know where to go, and

what the way is, and what is needed for this way. But how can you know what you don't want to know, or what you have only heard about slightly and superficially? And so, before following Jesus Christ, you must do the following: You must study attentively the foundations of Christianity, i.e., the actual books of Holy Scripture on which our Orthodox faith is founded. You should know where they came from, who wrote them and when, how they were preserved and have been handed down to us, why they are called Divine and Sacred. . . . it is the binding duty of every Christian, when he reaches maturity, to know his faith thoroughly; because anyone who does not have a solid knowledge of his faith is cold and indifferent to it and frequently falls either into superstition or unbelief (St. Innocent, 2006:17).

While St. Herman provided a heart and living example of discipleship for the Church in Alaska (as an "ordinary" monk—not a priest and not a bishop), it was St. Innocent who was the catechist and teacher, constantly translating the teaching of the ancient Church into the languages of the people. After making the first alphabet in Aleutic, he then wrote an introduction to Christianity (catechism) that remains a standard resource to this day, written in 1833.

The warning of St. Innocent to his parishes in Alaska in missiological terms was to be wary of separating forms of Orthodoxy worship and piety from the meaning for which they were given by God in the context of His Church. Don't forget why you are doing what you are doing.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what has happened to many parishes in Alaska. Elders and pastors either forgot or were not taught the meaning behind the forms and after a few generations began to practice religion without power (2 Tim. 3:4). We are now suffering those consequences in many parts of Alaska, and the "golden chain" of discipleship is broken, and in need of repair.

Recovering meaning in the Local Parish

Therefore, we are currently working at St. Herman Seminary in Kodiak. We want to help the local parishes recover their ability to produce seeds which the seminary can then germinate in the lives of men, women and families to become disciples and participate in making disciples. The point is *not* that a Church-parish has a "Discipleship Program," nor is the point that every member of the Church-parish is a Catechist. Rather, the Church-parish—as *a whole*— makes disciples (or fails to make disciples) by what the Church-parish is. Vic Downing, rejuvenated layman with a great vision for Alaska, points out,

"This is difficult for us to understand because we are 21st century North Americans whose "progress" has resulted from specialization. For example, the Chemistry professor teaches Chemistry, not the university janitor or the university accountant; so too, we think discipleship is the priest's responsibility of every member of the local parish" (Downing 2018).

The Major Means of Making Disciples: The Divine Liturgy (Worship in Spirit and Truth)

There is no more complete, precise, profound, or accessible view of Orthodox Christianity than the Divine Liturgy, the prototype being Holy Week and Pascha (Easter). Therefore, there is no more glorious or urgent priority than ensuring the Divine Liturgy offered by each Church-parish is understandable, personable, gracious, and beautiful to those who are experiencing it. It is the Divine Liturgy done rightly that makes disciples and that propels Orthodox Christians into the streets to further reveal the love of God by how they care for their neighbors. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that the authenticity and viability of the Church-parish and, therefore, the disciple-making of a Church-parish is a function of the extent to which the Church-parish worships truly (Downing 2018).¹

Again, quoting from one of my students who is also one of my mentors at St. Herman's seminary:

The Church-parish *doesn't* make disciples by hosting a perfectly staged and perfectly performed Divine Liturgy. For the Divine Liturgy to be a demonstration (i.e., revelation) of the Kingdom of God, the participants must *know* what they are doing, what God is doing, what is at-stake, and they must have evidence that their lives are being rehabilitated because of participating in the Divine Liturgy. To do less than that is to promote magic, delusion, and even idolatry of local cultural traditions (Downing 2018).

Unfortunately, this 30-minute time-allotted introduction to cross-cultural Orthodox precepts relating to discipleship does not permit me to elaborate what would be take a semester to teach at St. Herman Theological Seminary. Let me simply conclude with a creative model-analogy made my Victor Downing in class which related the process of making disciples to the teaching and formation of traditional Eskimo whaling, centuries old in Alaska.

[**NOTE:** Unfortunately, due to my inefficient use of time, I was not able to publicly present Vic's model, but it is included here for reference sake. The author and the presenter will be more than pleased to talk more to anyone interested in correcting or carrying on such study for the sake of the making disciples in the Orthodox Church in Alaska.]

¹ In the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann back beginning in the early 1960's: "...there is a eucharistic crisis in the Church. In the tradition of the Church, nothing has changed. What has changed is the perception of the eucharist, the perception of its very essence. Essentially, this crisis consists in a lack of connection and cohesion between what is accomplished in the eucharist and how it is perceived, understood and lived. To a certain degree this crisis has always existed...however, this crisis has become chronic. That schizophrenia that poisons the life of the Church and undermines its very foundations has come to be seen as a normal state (Schmemmann 1987:9); Also, see Rucker 2017 for reflection on the state of the Church in North American at present.

