

DISCIPLESHIP SHIFT

Five Steps that Help Your Church
to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples

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WITH ROBERT COLEMAN

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FOREWORD

Something is missing in the life of the church. Today's institution has a polite form of religion, but it seems to lack power, the power to radically change the wayward course of society. This is not to say that nothing worthwhile is happening. In fact, all kinds of things are going on, and if success is measured by big meetings, big buildings, and big budgets, then the church appears to be doing quite well.

But the real question has to be asked: is all this business actually fulfilling the mandate of Christ to make disciples and teaching them, in turn, to do the same? That's the mission of the church. Yes, we want churches to grow, but it is becoming painfully evident that getting more people on the rolls has not resulted in a corresponding increase in transformed lives. Where do you find the contagious sacrifice and all-out commitment to the Great Commission? In our obsession with bigger numbers of converts, far too little attention has been given to the nurture of believers in how to live their faith. This neglect has created a crisis in the contemporary church. How we deal with it, I believe, represents the most important issue we face today.

That's why the concern of this book is urgent. The book comes to grips with the problem of respectable superficiality in the house of God, and what can be done about it. The authors go back to the Bible and recognize in the way Jesus made disciples an example all of us can follow. We don't need crowds to reach the world. True, our Lord did on occasion speak to multitudes, but most of his time was spent with a few learners. Being with him day after day was the essence of their training. Ministry was seen not as a specialized clerical calling but as an everyday lifestyle of obedience to Christ.

Replicating this pattern of living becomes the goal of the priesthood of all believers.

Building on this, authors Jim Putman and Bobby Harrington set forth a plan by which intentional discipleship, developed through personal and group relationships, becomes the center of church life. Adjustments can be made to accommodate different situations and cultures, of course, but the biblical principles offer guidelines for implementation in any context. When this view of ministry is entirely new to a congregation that wants to start, helpful directions are suggested in transitioning to the model.

Giving the book a ring of authenticity is the personal experience of the authors. These are pastors who write out of what they have practiced. The validity of their teaching can be seen in their own growing churches, as well as the network of fellowships inspired by their example.

Here is an answer to the aimlessness and lack of spiritual depth in so much of the church growth we see today. It is down to earth. It isn't complicated. Even better, it presents a way to change the world, one person at a time. Not everyone will agree with all that they read, but you cannot read it without being challenged. And for those who dare to take its message to heart, the book may open a door to an exciting new concept of ministry.

—Dr. Robert E. Coleman



INTRODUCTION

Some of you are under real pressure.

You need to make things happen in your church. (And preferably by next Sunday!) You're seeing a decline in attendance, interest, passion, spiritual maturity, outreach, giving, evangelism, or effectiveness, and you need—actually, you *long*—to reverse those trends. You pray your church will be successful in its purpose. You want it to be as effective as possible. You're looking for a coach to provide a clear and uncomplicated way forward to biblical success. It's our prayer that this book will do that, and do so in a big way.

But right from the start, I (Jim) invite you to slow down and resist the urge to jump straight to a solution. This may seem counterintuitive, particularly for hard-driving leaders. But the reason for slowing down is this: in the same manner that it takes time for any church to develop its problems, it also takes time to sort out solutions and apply them to your church's specific context and situation. Church leaders are often tempted to read a book or attend a conference and then immediately attempt to change their church to the next great thing, whatever that may be. They seek one-size-fits-all, step-by-step remedies, plans that can be slapped on churches quickly. But that's not what this book is about.

I've seen leaders succumb to this temptation. Each month about a hundred church leaders from across the country attend our church's training and development program, the two-day event where we teach discipleship processes experientially and in depth. Formerly we held these programs at the beginning of the week, on Mondays and Tuesdays. Leaders could come into Post Falls, Idaho, where our church is located, and first attend a weekend service at our church,

then attend the training program. But we don't do it that way anymore. Now we hold training sessions at the end of the week, on Thursdays and Fridays. There's strategy at work here. Now we hold the training first. Leaders can attend one of our church services afterward, if they wish.

The problem was that leaders used to attend one of our services, take a cursory look around, and then immediately jump to conclusions. They would tell me they had found our "secret." I'd always ask them what that was. They would say something like, "Ah, you've got great music. That's what we need." They might also say, "Your church is friendly and it makes people want to come back, so we need to do that as well."

But they missed it. Music isn't the issue (though I want the best music we can get in our church). Chances are good that the issue plaguing their church is much more important than what kind of music they use. It is true that if we want to give people a taste of relationship on the weekend, we want to be friendly, but that isn't the solution by itself either. A church won't go to the core to fix the problem if all it sees are the peripheral things.

It's like a professional baseball pitcher who develops a shoulder problem. He wants to keep playing, so he gets a trainer to shoot his shoulder full of cortisone, a drug that reduces inflammation and swelling at the site of an injury. The shoulder is numbed so the athlete can keep playing, but the athlete hasn't addressed the injury. He goes out on the field and is able to keep playing for a while, but soon his injury gets worse and catches up with him — and then he's out of the game for a long time, if not for good.

That's what happens when a leader simply imposes a new quick fix, peripheral solution on top of a core foundational mistake the church is already making. The symptoms are addressed, but the cause isn't. This book goes to the core, and it takes time to do that.

