

A Discipleship Model for Churches in Challenging Times

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Abstract

Christian congregations in North America are discovering the need for a discipleship process which goes beyond the "gap" produced by (1) campus and community-based evangelism, & (2) church-based adult Sunday school classes and mid-week Bible study groups. It is becoming overwhelmingly clear that churches have been so focused on the theological agenda (reproducing a 'correct' theology among their people), the social agenda (feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and addressing the needs of the poor) and the ecclesial agenda (internal matters of politics and self-management), that they have become ineffective at producing strong, healthy, well-grounded disciples. This article represents a summary-survey of research carried out in a North American context in 2008, which sought to identify a process for effective discipleship in local churches. A process for making disciples is proposed and outlined -- a process which is transferable not simply to the churches where the research was carried out, but to every local church with a passion for making disciples.

Introduction

During 2008 I interviewed the ministry-leaders of ten Asian Christian churches in the Northeastern States of New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. My purpose in interviewing these pastors was to come to an understanding of what discipleship processes were being employed among North American churches whose membership-based was predominantly ethnic. The goal of the research was to create a discipleship process which was applicable not only to Chinese Christian churches but to all Christian churches regardless of their makeup, to benefit the discipleship mandate given by Jesus Christ to his apostles, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

The findings generated from the research indicated the following five key points: (1) all pastors and churches identified discipleship as a key priority in their preaching, leading and pastoral ministries; (2) but for a variety of reasons, e.g. excessive busyness, preoccupation with existing programs and internal relationships, few consistent and effective discipleship programs actually ran; (3) pastors (especially) identified the lack of discipleship resources which were effective in transitioning people from junior believers into mature disciples; (4) inadequate resources in terms of time and money were assigned to discipleship processes; & (5) the feeling was that the demands of life inside the church (services, mid-week meetings & ministries) and life outside the church (work, family and mortgage) exercised a detrimental influence on relationships, and therefore minimised the space available for working on one's own discipleship or contributing to the discipleship of others.

The Decline of Discipleship:

In his book *Growing True Disciples*, George Barna wrote that many Christians who are members of local churches report being under-supported in their growth towards Christian maturity.

Relatively small numbers of born again adults said that their churches give them the specific paths to follow to foster growth. Slightly less than half said that their churches had identified

any spiritual goals, standards or expectations for their congregations in the past year ... Only one out of every five believers stated that the church has some means of facilitating an evaluation of the spiritual maturity or commitment to maturity in the congregation.¹

Barna later commented, "(55%) of the adults who indicated their interest in hearing advice on how to improve the spiritual life also said that if the church matched them with a spiritual mentor or coach, they would be more likely to pursue the changes suggested to them."²

Churches often adopt or create programs to make disciples, but programs do not make disciples -- disciples make disciples. Programs lack intentional relationships with the appropriate levels of accountability. In his book *Transforming Discipleship*, Greg Ogden³ identified four problems which affect discipling programs. (1) Programs tend to be information or knowledge-based. (2) Programs are the one preparing for the many. (3) Programs are characterised by regimentation or synchronisation. (4) Programs generally have low levels of personal accountability.

Leroy Eims asked, "Why are fruitful, dedicated, mature disciples so rare?"⁴ Eims' question has been repeated by Richard Foster and Dallas Willard of the *Renovare Movement*. Where are all the disciples? Observations about those who have left the church, and the arrival of a new and disjointed post-Christian, post-modern and post-secular world abound. Yet the real culprit for the decline of discipleship surely is the decline of any emphasis on making disciples in local churches. The churches I interviewed in 2008 said they wanted to make discipleship a primary goal, but for a variety of reasons they were not able to carry through their intention. Despite the centrality of the task of making disciples both as a commission from Jesus Christ for the church, as well as a missional strategy for the church to implement as one of its primary tasks in history -- pastors and churches find it very difficult to "break out" of the straitjackets of history, convention, busyness and other sub-agendas they encounter. The result is that discipleship appears to be in decline in our local churches. And if there is decline in our local churches, there is inevitably an irresistible decline in discipleship across our nation.

Renewing the Pattern:

Jesus' ministry focused on a sustained pattern of making and reproducing disciples. His call to his disciples was to "Come, follow me!" (Matthew 4:19); a call which he intended to become the primary pattern of the mission of the Church across history. The call to follow Jesus was two-fold: (1) to *be* disciples, and (2) to *make* disciples ... as shown by his subsequent statement that his disciples would become "fishers of men." Likewise the apostle Paul could state, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). For Paul the apostolic meta-strategy was to establish local churches, but the micro-strategy was to make disciples who would grow into the image and likeness of Christ.