ADDENDUM

Student Project, St. Herman Theological Seminary

Kodiak, Alaska

Victor Downing

Northern Alaskan Native Traditional Eskimo Whaling of the Western Arctic

Traditional Eskimo whaling of the Western Arctic consists of the shore-based pursuit of bowhead whales (and sometimes other species) during the spring migration in shore leads or open water passages as the winter ice begins to break up. A few communities have an opportunity to engage in fall whaling when migrating bowheads are returning to their winter grounds. Hunters in skin boats (*umiaks*) typically throw hand-held harpoons at surfacing whales and use inflated bladders or "drags" to slow struck whales. Animals that were struck and killed were then towed to shore ice edges by several boats of paddlers. At the ice edge, the whale carcass was butchered, with the skin and blubber (*muktuk* or *maktak*) removed prior to sectioning the carcass and removing large amounts of meat. Meat and blubber were transported to underground ice cellars where permafrost temperatures kept the contents frozen until it was consumed. Baleen or "whalebone" (long sheets of bendable food filters hanging from the upper jaw) and bones were also removed to the hunters' village to be used as raw materials in a number of tools and utensils.

All aspects of whaling fall under the control of ceremonial rituals and belief systems as well as customary patterns having to do with the attraction of whales to the crews, permitting themselves to be taken for food for the village, the hunting and butchering process, and the various uses to which the whale's resources are put.

This shore-based Eskimo whaling stands in contrast to pelagic (or ocean-based) or commercial whaling. Such ship-based whaling flourished during the 17th-19th centuries. Scandinavian, Dutch, English, Scottish, and American whale fleets pursued the circumpolar bowhead stocks, first around Spitsbergen and Greenland, and later (in the 19th century) in the Canadian Arctic and the Bering Sea-Chukchi Sea regions. Oil reduced from blubber and baleen were the primary commodities produced by this worldwide whaling industry.

Unlike commercial ship whalers, Eskimo whalers were limited to taking whales near their villages when the animals migrated past on their annual round and primarily were seeking food through their whaling endeavors. Because of the huge quantity of meat and oil that successful whale hunting provided to a coastal village as well as the danger involved in a whale's pursuit, whaling and whalers had special significance for such communities. The primary food source consisted of whale products, the community's families were organized around whaling crews led by powerful and influential captains, men's and women's roles were defined by the parts

they played in the whaling process, pan-community and intercommunity distribution of whale products tied together related and other peoples, and taboos and customary procedures gave structure to village behavior.

The basic pattern of traditional Eskimo whaling continues from the distant past into modern times, based on an unbroken lineage of whaling knowledge and skills that were handed down between the generations. While today's Eskimo whalers have added technological advances such as bomb darts, aluminum boats (in some villages), Global Positioning Systems and two-way radios to the repertoire of whaling apparatus, the basic pattern of pursuing bowheads from shore camps during the migration season with hand-thrown harpoons, with all the accompanying dangers, has not changed. Reading the weather and carefully navigating the offshore waters reflect skills that tie the past with the present.

Whaling and Disciple-Making²

v. 2.0

Exporting Ancient Native Alaskan Treasures to 21st Century Alaskans and Especially to 21st Century People of the Lower 48

Questions for Native Alaskan Disciple-Makers	Responses to questions 1- 20 (in real-time discussion and as written homework)	Responses to question 21 (in real-time discussion and as written homework)
1. What do you call the whale ³ ? 2. What do you call the vessel? 3. What do you call the harpoon? 4. What are the roles aboard the vessel?		
5. So, whaling is what happens aboard the vessel? [What about ashore?]		
6. What are the roles ashore?		
7. What is required to qualify for such roles? [character?]		
8. Who has which role in the vessel and why?		
9. What are the roles ashore?		

² Vic Downing (SHS Advanced Catechism Class project, 10-12-15)

³ Ancient Native Alaskan activities in addition to whaling may be considered if they involve the whole village, teamwork, danger, and necessity.

10. Which is more important: roles on the vessel or roles ashore?
11. Choose one role. Describe the outward “behavior”, the “belief”, the “values”, and the “world view.” (“peel the onion”)