Another reason not to jump immediately to a solution, even if you rightly diagnose the problem, is that churches tend to move slowly through change. Think icebergs or large ships. Wise leaders need to go slowly toward any new cultural change or methodology. No matter what your church's age, if it's been meeting for more than

a few months, then you will already have established ways of doing things, and the people are there because they like these practices. Every church has a preexisting DNA. Respect the people in your church, who they are, what your church's emphasis and methodologies are. The existing emphasis and methodology might be ineffectual, but your church has reasons for doing what it does and it will take time to lead through change.

Slow down, and steer your ship slowly and wisely. Learn what the core solution is to your church's problems, and then work with your team and with the specifics of your church's situation to implement change in effective and lasting ways.

There are always two issues at stake: choosing the right destination and choosing the right leadership style and way to get your people to the right destination. If you are a good leader who leads everyone to the wrong place, then you have failed. If you have the right destination but lead the wrong way, then you have also failed, because no one will follow you to the right place. I have seen both problems manifested more than once, so my advice is to take your time to do both right.

Are you with me?

It's no easy matter to shift how a local church operates so that it can become more effective. I'd be the first to admit that our church does not have all the answers, and we have made many mistakes along the way. We have struggled to discern the difference between a biblical principle that works everywhere and in every generation because it is God's design, and a principle that works only in our context.

Every leader will need to do the same. You will need to carefully discover how the biblical mandate works in your situation, and then have the wisdom to lead as a good shepherd leads to the right place. Even though we've made our share of mistakes, what we have experienced in the past years—and what we experience now—is so exciting, so fulfilling, so opposite of what so many experience in churches across the country, that we can't help but share the story of what God is doing. My goal in the pages to come is to highlight biblical principles pertaining to the mission of the church and note how these principles work in any context or culture.

If you are a church planter, let me also caution you. The great thing about starting a new church is that you can start everything fresh and new. The DNA of the new church will be the one that you and your team are creating—and everyone who has ever planted a church knows the initial thrill of planning with a blank slate. You say to yourself with great anticipation, “We get to create the church that has been birthed in our hearts by God.”

But, as many church planters later realize, it is easy to jump in and attempt to create something new and different, only to find that you inadvertently end up creating something very similar to what you have known. You did not realize that many of your assumptions and practices were grounded in ways of doing church that hurt what you felt God leading you to create. The adage “measure twice, cut once” is helpful at this point. If we want to create a church truly committed to discipleship, every assumption about church needs to be filtered and reevaluated through the lens of the Scriptures and especially Jesus’ methods for doing discipleship and church.

I’ve asked two leaders and key thinkers in the discipleship movement to help me write this book. We’re going to keep the book in the “I” voice mostly, just so you know who’s talking (Jim), but I want to give you a brief introduction to my coauthors and let you know what their role is in this book’s writing.

Dr. Bobby Harrington is the founding and lead pastor of Harpeth Community Church just outside of Nashville, Tennessee. His church was launched in 1998 and at first used the attractional model, but it has since made the transition to the relational-discipleship model, the one this book espouses. Bobby knows firsthand what it means to shift a church’s main focus to discipleship. In the last ten years, he has also trained and coached hundreds of church planters. He also has four degrees in theology, including a doctor of ministry degree from Southern Baptist Seminary, so his focus in this book will be on research and clarification, as well as helping to undergird this book’s message with biblical truth.

Dr. Robert Coleman is a legend in the evangelical community. At age eighty-four, he’s seen many examples of how a church can shift its focus to discipleship and go from floundering to thriving.

In 1963, Dr. Coleman wrote a book called *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, which has since sold multiple millions of copies all over the world. It was the first book I read on the topic of discipleship, and it has influenced my focus ever since. Dr. Coleman is a mentor of mine and will be adding sidebars throughout this book to help shed time-tested light on the subject.

In the following chapters, we'll examine what it means to shift our churches to focus on biblical discipleship in relational environments. My encouragement to all of us is to stay pliable, humble, and teachable. Let's engage and participate in the concepts presented in this book. And let's work together from the core out. If we focus on the philosophy first, on why change is needed, then we can know why things are done and adapt our thinking to our church's particular situation. First comes philosophy. Second comes practical adaptation. (Know the "why" before you figure out the "how.") You'll notice that each main shift is presented in two chapters. The first chapter of each shift focuses more on the philosophy behind the shift, and the second chapter focuses more on the methodology. (With the first shift, we've included two chapters on methodology because there is so much material there.)

Be encouraged that we are not alone in this. God always shows up and does his part perfectly. As you examine the teachings in this book and relate them to your church's situation, God will help you discern biblical principles versus personal preferences. He rewards people who seek him, and we need God's strength to get us out of our comfort zones and proceed.

Whatever your role in your church, whatever your level of learning, no matter if you've been a Christian for thirty years or thirty weeks, God is going to do something remarkable in and through you and through the local church you're an integral part of.

Okay, let's begin.

