

PURPOSE: To connect with those who have an active relationship with Church Doctor Ministries as peers in ministry, clients, and partners in prayer and support.

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Making Disciples: Why Christians Get the Goal and are Clueless about the Method

After working with a few thousand churches of all brands and sizes, I'm convinced: if Jesus was a Church Doctor consultant, His number one recommendation would be to get back to *relational discipling*. Why? (1) He modeled it. (2) Where it is practiced churches experience breakthrough; (3) many church leaders seem clueless about how to do it; (4) it speaks to the most significant roadblock to the effective expansion of Christianity.

Hudson Taylor, the missionary to China said, "The Lord's work must be done in the Lord's way if it is to have the Lord's blessing." Nancy Pearcey nails it in her book, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity*: "...a Christian church or ministry may be biblical in its message and yet fail to be biblical in its method." (Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway Books, 2004).

In 2006, George Barna Research reported that the number one topic of interest for church leaders was discipleship. Not growth, pastoral care, or evangelism. In the last several years, books on discipleship have flooded the market. During these years, we have noticed a common frustration among church leaders: most get the goal of making disciples, yet very few know *how*. When we recommend relational discipling to congregations, some of the most gifted and ex-

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Kent says, "I'm enjoying the most exciting time of my life—watching God move in the nation and experiencing breakthrough in churches. This is an answer to my life-long prayers and efforts."

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MULTIPLYING MINISTRY

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perienced leaders struggle to grasp the concept. Knowing the goal of the Great Commission seems easier than following the right strategy. Using right methods transforms theory into practice, the goal into results. This is the breakthrough transformation Pastor Larry experienced when he interviewed Jill for the position of Director of Discipleship.

DEBUNKING THE PROGRAM

"I'm really glad you could meet with me for this interview," started Larry. "I've read your resume...can I call you Jill?"

Jill nodded approval....

"...you've had good training, Jill. But what really intrigues me is the results you achieved at North Lake. I talked to Pastor Rob there, and he speaks highly of your work over the last ten years."

"Yes...well...God really blessed it," reflected Jill.

"So what brought you to Seattle?" Larry asked.

"My husband's job transfer. We've always thought we might like to live in the northwest. I hated leaving my work at North Lake...but I was excited to see your position online...."

Larry returned, "well, we had this church consultation back in December and one of the key recommendations was us was that we retool to what they call 'relational discipling.'" Larry paused, as he turned to the page in the consultant's report. "So...our board and staff team came up with this position, Director of Discipleship. Our consultant said that we are what you might call a staff driven church. We believe that wherever God does a work, He uses a good leader."

"So, what do you think this might look like here at Bridgeway, Dr. Triplet?" Jill asked.

"Please, call me Larry. Well, Jill, we have given this recommendation about discipleship some serious thought, of course. I believe Cindy, our consultant is right. We do so much work very well at Bridgeway. Our worship attendance has grown by 34.8% over the last five years. We have a large number of very good programs, with many people involved. Consultant Cindy evaluated our preaching as very good. The Associate Pastor and I rotate. I preach about 60%, she preaches about 40%. Once in a while, our Youth Pastor preaches. But you know..." Larry paused for reflection... "I feel that, as a church, we are a mile wide and an inch deep..."

"Why would you say that?" asked Jill.

TEN WAYS TO DEVELOP RELATIONAL DISCIPLING

1. Balance Spiritual Formation: Christianity is more caught than taught.
2. Recognize you can't mass produce disciples.
3. Trust God that starting small and multiplying produces greater results than starting big and adding.
4. Re-orient your ministry worldview: who you are is more important than what you do.
5. Restructure ministry with a primary emphasis on relationships and a secondary focus on programs.
6. Develop this philosophy of ministry: never do ministry alone.
7. Gently simplify your church with fewer activities and shift efforts to disciple-making: equipping Christians and reaching unbelievers in a relational context.
8. Help everyone in church discover, develop, and use their spiritual gifts, using this biblical approach as your operational compass for ministry involvement.
9. Develop a culture of sharing "God stories" (witnessing by asking, "What is God doing in your life, lately?")
10. Use this story as a discussion tool, in a relational setting with small groups of influencers in your church. Begin to change the culture.

“Well, Cindy, did a good job of consulting, I believe. She said that the growth of our church is mainly through program attraction—and a lot of our growth is Christians from other churches...and we have a younger church, so there are a lot of children. I don’t know...we have a lot of Bible classes for adults, but as a percentage, very few people attend. You know, people are busy....”