Local congregations seeking to minister to today's competitive-commuter-consumer society need to find a way to identify Jesus' pattern of making and reproducing disciples that really works. And they need to do it in such a way as to bring it back from the "lost property" box to which it has become accidentally assigned. The problem for most pastors is not a theological one -- few evangelicals who read this article will have problems with the *what* or the *why*. The problem for most pastors is one of implementation -- that *how*. The purpose of this research was to identify a process which will enable discipleship to move out of the "too hard" basket into the realms of possibility -- given the average pastor's already heavy work schedule. In order to renew the pattern of discipleship in our churches,

¹ George Barna. *Growing True Disciples* (Ventura, California: Issachar Resources, 2000), 41

² Barna, 42

³ Greg Ogden. *Transforming Discipleship* (Downers Grove: IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 43-5

⁴ Leroy Eims. *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 45-6

congregations themselves will have to learn to fight the default positions they have inherited from their founding fathers and mothers, and the daily grind of deadlines, programs and the priorities of second-order but already in-place ministry patterns.

A Discipleship Process:

The research undertaken among the 10 Asian Christian churches has enabled me to identify a five-step discipleship process which I propose here, in abbreviated form, for your consideration. It is hoped that pastoral leaders, elders, ministry-workers, evangelists and youth leaders will find ways to renew and recover the discipleship pattern in their ministry-settings, drawing on this process. The five-step discipleship process I identified in my Doctor of Ministry thesis contains the elements of growth, relationships, accountability, compassion, and evangelistic opportunities. I found that if a disciple is to progress from being a new believer to being a mature disciple, they have to progress through each of these critically important elements.

- a) **GRACE:** The acronym GRACE is used for the five essential elements of discipleship:
- **Growth:** where the disciple becomes teachable and learns to love God's Word and is grounded in a proper 'habit' of desiring to follow Christ
 - **Relationship:** begins to practice right relationships with God and others, and understands the importance of repentance and reconciliation
 - **Accountability:** positions themselves to be answerable to other disciples for their actions and attitudes as an act of willing submission to Christ
 - **Compassion:** the out-working of their faith in the three communities of church, neighbourhood and city
 - **Evangelism:** acquire skills in connecting with people around issues relating to the inner life, and where they stand before God.
- b) **Disciplers:** An important part of discipleship is the introduction of one who does the discipling, or a discipler. The role of the discipler is very important for the success of the discipleship process. The discipler promotes genuine growth and change, and provides a living model for the disciple to follow. The discipler helps the disciple to reach his or her goals more effectively, and plays a key role in demonstrating God's pattern for spiritual growth. The discipler does these things by developing healthy, transparent, and trustworthy relationships with each disciple. As Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." It is important to establish training to build mature disciplers, because established Christian ministry practitioners are more oriented towards managing saints than making them. The role of the discipler however is critical in the making of other disciples; without them the process cannot go forward effectively.
- c) **PODS (Periods of Development):** I have identified five pods which facilitate the implementation of the five grace-phases. The five pods are Germinate, Reach, Assess, Crossover, and Elevate. You will note that each of these stages in the process also create the acronym GRACE.
- 1) **Germinate:** this first pod is targeted towards new believers, who meet together in weekly groups of 3-4 people. They are encouraged to undertake a series of studies as follows:
 - i. Discipleship Essentials (see the description below) -- a set curriculum of 24 sessions
 - ii. Discipleship Foundations & baptism class -- 7 sessions
 - iii. Celebration of Discipline -- 12 sessions (Richard Foster)
 - iv. [When old baby Christians are involved (my term for long-term church attenders with little spiritual life), I suggest they should study a Faith on the Edge course (24 sessions); Celebration of Discipline (Richard Foster, 12 sessions); & Sermon on the Mount Bible study (7 sessions)].

NOTE: in the Germinate stage, new disciples are gathered around a discipler in groups of 3 or 4. New disciples are invited to join the groups, which generally run for 6-9 months. The relational dynamics in the group setting enable significant spiritual growth to take

place. Disciples are under the guidance of the discipler, but also learn to disciple others by watching his or her example. Growth into Christ-likeness is the goal of the group, through memorising scripture and interiorising the values of the kingdom of God in a group-setting of mutual concern and mutual regard. Disciples are actively encouraged to be baptised during this phase.

- 2) **Reach:** in this second stage the disciple becomes a part of a small group, Bible study or Sunday-school class. The intent is that they will become disciplers with L-plates. In groups of 3-4 people, under the guidance of a senior discipler, they are given opportunities to learn how to disciple others, and observe how people grow in their spiritual lives through discovery, encounter, struggle and resolution. Mentoring with the discipler takes place outside the group on a semi-regular basis.
- i. Lead others through the Discipleship Essentials course -- 24 sessions, under the guidance of the discipler
 - ii. participate in a study on Prayer -- 7 sessions
 - iii. participate in a study on Servant Evangelism -- 7 Sessions (Conspiracy of Kindness)

NOTE: in this phase the disciple is encouraged to look beyond their own personal concerns and to learn to reach out to others -- Christians and non-Christians. Participating in ministry-settings provides them with a growing confidence, and the guidance of the discipler provides them with a growing maturity in dealing with peoples' inner-growth issues. In the stage, they grow to develop a pastoral, personal and spiritual concern for other people and to "be their brothers' keeper."