KEY POINTS

- Resist the urge to jump straight to a solution. Too many leaders are tempted to read a book or attend a conference and then immediately change their church to the next great thing, whatever that may be. That's not what this book is about.
- It's no easy matter to shift how a local church operates so that it can become more effective. Slow down, and steer your ship slowly and prudently. Learn what the core solution is to your church's problems, and then work with your team and with the specifics of your church's situation to implement change in effective and lasting ways.
- We're with you in this! The body of Christ is a team, and even as we write this book, we're praying for you and your church's success.



Chapter 1

THE ENGINE THAT DRIVES IT ALL

What is the God-given purpose of the local church?

Bobby Harrington gave a lot of his extra time for about a decade to train church planters and create church planting networks. He did it joyfully. But one day, flying out of Nashville for a network meeting in another city, a vague thought became a clear realization: he was uneasy with the churches being planted. Would the result of all these church planting efforts really last? Would the churches planted truly please God, long term?

The church planters were godly, wonderful people. The theology was good. Their level of commitment was inspiring. But he wondered if the approach to church planting that he and his peers (including various church planting organizations) were advocating was often leading to a shallow, cultural Christianity. Before giving himself to church planting, he had already concluded the same thing about many established churches. Too often they had problems with legalism or traditionalism or they lacked authenticity or something else that missed Jesus' heart for a lost and hurting world. But that day, he finally admitted to himself that he was witnessing much of the same cultural Christianity in the church planting world. Something at a fundamental level needed reevaluation.

It was around this time that we (Jim and Bobby) became good friends. We had the same fundamental belief. Maybe you agree with us? When it comes to the local church in North America today, something is not working.

The big question driving this book is the question of effectiveness. For a moment, resist the urge to defend yourself or your church. Don't defend your experience in ministry, your seminary degrees, or your genuine heart for seeing people come to know Christ. Don't defend any of the activities taking place at your church. And don't defend the size of your congregation, the amount of giving, your service to the poor, or the number of new converts. Simply ask yourself, Is the church producing results? Is it doing its job in the best way possible? And please resist the urge to quickly answer yes.¹

It's true that throughout North America today, though numbers are declining, there are still many people coming to church, and some are busy with ministry-related activities. There are ministries to the poor. Buildings are being built. Programs are running at full tilt. Money is being given.

But attendance, busyness, construction, finances, and programs are not real indications of success. The core question of effectiveness—the question that ultimately matters—is whether the people who are getting saved are being conformed to the likeness of Christ. Are we making mature disciples of Jesus who are not only able to withstand the culture but are also making disciples of Jesus themselves?

Let's look at some research.²

Consider how recent statistics show that when it comes to morality and lifestyle issues, there is little difference between the behavior (and one can assume condition of the heart) of Christians and non-Christians.

Divorce rates are about the same.

The percentages of men who regularly view pornography are roughly the same—and it's a lot of men.

Christians are considered to be more than two times as likely to have racist attitudes as non-Christians.

Domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and most other problems are just as prevalent among Christians as among non-Christians.

Consider too statistics about evangelicals. About one in four people living together outside marriage call themselves evangelicals.

Only about 6 percent of evangelicals regularly tithe.

Only about half the people who say they regularly attend church actually do. And a significant number of younger adults (millennials) believe that evangelical churches are not even Christlike or Christian. Sixty to 80 percent of young people will leave the church in their twenties.³

Fewer than one out of five who claim to be born-again Christians have a worldview of even a few fundamental biblical beliefs. Plenty of people call themselves Christians, but very few people can actually tell you what it means—from the Bible’s perspective—to be a Christian. They might call themselves Christians, but they also believe that the Bible is full of errors or that God is not one God manifest in three persons or that Jesus Christ did not lead a sinless life (or that he isn’t God) or that simply being good will get you into heaven.

When you ask most evangelicals what their job as a believer is, they may tell you that they are to share Christ, but how many actually do? At worst, they follow the rule that you don’t talk about politics and religion, and they will die without ever seeing anyone come to faith. At best, they may invite people to church, but they think making disciples is not their job; it’s the pastor’s job.

We could go on and on. One can’t help but conclude that something is wrong. Where’s the lasting life change? Where are the transformed lives? Why are people in our churches just like the world? Why are we not developing people who are Christlike?

A few years back, Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Church, one of the most influential churches in America, revealed the results of a months-long study into the church’s effectiveness. The conclusion was that the church simply wasn’t producing the results they were hoping for. Willow Creek’s leaders did research into other churches across the country and came to the same conclusions.⁴ In the foreword to *Reveal*, a book outlining their discoveries, Bill Hybels wrote, “The local church is the hope of the world. For a number of years now, I have shared this message whenever I’ve had the opportunity to serve pastors of local churches across the nation and around the world. It’s a message I believe with all my heart. So you can imagine my reaction when three people whose counsel I value

told me that the local church I've been the pastor of for more than three decades was not doing as well as we thought when it came to spiritual growth. As if that wasn't bad enough, they said this wasn't just their opinion. It was based on scientific research."⁵

The results rocked Willow Creek's world. Willow Creek's leaders realized that they had to make significant changes. Hybels put it this way: "Our dream is that we fundamentally change the way we do church. That we take out a clean sheet of paper and we rethink all of our old assumptions. Replace it with new insights. Insights that are informed by research and rooted in Scripture. Our dream is really to discover what God is doing and how he's asking us to transform this planet."⁶

That's what's required of us as well. To be effective, we need to make a fundamental shift in the way we do church. What we're doing now isn't working, at least not like we'd hoped. We have defined ourselves by emphases and methodologies that don't produce results.