“So why do you think...what was her name...Cindy, your consultant...why do you think she said you need to focus on discipleship?” asked Jill.

Pastor Larry didn’t even realize that Jill was actually interviewing him. “Well, we need to get more people into Bible study.”

“To grow disciples?” Jill challenged.

“Yeah,” continued Larry, “we put together a discipleship board. The person who fills this role of Director of Discipleship—you or whoever—will work with this group to develop a good solid discipleship program.”

“And what do you think that would look like?” Jill asked.

“Well,” Larry jumped to respond, “we would want input from your ideas, of course, but we thought that we need to increase our small groups. And provide more Bible study classes... maybe with a wider selection of topics. We need to look for books about discipleship and maybe use them as materials for people to read. We have even discussed writing some of our own materials—you know, taking from the Bible the teachings that focus on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.”

“So how would you measure results? How would you know if you are effective? And how soon do you think you would see results?” asked Jill.

“We haven’t really talked about that yet. But I would like to see, say... in a year—yeah, twelve months—I’d like to see an increase of, say, 30% of those involved in a Bible class or some group, on a regular basis,” Larry reflected. “Maybe with a break around Christmas, and maybe a recess during the summer. Does that seem reasonable, do you think?”

Jill paused, recognizing that Larry was on another planet from what she could bring to the church. She was at an awkward moment. At this point she was concluding that what might be a great ministry opportunity could be a nightmare of misdirection. She was feeling homesick for the ministry worldview she left at North Lake.

Larry recognized the deafening silence and awkward, long pause. Recognizing that he had dominated much of the conversation, he broke the silence: “Jill, how would you go about developing a program of relational discipling?”

With that question, Larry was about to experience a transformational worldview opportunity.

THE DISCIPLESHIP BREAKTHROUGH

Jill took a deep breath, spoke a silent prayer from her heart, and asked God to direct her comments. She began a gentle approach to a monumental paradigm shift. “I grew up in a great church with a wonderful pastor. I was in Sunday school and had some awesome teachers. Through it all, I got the subtle notion that discipling was almost exclusively focused on

content and teaching. But then, as I got just a little older, I began to visit with my favorite uncle, David. He was an awesome Christian, and we spent a lot of time together, one on one. We talked about all sorts of things about life. He was very transparent about his spiritual journey. He let me know that he wasn't perfect, and told many—what he called—“God stories:” the way God worked in his life. He took me to the hospital with him several times, visiting relatives. I saw him pray...and, eventually, he let me pray. We used to sit at the table in his garage. He would always have something for me to drink and snacks. What I learned from him – and practiced with him – was a big part of my own discipleship development, right along with the formal teaching at church. As I grew older, I realized that Christianity is perhaps more caught than taught. Rather than a program, I see Christianity as a movement through relationships. I realized that I learned in Sunday School *what* Jesus taught, but I learned from Uncle David *how* Jesus did it. I then realized that the Apostle Paul did this with Timothy and others. Every time he went somewhere he invited someone along. He did what Jesus did. Jesus said, ‘come, follow me.’ My Uncle David did that. Now I do that. This is my view of discipling. I think that is what your consultant, Cindy, meant by “relational discipling.”

Larry was looking at discipleship with an expanded focus. His mind was racing with re-definition. He was wondering what this would actually look like in his church. “So, Jill, if you could write your own job description, what would it look like?”

A Relational Discipling Church

Jill started to paint the picture: “if I were Director of Discipleship here at Bridgeway, Larry, I would first ask that no program of discipleship be announced or promoted. You know, Jesus taught the Kingdom of

KEY RESOURCES

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- Hull, Bill and Dallas Willard. *Disciple-Making Church, The: Leading a Body of Believers on the Journey of Faith*. Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2010.
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- Morton, Scott. *Down-to-Earth Discipling: Essential Principles to Guide Your Personal Ministry (Living the Questions)*. Carol Stream, IL: NavPress, 2003.
- Ogden, Greg. *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2003.
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God is like yeast and bread. It is quiet and takes time. I believe discipleship happens that way.

“Second, I would want you, the rest of the staff, and the Leadership Board to expect very little visible results in three years...but a growing awareness of transformational change in the church in six to seven years. So, no big goals promoted publicly. I’d want you to ‘have my back’ for those inevitable comments that will come, like ‘what do we pay her to do, anyway.’