12. What is required to qualify for such roles? [character?]

13. What must be done in preparation?

14. What are the dangers?

15. What makes a successful venture?

16. What is the guarantee of success?

17. When you succeed, why do you succeed?

18. Why did your ancestors go whaling?

19. Why do you not go whaling today?

20. What are the disadvantages of not whaling? [Character? Pride? Gratitude?]

21. How is making disciples like whaling? Refer to what you have said (above).

Leveraging Your Ancient Culture

1. Describe the environment of the tundra / Arctic Circle /where whaling occurs⁴? [Go beyond the physical. Focus on the nature of the physical (e.g., dangerous, unpredictable, full of opportunity/provision, misunderstood, etc.)]
2. Describe the environment of The Lower 48⁵ [(1) The Silicon Valley, (2) Chicago, (3) Atlanta). [Go beyond the physical and cultural. Focus on the nature of the physical and cultural (e.g., dangerous, unpredictable, full of opportunity/provision, misunderstood, etc.)]
3. How are the environments of The Lower 48 and the environment where whaling occurs similar⁶? What do you have that the people of The Lower 48 Need? Speak to the following:
 - a. Individual character
 - b. Group character
 - c. Behaviors / skills
 - d. Response to danger
 - e. Response to provision
 - f. Ingredients of a successful whaling venture
4. **Consider three “ethne” from the Lower 48: (1) Single parent, poverty level family in Chicago, (1) “Yuppie” couple with no children in Palo Alto working for Google and Bristol Meyers, (3) Teenaged high school students in upscale Atlanta high school. Build an “Onion Model” for each.**
5. What are the connections between the above people and conditions and The Gospel of The Kingdom of God?
6. What are the connections between the above people and conditions and Orthodoxy?
7. What is your proposal for serving the people of The Lower 48?

⁴ Again, other ancient Native Alaskan activities may be considered as long as they require the entire village, teamwork, danger, and necessity.

⁵ It is very unlikely Native Alaskans will know this “off the tops of their heads”... that’s the point. They will need to work as a team or teams to “explore” and “learn the lay of the land” / the currents of the channel. This will propel them into discussions with those who are living in The Lower 48 as well as into articles and U-Tube presentations. An alternative is to do with work in-parallel with a comparable group from The Lower 48 where each group interviews the other... this could be accomplished via live GotoMeeting events and/or simultaneous “Exchange Programs” down there and up here.

⁶ To what extent do Native Alaskans readily think in analogies? (I’ve found that people from The Lower 48 typically find it difficult.) We may need to help with this.

8. If we view your proposal (# 6) as a whale hunt, what do we need to do next?

Sources

Anastasios, Archbishop (Yannoulatos), *Mission in Christ's Way: An Orthodox Understanding of Mission*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010.

Chrysostom, St. John, *Homilies on Colossians, Homily IX, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 13*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Fourth Printing, 2004.

Downing, Victor, "Advanced Catechism Class Project," Saint Herman Theological Seminary, Kodiak, AK, Paschal semester, 2018. [On-going to the present]

Hopko, Thomas, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Education, Mission, and Witness in Contemporary Orthodoxy*. NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006.

_____, *The Orthodox Faith: Volume 1: Doctrine and Scripture*. NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981.

_____, *The Orthodox Faith, Volume 2: Worship*. NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981.

Innocent, St., Bishop of Kamchatka, the Kuriliun and Aleutian Islands, *Indication of the Way Into the Kingdom of Heaven*. Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, Holy Trinity Monastery, NY, 2006. [Original Aleutic ed. first published in 1833]

Meyendorff, John, *Education: A Major Priority, and Why Theology*, p 149, in *Witness to the World*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987.

Rucker, David C. "Schmemmann's Liturgical Crisis Fifty Years Later: Amnesia or Ανάμνησις." SVTQ Vol. 61, Number 1, 2017, Pp 91-117.

Schmemmann, Alexander, *The Eucharist*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987.

_____, *Church World Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979.

Yannaras, Christos *Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013.

Zizioulas, John D., *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.

Note: For other background resources by the author on discipleship in the Orthodox context:

Rucker, David C. 2007 "A Mission Parish Involved in Missions: Part 1 of The Effect of International Missions on the Local Parish." Spring, Vol. 23:1, pp. 8-9. OCMC Mission Magazine. St. Augustine, FL: OCMC. https://www.ocmc.org/images/PDFs/Magazine_Vol23_No1.pdf (Accessed 7/17/2018)

2008 "Interview with Fr. David Rucker, Associate Director, OCMC." Again Magazine, February ed. Ben Lomand, CA: Conciliar Press.

2008 "Missions and the Parish in Decline: Part 3 of How International Missions Benefits the Local Parish." Spring, Vol. 24:1, pp. 6-8. OCMC Mission Magazine. St. Augustine, FL: OCMC. https://www.ocmc.org/images/PDFs/Magazine_Vol24_No1.pdf (Accessed 7/17/2018)

2011. "Becoming His Disciples as We Participate in Making Disciples: Beginning in Our Local Parish." OCMC Mission Magazine. Spring, Vol. 27:1, pp. 3-7. St. Augustine, FL: OCMC. https://www.ocmc.org/images/PDFs/OCMC_spring_11_web.pdf (Accessed 7/17/2018)

Also see:

Chakos, John. 2007 "The Local Parish as a Center for International Missions: Part 2 of The Effect of International Missions on the Local Parish." Fall, Vol. 23:2, pp. 6-7. OCMC Mission Magazine. St. Augustine, FL. https://www.ocmc.org/images/PDFs/Magazine_Vol23_No2.pdf (Accessed 7/17/2018).