Fortunately, there is hope ahead. Within the pages of God's Word is a design that will lead to effectiveness. The solution to our ineffectiveness as churches involves following a clear and uncomplicated way to train people to be spiritually mature, fully devoted followers of Christ, and then in turn having those disciples make more disciples.

What we need in our churches today are fewer "Christians," at least in today's popular definition of the word. Now, I don't want fewer saved people. Far from it. I want as many to be saved as possible. But the point is that fewer than we think are actually saved.

What I want are full-fledged followers of Jesus Christ, and to produce that in our churches today, we need a radical shift. We need more of the engine that Jesus used to change the world, the engine he instructs us to use. This engine will not create perfect churches, but it will create *effective* churches.

It's relational discipleship.

Ask/Dr. Coleman

Is the church today doing its job to the degree that it could?

As church leaders, we definitely need to ask ourselves whether our churches are as effective as they could be. I'm afraid, however, that the church is not living up to her potential.

The church is preserving itself well, content to maintain a rear-guard action, content to protect the status quo. But that's not what God has called the church to do. God wants the church to do more than merely hold its own. We're in a battle against the powers and principalities of this world. Aggressive action is needed.

Regrettably, I've seen a lack of effectiveness all too often. It leaves you with a sinking feeling to see what great potential there is in a person or a church, yet to see them settling for second or third best. It leaves you with the feeling of sorrow. American poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier said, "For all sad words of tongue and pen, / The saddest are these, 'It might have been.'"

There are, however, many exciting places in the world today where the church is moving. I think of the Covenant Evangelical Free Church in Singapore. More than 4,500 people fill the five Sunday services on two campuses, and a third campus soon will be under construction. Twenty-five years ago when Edmund Chan, fresh out of college, became a pastor, his discouraged congregation had only seventeen members. But this gifted expositor of Scripture had a vision to make disciples who truly worship God in all arenas of life by the enabling of the Spirit. He began to train men who would take up their crosses and follow Christ, teaching them to train others to live the same lifestyle. It was radical

discipleship. As the church multiplied, so did its outreach in missions and church planting around the world. When I visited the church in the spring of 2012, a spirit of revival pervaded the atmosphere. I call that a church alive, a church living in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

A church like this gives me hope. Today's churches need constantly to strive through the power of the Holy Spirit to be as effective as they can be.

The solution to our ineffectiveness as churches is to train people to be spiritually mature, fully devoted followers of Christ, and then in turn to have those disciples make more disciples.

FOUR MAIN CATEGORIES

How did the church get to the state it's in today? Simply put, the problem stems from the way today's churches are designed. Within North America, each local church is characterized by two important components.

The first is *focus*. Think of a church's focus as the primary emphasis that it commits its time and resources to achieve. It's the engine that drives everything else in that church. For instance, a church may desire to reach lost people, so it will expend its energy and resources on bridge events and worship services focused on giving reasons to believe and issuing invitations to accept and follow Christ.

The second component is *methodology*. This is the way a church sets itself up systematically to accomplish its purpose, or the manner in which it tries to achieve its focus. It could also be thought of as a structure or a system environment (as we call it in the sports world) that a church has created to accomplish what it values.

Every church has its focus and its methodology for achieving its focus whether it realizes it or not. When looking at the different kinds of churches, leaders disagree over how many categories of churches exist today. Some hold that there are only two main categories—attractional and missional. Others add a third—organic

(sometimes called “house”). Others add a fourth—educational. The disagreement stems mainly from crossover and blending of focus and methodologies. Truly, most churches don’t fit any category exactly. Nevertheless, I find that most churches today will lean toward one of the following four categories, even if a category doesn’t fit precisely.

Category 1: Educational

A pastoral-educational focus with a classroom methodology.

In the educational category, a church uses the bulk of its energy on biblical education, and it’s understood that the pastor’s job (along with the pastoral staff) is to provide this education for the people. Leaders and members make well-intentioned statements such as, “We believe the Bible is God’s Word, and we want to get it into the heads of our people.” Churches with this emphasis focus on Bible study and doctrine.

The methodology in these churches is most often the classroom model. A strong emphasis is placed on Sunday morning teaching times, Sunday school attendance, perhaps a midweek educational forum, youth and children’s programs and Bible studies, and perhaps information-oriented teacher-led small groups.

Sometimes a strong emphasis is placed on pastoral care as well, though few churches, especially larger churches, are intentional about this aspect. The paid, formally trained, professional pastors are responsible for developing and implementing programs for teaching Bible knowledge. The pastors in churches where care is expected are also responsible for caring for the congregants, so heavy expectations are placed on the pastors’ time. Congregants want pastors to visit them in the hospital, counsel them, open meetings with prayer, attend myriad planning meetings, drop everything to come to their aid in family crises, and seldom take time off for vacation (otherwise, who will lead the church?).

