

Alison Morgan

FOLLOWING JESUS: THE PLURAL OF DISCIPLE IS CHURCH

Foreword by James Newcome, Bishop of Carlisle

There seems to be a growing consensus around 'Discipleship' as the greatest challenge facing Christians in the West - and, as usual, Alison Morgan has not only identified the key issue but also provided a lucid and practical insight into what it means. I love her writing. Somehow she manages to combine substantial scholarship with highly personal reflection and down to earth illustration, so this book - like her previous work - is easy to read as well as intellectually and spiritually stimulating.

A recurring theme is 'community': Alison has discovered from her own wide-ranging experience that discipleship is something we learn and develop together. A significant part of her own journey, which I have been privileged - in a very small way- to share, has been promoting the tremendously successful 'Rooted in Jesus' course in Africa. The challenge African culture poses to complacent, bored, individualistic Christians in the West comes across forcefully in the specific examples she provides of discipleship being worked out in countries such as Kenya and Tanzania. Part of this has to do with 'signs and wonders' and the importance of seeing as well as hearing. But much of it is about people learning with and from each other. Growth in discipleship involves commitment to other disciples as well as to Jesus. So she defines discipleship as "a form of apprenticeship undertaken in community".

I also like the way in which Alison roots her theological reflection firmly in Scripture. She draws out particular emphases in the four gospels and shows how - in the Bible as well as in experience - 'making disciples involves a lot more than just leading people to faith.' This book is about living and sharing Christianity; not just being taught it. It is about becoming a practitioner rather than an observer, which means both being accountable to other Christians and engaging deeply with the Bible. That's why the helpful 'group-study' questions at the end of each chapter focus on passages from Scripture as well as the experience of group members.

What's more, in considering what is really involved in following Jesus today, Alison doesn't ignore or attempt to side-step some of the difficult issues - such as what it means to 'be lost', which she suggests has to do with heading in the wrong direction. She readily acknowledges that of the 33 million people in England who describe themselves as 'Christian', only a small percentage actually attend church or have what might be described as a living relationship with Jesus. And for those who really are trying to become more like Jesus, she is honest about the mistakes made, sacrifices endured, and pain suffered along the way.

This leads her to the inevitable conclusion that 'if the Church is not about making disciples, it is not Church'. As Alison points out, the health of the church depends on the depth of our discipleship - and for many congregations in this country that is immensely challenging. It has far-reaching implications for the way we live, and how we worship together and engage with our communities as well as each other. It also indicates that the way forward is not 'dumbing-down' the message. In the course of her travels Alison has seen quite clearly that 'turning a tough option into a soft one' doesn't lead to church growth. She has also seen that it is difficult to develop discipleship without small groups of one sort or another.

This book is full of stories and insights which, in Alison's own words 'help us to evaluate the hidden voices of our culture and assess the validity of the assumptions on which we base our lifestyles.' It is about accepting the invitation to enter into Jesus' story - rather than simply inviting him into ours, and that is the secret of our true identity. If you are looking for something to excite people about Christian Discipleship: - this is it.

That's why, in a diocese whose vision is for 'growing disciples', I will be sending a copy of 'The Plural of Disciple is Church' to all our clergy: with gratitude, yet again, to Alison Morgan for providing such a compelling contribution to such a crucial subject.

James Newcome