- 3) **Assess:** in this third pod the disciple takes a spiritual gift assessment, and learns to identify their own spiritual giftings, even as they are involved in ministry-settings as an emerging leader.
- i. attend a spiritual gift assessment seminar
 - ii. commit to serving in one or more ministries in the church, in their areas of gifting and under the guidance of their discipler
 - iii. continue to meet for mentoring and prayer with a discipler

NOTE: in this third phase disciples are assessed for their area/s spiritual gifting, and resource to ensure that they grow through the learning phase to begin to implement their gifts in the context of Christian ministry.

- 4) **Crossover:** the disciple commits to being a part of a leadership development and mentoring process. That process is designed to encourage each disciple to "cross over" into social and cultural contexts which are different from those they are used to. The purpose of the crossover is to share the love and message of Christ with those who do not yet believe. The disciple who participates in the crossover pod will gain experience in building relationships with others who are "different" to them. There are two methods for this pod; firstly, a short-term mission trip which is used as an intense discipleship experience, and secondly, volunteering in a local community in order to cultivate relationships with people from different socio-economic strata and areas, e.g. soup kitchens, community centres, youth-centres, recovery and addiction groups etc.
- i. short-term missions trip
 - ii. volunteering in a local community organisation

- 5) **Elevate:** in this fifth pod, the disciple commits to being a part of a leadership development and mentoring process. Many new disciples choose not to become leaders in their local churches. This pod begins with the aim of making leaders of disciples. It does so by linking maturing disciples with those who have responsibilities in local churches, e.g. elders, deacons, pastors and youth workers. In this phase the congregation is encouraged to interact with 'elevate' disciples as trainee-leaders and as people who are learning the ropes of servant leadership. During this phase they are required to:

- i. lead a ministry project from start to finish -- e.g. plan and implement a mission trip, begin a new ministry, organise and lead a special event -- while being mentored by a discipler or pastor
 - ii. read several books on leadership and discuss these with an assigned mentor
 - iii. submit regular monthly reports to their discipler.
- d) **Discipleship Essentials:** the discipleship essentials material is comprised of a four-part series of studies as follows:
- 1) Growing up in Christ: making disciples, being a disciple, how to have a quiet time, Bible study, prayer, and worship.
 - 2) Understanding the Message of Christ: a Three-Personed God, made in God's image, sin, grace, redemption, justification, and adoption.
 - 3) Becoming like Christ: being filled with the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, trust, love, doing justly, and witnessing.
 - 4) Serving Christ: in the Church, your ministry gifts, spiritual warfare, walking in obedience, and sharing the wealth with others.

Conclusion

This whirlwind tour of the discipleship process I proposed for churches in challenging times is not enough to give you an in-depth understanding of all of my research, but it is enough to give you a glimpse of its possibilities. Only you can discern whether or not it has relevance to your Church and ministry in your particular social and spiritual context. What I have tried to do is to identify Jesus' pattern of disciple-making, and to break it down into achievable 'steps' so that pastors and ministry-leaders can close the "gap" between what you are presently achieving and what you want to achieve in discipleship. Pastors and ministry-leaders in the 10 Asian churches in the Northeast area also the same thing: (1) all pastors and churches identified discipleship as a key priority in their preaching, leading and pastoral ministries; (2) but for a variety of reasons, e.g. excessive busyness, preoccupation with existing programs and internal relationships, few consistent and effective discipleship programs actually ran; (3) pastors (especially) identified the lack of discipleship resources which were effective in transitioning people from junior believers into mature disciples; (4) inadequate resources in terms of time and money were assigned to discipleship processes; & (5) the feeling was that the demands of life inside the church (services, mid-week meetings & ministries) and life outside the church (work, family and mortgage) exercised a detrimental influence on relationships, and therefore minimised the space available for working on one's own discipleship or contributing to the discipleship of others.

In the case of your own ministry-context, paying attention to (3) identifying suitable discipleship resources to enable your church to transition junior believers into mature disciples; and (4) the need to assign extra resources in terms of time, personnel and money to discipleship processes should be noted. In particular, writing discipleship into your church's goal and strategy statements, and establishing the priority of discipleship through achieving ownership on the part of your congregation is essential. Ensuring that the pastor's job description focuses on discipleship and preaching towards discipleship goals is essential. Further, putting in place a process for selecting and training suitable disciplers is the engine room which makes discipleship work in a local congregation. "Please consider!"

If you have further questions about how this discipleship process, based on the pods, can be applied in your local church or ministry-setting, please contact me at jeff.whisman@gmail.com.