The educational model typically doesn’t stress attracting new people to the church as much as it does educating and taking care of people who are already there. Those who come through the door expect to be biblically educated, and this is often (in their minds) the meaning

of “becoming a mature disciple.” The hope is that the education will translate to Christian behavior outside the walls of the church.

Category 2: Attractional

An attractional focus with an entertainment methodology.

The well-meaning emphasis in the attractional category is placed on biblical evangelism through church services and large events that attract people. Helping people to “make decisions for Christ” is primary. It is assumed that discipleship will happen through church attendance. Some churches in this category seek to retain people who have attended church for years in more traditional settings, by updating the way songs are sung and lessons are taught. The modern way of doing things tends to keep people from being bored with church, at least for a while. The key is to design church services to win people.

In this category, people are attracted to the church because they have real questions and hurts that need answering and dealing with. The sermons are designed to answer those questions and address those hurts. The leaders in these churches are focused on taking ground outside the walls of the church by using the weekend service as a hook. They really seek to inspire Christians to invite their friends to the services where an invitation to accept Christ is given. Worship services are usually professional and celebratory in nature, limited in depth, and will sometimes use non-Christian music to identify with the church’s primary demographic—unsaved people. Good coffee is served. Dress is casual. Messages are shorter, practical, and relational in style.

Category 3: Missional

A missional focus with a service-opportunity methodology.

Churches in the missional category are sometimes referred to as social justice churches. The focus is biblical action. These churches are designed around the paradigm in which God has given each person a kingdom-oriented purpose, and each person needs to discover that purpose and then live it out in practical, tangible, community-changing ways.

The methodology is service. Christians are primarily encouraged to become active outside their church's walls for the purpose of social change and as a means of "living out Christ's kingdom."

The church might encourage its people, for instance, to focus on feeding the homeless or working in a women's shelter. People might organize community cleanup days in the name of Jesus, or anonymously leave packets of diapers on the doorsteps of young mothers. People might be encouraged to live radically and simply, focusing on others rather than possessions.

Missional churches are typically contemporary in style, but not always. Some are more liturgical. Some are traditional yet have a strong, driving sense of outreach.

Category 4: Organic or "Home"

A fellowship focus with an organic methodology.

In the organic category, the emphasis is biblical relationships, or fellowship. These churches focus on Bible verses that talk about how people need to be devoted to each other in brotherly love and close fellowship.

The methodology used is home groups (sometimes called "house churches"). In this model, a group of believers might gather together in an informal, relational way for teaching, worship, service, and fellowship, yet there would be very little organizational structure involved. They would hold few or no regular public, large group services and may not have any main meeting place other than the homes they live in. (Though I am aware of several churches in this model that like to meet as a whole once a month in a rented facility.)

They might initiate activities to serve their communities, but the emphasis is placed on the home group doing the service, rather than attracting people into the house church. The main emphasis is "doing life together," or journeying together as people who love God and are devoted to him.

Your church may fit precisely into one of these categories. Or it might straddle two or more of them. Your church might believe in all

or some of the church functions that these categories represent, but it probably focuses on one and hopes the others will happen naturally. That's okay. Think of these categories as broad brushstrokes that help to provide definitions.

THE COMMON ELEMENT: SOMETHING'S MISSING

Please note that my purpose is never to bash any other churches. Rather, I want to enter into the struggles these other churches are facing. In the Relational Discipleship Network training sessions, we work with churches in each of these categories every month, so we get to see and hear firsthand what is working and what isn't. The churches are led by people who love the Lord, but the leaders know and articulate that something is missing. To be clear, there is much to commend in all four models. None are intrinsically wrong, and leaders of each model can use proof texts to create biblical reasons for what they do. Plus, there are pockets of effectiveness in each model—even tremendous effectiveness for a period of time.

But there are also tremendous challenges with each. Again, we must ask if any of these models are truly succeeding. Are people being transformed from spiritual immaturity to maturity, and are they following Jesus in regular, lasting, and effective ways? The answer, according to the statistics we referred to earlier, is sometimes yes and sometimes no. But mostly, unfortunately, no.

The common element in the four categories of churches is that the models are incomplete. The focus and the methodologies are improperly placed, in such a way that there are missing components that leave the church one-dimensional, when it was meant to be complete. That only causes problems in the long run. That's what we're aiming to shift.

For instance, in an educational model, one of the greatest challenges is pastoral burnout if the pastor is expected to teach and care for all the people in relational ways. I've talked with pastors operating in this model who tell how they get so caught up in creating sermons, making sure all the programs are running, and caring for all the perceived needs of the church that they are continually

exhausted. The expectations placed on church leaders in this model are sky-high, impossible to fulfill. Those in this category also have a very real problem with effectiveness even in the area of real learning. Usually people who go to these churches love to listen to the pastor speak and become very reliant upon him and his understanding rather than learning to understand the Bible for themselves. When they do read themselves, it just isn't as interesting as when they hear it from the master teacher. Also, lecturing is the least effective way to teach anything and leads to few really understanding the truth that the teacher wants them to understand. Because the teacher cannot unpack what he is teaching in practical ways, the people often have wrong understandings of how to apply the truth. They can misrepresent or misunderstand what the teacher really believes or would do in any given situation in the real world of their everyday lives.