“Then, I’d like time to teach the staff and leadership that discipleship has two components. When Jesus said, ‘go, make disciples...,’ and you put it into the context of the New Testament, there are two dimensions: first, making disciples means that every Christian is looking for an opportunity to share with unbelievers what Jesus has done in their lives—God stories that they share in their social networks—you know, those who they are in relationship with already. This is sometimes called evangelism, but it is better described as witnessing.

Second, there is what I call Ephesians 4 discipling. This is equipping of God’s people for the work of ministry, as the Apostle Paul says. This is one-on-one, on-the-job training. I describe it: watch me, then help me, then I help you, then I watch you do it all. That means that I’d want your staff and leaders to do away with volunteer recruitment. For example, encourage Sunday school teachers to look among those they know at church and invite them to ‘come follow me’—hang out in the classroom with me. This would be true of every ministry.

Larry, if this is going to work, you also need to quit doing ministry by yourself. You need to quit making hospital calls alone. You need to model, taking someone with you, always. Furthermore, the church needs to stop elections. Let leaders disciple future leaders. I know, this is a big change.”

Larry responded with a ‘deer in the headlights’ look as his mind wondered about what he missed in seminary.

“Want me to go on?” Jill asked.

Larry nodded a half-enthusiastic ‘yes.’

“I would ask that you lead everyone in church discover their spiritual gifts. There are self-reflection surveys and workshops to do that. I’d want clerical help to develop an electronic file, by person, and gift mix and another file, by gift, listing all those that have that gift. I’d want this updated anytime someone new comes into the church. This would be ongoing.

“Then, as I learned about the gifts of people in the church, I would choose two to four of your church members and I would disciple them one on one. With each one of them I would ask them permission to allow one staff member or one church leader to be present—to be a silent observer and learner. I know, this is particularly hard for pastors – to keep quiet. This would be done two to three times a month for six to eight months, or more. Everyone is different. I would model equipping people for a ministry they are gifted in. They would be disciplers—multipliers—when we are finished. I would monitor them and hold them accountable, in a grace-oriented way – as they then multiply themselves, and, in a movement fashion, expand this model and lifestyle in the church.

“I would choose two to four others and take them out to coffee or breakfast or lunch or whatever, to connect with an unchurched person in their social network. I would teach them to identify the clear signs that people give when they are receptive to hear about spiritual things. I would

model this with those unchurched people I meet and who become my social network, as I meet people here in Seattle.

“By the way, at the same time, I’d want you and the staff and the leaders to start every gathering, Bible class, meeting, small group—any time our church people get together, for any reason—by asking the leader to say: ‘Before we start, let’s just take a few moments, does anyone want to share what God is doing in your life lately?’ Don’t make it a program, or announce what you are doing, just do it. It may take a few years, but eventually the culture of Bridgeway will change. People will get used to sharing their God stories around church. Then they will be equipped to spontaneously share their God stories with those who are not yet Christ followers in their social networks. It will become part of their DNA—who they are.

“I will train two to four in the church in this outreach one-on-one relational discipling for twelve to eighteen months. And I would want a staff member or church leader with me to silently observe. By ‘observe,’ remember, I mean silently watch me, eventually help, then do – and I help, then do it all and I silently watch. Afterward, we would debrief. We would do this two or three times a month.

“I know this is asking a lot from busy staff and church leaders. So, I would also ask that you consider off-loading about a third of the activities around this church. Your church is way too busy with good activities that are not God’s mission activities. You have to do this gently or you will lose people. Most of all, give your leaders—and yourself—permission to lovingly say ‘no.’ It will help them avoid burnout and shift to Great Commission, make disciple initiatives.

“Larry, I know this seems radical. Jesus’ approach is radical. Most churches have drifted from this relational movement toward a program mode. This is Kingdom Culture being restored in the church. It takes time, and it starts small. Jesus spent three years with primarily twelve guys, and launched the greatest movement in history. This would become a transformational change for your church. Anyway, you asked me what I would do. That is what I would do.”

QUESTIONS:

Will Larry hire Jill? Would you?

If you did, would you make the operational changes in your ministry to make this radical change possible?

If you are in a smaller church, and can’t hire someone like Jill, would you implement changes to make this happen on a volunteer scale?

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