Similarly, I've spoken with pastors of attractional churches who describe how their church succeeds in bringing people in and helping them make decisions for Jesus but leaves those people in a spiritual childlike state in which, over time, they conclude that their needs aren't being met. Or they decide that maybe Jesus isn't real because they were not taught what to expect from a relationship with God. When trouble comes, they don't know what to do or why bad things happen, and then the enemy comes and does what he always does—causes doubt and conflict. The people drift away from the faith or get frustrated and angry and stick around causing problems. Or they'll leave and go to a church with an educational model so they can go deeper in their faith (or so they think).

There is much good in the missional model, yet I've spoken with pastors who describe similar frustrations. They note that if mission to the poor and marginalized is the primary focus of a church, then they always have people giving and reaching out, but not much is being invested back; there is not enough that builds the believers up. A missional church will grow, but since its focus is primarily on doing things for hurting people (who will continually take), eventually the people will burn out, particularly if service and action aren't balanced with the rest of life. When a church is focused on doing things for other people, then the problem is either that the people

receiving the service aren't very appreciative or that the intrinsic acts of service don't yield a lot of fruit. There's no sustaining strength that comes from relationship with other believers.

People who interact with the organic model tell how a church focused on doing life together has its strengths for sure, but if they are not careful, it too can get out of balance. Spending time with people can grow very frustrating unless the people you are doing life with are becoming more and more like Jesus. If not, eventually these people get irritated with each other or hurt each other and move on. God's idea of real relationship includes being together, yes, but while we are together, we are being transparent and authentic with a goal—to become a disciple of Jesus who can make disciples of Jesus. A strict emphasis on fellowship alone creates a church that struggles with an inward focus instead of reaching others, because the group values real relationships that require so much. This makes it hard to include newcomers, especially lost people. I've heard participants in this movement describe how at some point this church model has a tendency to become cliquish, dysfunctional, even cultish. Limited new lifeblood comes into this church, and it often implodes or disbands.

What's the solution, then? If the purpose of a church is not primarily to transfer information, if it's not primarily to attract people, if it's not primarily to serve our communities, and if it's not primarily to encourage fellowship, why then does the church exist? All four functions are important components of a church, but none should be the main focus of a church—not as Jesus defined it, anyway.

So what is the main focus of the church supposed to be?

DISCIPLESHIP, NOT EVANGELISM

A solution emerges when a church shifts its focus to biblical discipleship using the methodology of relational environments. In the chapters to come, we'll talk in depth about what this means, but notice those two key words again in relation to what we're espousing, and keep the ideas in mind so you can begin to chew on them.

Focus = biblical discipleship

Methodology = relational environments

We believe that discipleship should be the core focus for the church. And we believe that the relational model Jesus utilized is the timeless and best methodology for discipleship. The “relational discipleship model” embraces all aspects of the main four categories, yet it espouses something different as the one driving focus.

This model doesn’t measure success by how many people come to a church, how much money is given, or even how many converts are made. These things are worth measuring, but they’re always secondary. The model we advocate measures success by how many people are being loved and led into the way of Jesus, are coming to Christ and following him. It measures how many people are being transformed into Christ’s likeness and are pursuing his kingdom mission. It values and measures how many are actually becoming disciples who can make disciples.

Let’s start with the question of focus. As mentioned, one problem today is that churches are full of “Christians” but not disciples, and yes, there is a significant difference. In the early church, the first followers of Jesus were called disciples. Later they were called Christians because of their association with Christ (Acts 11:26). But the Bible never instructs us to make Christians, not in today’s loose sense of the word, in which more than 80 percent of Americans claim to be Christian.⁷ The Bible refers to disciples around 270 times, but to Christians just three times. So a focus on discipleship is the first overall shift with which we must grapple.

Consider how the New Testament is intensely Christ-centered. Jesus is the key to everything else. He is the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the Vine, the Gate, the Way, Truth, and Life, and the model to follow. The ideal life is focused on Jesus. It is not just trusting him but also truly following him. To focus on him is to live a fulfilling life. It is about becoming more and more like him in the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God. To be conformed into Jesus’ likeness is the goal (Rom. 8:29). The word for this is *discipleship*. The New Testament church was all about being and making disciples of Jesus.

DeYoung and Gilbert’s comprehensive study *What Is the Mission of the Church?* deals with many of the complicated questions about the

mission or purpose of the church that thoughtful people are asking. My coauthors and I have found their book to be a helpful one because it deals comprehensively with all the biblical material. We could not recommend it more highly, especially to young leaders. They sum it all up in a simple statement: “The mission of the church—your church, my church, the church in Appalachia, the church in Azerbaijan, the church anywhere—is to make disciples of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit to the glory of God the Father.”⁸

New Testament scholar Michael Wilkins puts it this way: “Since all true Christians are disciples, the ministry of the church may be seen in its broadest sense as ‘discipleship.’ Various ministries within the church should be seen as specialization, aspects, or stages of discipleship training.”⁹

Let’s focus on a key text that can help us with this point, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). Too many churches refer to this passage in the sense of making converts only. But that line of thinking ignores both the meaning of the word *disciple* and the phrases in the text that define what is involved in making disciples. Let’s look carefully at what it says: “Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’” (ESV, emphasis added).

All authority was given to Jesus. He commanded his disciples to go and make disciples. Disciples are not merely converts but also doers, learners, students, Christ followers, or better yet, “apprentices of Jesus.”¹⁰ We make disciples, the text tells us, by baptizing people who respond to the gospel message and by teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded.¹¹ So notice Jesus tells us that he has all authority, and then he tells us to teach what he commanded. So it is right to say that following Christ is a nonnegotiable part of the Great Commission.

To be clear, the call isn’t to perfection. A disciple of Jesus will be imperfect, even as Peter denied Christ, Thomas doubted Christ, and many other disciples misunderstood Christ. Yet the call of a true

disciple is a call to a change in allegiance, from self to Jesus' leadership in our lives. In a disciple's life, the Great Commission must be taken at face value. If anyone serves Jesus, he *must* follow Jesus. There is no wiggle room in a genuine Christian's life for a faith characterized by compromise.

Jesus not only told us to make disciples but also gave us a model to follow in doing so. I believe that most Christians have divorced the teachings of Jesus from the methods of Jesus, and yet they expect the results of Jesus. I believe his methods are just as divine as his teachings. He showed us that the fundamental methodology in making disciples is relationships grounded in truth and love. Jesus is the greatest disciple maker in history, and his way works. Discipleship is the emphasis. Relationships are the method. Jesus invited people into relationships with himself; he loved them and in the process showed them how to follow God. His primary method was life-on-life.

The method Jesus used with his disciples was the same method that the Old Testament advocated for parents to use to disciple their children. Deuteronomy 6:5–9 states it succinctly: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (ESV).

Parents were to equip their children to love and obey God. The method was relationship (“when you sit in your house,” “when you walk by the way,” and “when you lie down”). And the whole process was discipleship, or in today's language, apprenticeship.

It is spiritual parenting.¹² In the Gospels, this method is seen when Jesus invited people into his life. He picked twelve to be his disciples, with the goal that they would carry on his ministry when he left. He invested in them by talking to them when they sat down, when they walked along the road, and when they laid down.

The apostle Paul and others also used this same method. Consider

2 Timothy 3:10–14, where Paul describes his relationship with Timothy: “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra. . . . Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it” (ESV).

Paul didn’t simply lead a Sunday school class once a week or preach a sermon to a large crowd and end there. He focused on doing life with people he disciplined. In the Bible, relationships are the context and environment for discipleship. It was the way of parents and many leaders in the Old Testament; it was the way of Paul and the apostles in the New Testament; but most important, it was the method of Jesus.

Jesus’ method is the best one for the church moving forward. It can be called “intentional relational discipleship.” And this book explains how you can implement this method at every level of the local church.

STORIES OF EFFECTIVENESS

To close this first chapter, I asked my friend Jerry Harris, senior pastor of The Crossing, in Quincy, Illinois, to share about what making the shift to the relational discipleship model was like for his church, as well as some stories he’s seen of effective discipleship in action in his church.

Jerry’s church, previously known as Payson Road Christian Church, is an independent, nondenominational church started in 1970, and a good example of an established church that has made the shift to the relational discipleship model in recent years.

Today the church has grown to more than four thousand people in six locations, and Jerry consistently reports strong levels of growth and spiritual maturity in his members.

Jerry wrote,

Over the years, we had become building dependent, staff dependent, and technology dependent. Most of our structure depended on attracting new people, using these three components. I was

fairly certain that if our building no longer existed, our church wouldn't either.

I visited Jim Putman at Real Life and saw that his church was built a different way. All the emphasis was placed on discipleship primarily happening in small groups. He even said that if there had to be a choice, he would prefer his people attending their small group instead of weekend worship. All of this was hitting me sideways.

Small groups have always been more of a necessary chore than a great opportunity to me. I had always seen them more in terms of a program than anything else. It has always been difficult to get them going and even harder to keep them going.

Yet here I was, visiting a church with over eight hundred small groups. Real Life was making it work without much concern at all for attraction.

I recoiled from Jim's insistence on the primacy of discipleship and felt myself continually backed into corners. "You're a flock shooter, Jerry," he said, evaluating The Crossing approach. "A flock shooter is a lousy hunter with a gun and no plan. When the flock is scared into flight, he just shoots as many rounds as he can into the flock, hoping he'll hit something. Usually he just wounds a few, if he hits them at all. But a good hunter picks out a bird, leads it, and pulls the trigger."

Jim was right. He was saying that our approach—preaching to the crowd—was like shooting the Word of God into the congregation and hoping that we hit something. It wasn't the way that Jesus did it or the way the early church operated.

Jesus got far more accomplished through twelve committed guys than he did with any of the large crowds he attracted. As Jim began to explain to me a different and better way of discipleship, I began to realize how we had missed the mark.

The recognition of how far our church and the church in general was from Jesus' method was a hard pill to swallow, but if real change was going to happen, then the senior leader had to swallow it first. I decided that change began with me, even if it was hard.

Making the shift with our church took vision, courage, time, and energy. But the results in years since have been highly worth it. We wanted to keep attracting, but we became intentional about what happened next. Our focus had to change—we had to pour

our energy into building a system that would enable people to do life with more mature people who would help them grow. It meant a lot of change, but the change led to a movement in our area that extended outside our walls.

Let me tell you the background of several of our present staff. For instance, The Crossing met Billy while he was in the psychiatric unit of a hospital in our area. He was dangerous to himself and losing his battle because of his addiction to meth.

Because of the relational discipleship focus of Celebrate Recovery (CR) at our church, a couple of our guys invested in Billy. They did more than bring him to church and lead him in the CR small group. They met with him in restaurants and talked to him when he was tempted or confused or frustrated. They taught him how to live and love by giving him a model to follow. Billy began to find personal victory over his addiction. Before long, Billy was leading CR groups and working as a volunteer at the church. As his mentor saw Billy's increased stability, he recommended him for a custodial job at the church. Billy was now surrounding himself with friends and former addicts, discipling them through recovery and going through small group leader training.

Billy is now a critically positive spiritual force in many lives, reproducing himself over and over again in areas where many of us would be simply clueless. A nondiscipling church would struggle with raising up people like Billy into any productive role, let alone a key role.

Chris was raised in church but fell out of it pretty early. A few years ago he was managing a local restaurant. A drug-addicted wife whom he had divorced had complicated his life, but he continued to raise their two children. He met his present wife while they were both employed at the restaurant. She encouraged him to come to church with her, but he put up a fight.

Chris's decision to join her began to reveal God's plan for him. He developed a relationship with the leader of our children's ministry, who poured into him while using him as a volunteer in his ministry. When that minister transitioned to the mission field, the next children's minister continued mentoring and could see Chris as an assistant.

Eventually Chris transitioned into the role of children's minister, affecting the lives of both children and parents. Chris sees the family

as God's perfect example of relational discipleship and today is transitioning to direct all the small groups at one of our campuses.

I met George about ten years ago when he moved back to town and started attending The Crossing. He was making a six-figure salary working as a regional sales manager for a national company. He had a business degree and had owned or run businesses over the years.

In his midforties, success was starting to give way to a desire for significance. He had been a high-functioning alcoholic for many years and was in recovery. His past addiction and lifestyle had blown him through a lot of money and three marriages.

Jim (not Jim Putman) came forward in a church service broken and repentant. He wanted deep change but needed godly men around him to coach him. Dick stepped up, inviting Jim to his small group and mentoring him daily. Jim started seeing himself from God's point of view and started hungering for opportunities in ministry.

Because of the efforts of mentors who poured into Jim, he is now campus pastor at one of our locations and has reproduced himself over and over.

Wayne came to The Crossing with a serious, even dangerous temper problem that had torn apart his marriage. His anger and bitterness was always looking for a target. One of those targets had been his wife. I can remember counseling Wayne and seeing the unsettling look in his eyes.

Jim began discipling Wayne, just doing life with him, helping him to navigate through all of his accumulated junk.

Today Wayne is one of our small group trainers working alongside Jim, training our pastors and leaders, and one of the sweetest and gentlest spirits at The Crossing.

Those are the stories we want to see in churches all across the world today, stories of God transforming people through the methodology of relational discipleship.

The overarching shift to begin thinking about is that churches are not called to merely make converts or even "Christians," in the limited sense of the word. Churches have tried that, and it's not producing the intended results. Churches must begin moving to a model of church that champions biblical discipleship in relational

environments. Simply put, a church exists to make *disciples who make disciples*. And the primary methodology is Christlike love expressed in life-on-life *relationship*.

But how? What are the specific shifts that need to happen?

Once you have the overarching shift in mind, we recommend five further specific shifts, and the first begins with defusing a potential powder keg. More about this in the next chapter.

KEY POINTS

- The core question of effectiveness—the question that ultimately matters—is whether the people getting saved are being conformed into the likeness of Christ (Col. 1:28).
- The solution is to train people to be spiritually mature, fully devoted followers of Christ, and then in turn to have those disciples make more disciples.
- The four main models of churches today are incomplete. The emphases and the methodologies are missing components that leave the church one-dimensional.
- We must become disciple-making churches, and that happens best in *relational* environments. A small group that meets solely for the sake of relationships misses the point. But relationships that exist for the purpose of discipleship mature people spiritually.

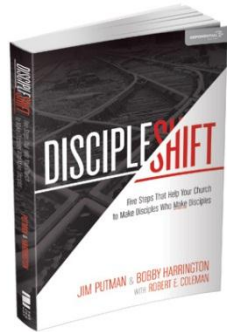
DiscipleShift

Five Steps that Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples

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Praise for *DiscipleShift*

Jim Putman and Bobby Harrington not only will remind you of the importance of the Great commission but also will spur you on to make lasting change in your ministry. If you want to realign the values of your church so that discipleship is at the core, read this book.



-Greg Surratt, Lead Pastor, Seacoast Church; author, *Ir-Rev-Rend*

DiscipleShift is an incredible and practical resource for everyone serious about helping people follow Jesus. Jim and Bobby have generously shared what they've learned from their combined total of more than fifty years of ministry both in planting churches and leading thriving ones. I'm thrilled to see them share their experience in the area of discipleship. Leaders everywhere will do well to heed their advice.

-Jud Wilhite, Senior Pastor, Central Christian Church

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