

A DISCIPLE-MAKING PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY FOR CHURCH-
PLANTING

A Research Paper
Presented to
Dr. James McKinley
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for 80616

by
Micah Richard Colbert
Mcolbert818@students.sbts.edu
July 4, 2022

*I affirm the honor code

A DISCIPLE-MAKING PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY FOR CHURCH-PLANTING

It was a question that I will never forget. My wife and I had recently returned to the States after four years of church-planting ministry in Ghana, W. Africa. After a brief family vacation, we started visiting our supporting churches to update them on what the Lord had been doing through our ministry partnership. At one supporting church, the pastor asked me to explain to the congregation our ministry approach and philosophy of church planting. For about thirty minutes, I shared from Scripture and experience the joys of planting a church simply by making disciples. Afterwards, the pastor asked the congregation if anyone had any questions. An elderly lady stood up and said, “Micah, it’s wonderful to hear about a church being planted simply by making disciples. Do you think someone could plant a church in the States that way? I guess what I’m asking is... *Could a church planter here duplicate what you did there?*” Little did I know how formative, challenging, and motivating that question would be to my future ministry as a church planter in Buffalo, NY.

Sadly, many people think planting a church is basically the same thing as starting a business. Essentially, the “CEO” of the church plant raises a large amount of financial support, markets his “product” to potential consumers, recruits attractive people to lead programs that meet the felt needs of the target community, and gathers Christians from other churches to join the new church. The success of the plant (generally measured by attendance and assets) depends upon the marketability of the preacher and the product. But does this corporate paradigm of church planting model the example of disciple-making ministry set forth in the New Testament? If not, is there a better way? Is it possible to plant churches simply by making disciples? If so, how would a disciple-making philosophy of ministry work in a new church plant in the United States?

In this research paper, I will examine how a disciple-making philosophy of ministry shapes the goals and priorities of church-planting. An overview of the definition and components of a disciple-making philosophy of ministry will be provided. Emphasis will also be placed on ways church planters can strategically implement a disciple-making plan based on a disciple-making philosophy of ministry. Examples from my church plants in Ghana, W. Africa and Buffalo, NY will be shared to demonstrate how key principles can be fleshed out in practice.¹

Defining a Disciple-Making Philosophy of Ministry

Every church, whether they realize it or not, has a philosophy of ministry. A philosophy of ministry is not merely the church's doctrinal beliefs, mission statement, or core values. Rather, it is the theological vision that undergirds the church's ministry practices.¹ A ministry philosophy explains how a church lives out its gospel identity and carries out its God-given mission in its particular context. Keller and Thompson note, "A philosophy of ministry make the church distinct, describing a vision for the church which is specific and unique to that congregation."² In many ways, it is "the middle space between doctrine and practice—the space where we reflect deeply on our theology and our culture to understand how both of them can shape ministry."³ A philosophy provides clear goals, direction, and focus so that the church can faithfully glorify God and carry out its mission. It enables the church planter and his ministry team to maximize their time, energy, and resources for the sake of the gospel. In short, a

¹ This definition of a philosophy of ministry is essentially synonymous with Tim Keller's definition of a theological vision for ministry. See Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 17-19. According to Keller, a theological vision for ministry is "a faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history" (p. 20).

² Timothy Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Church Planter Manual* (New York: Redeemer Church Planting Center, 2002), 89.

³ Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 17.

philosophy of ministry answers the question: “How can we best fulfill our Biblical purposes in accord with our theological commitment?”⁴

A biblical philosophy of ministry must be shaped by the church’s disciple-making mission.⁵ Every aspect of the church’s ministry should be viewed through the lenses of the church’s responsibility to make mature, Christlike disciples who glorify God and advance the gospel. A disciple-making philosophy of ministry answers the question: “How are we as a church going to make and mature Christlike disciples in our unique cultural context?”

Unfortunately, many church planters do not take the time to develop a robust, biblically faithful, culturally engaging philosophy of ministry prior to planting. Naively, they simply do ministry the way they’ve always done it or attempt to parrot what other “successful” churches or church plants do. They may transport or reproduce a model of ministry into a context where that model may or may not work. Buzz words like “missional” or “disciple-making” may be attached to the church plant, but if there is no unifying philosophy of ministry guiding the church planter and his core team, the church plant will flounder instead of faithfully fulfilling its mission.

A church planter who has not understood or clarified his theological identity, disciple-making mission, core values, and cultural context will find himself overwhelmed by the many pulls and pressures of ministry. Precious time and energy will be spent trying to please people, put out relational fires, get more people in the building, or keep the programs running instead of making Christlike disciples by God’s Word for God’s glory. Temptations to take short cuts or pursue relevance will cause the planter to drift from his theological moorings, leading him away from the safe harbor of faithfulness into the mirky waters of pragmatism. In contrast, some planters have the strong biblical convictions that are vital for a God-glorifying philosophy of ministry. However, they lack the cultural awareness necessary to make new disciples in their

⁴ Keller and Thompson, *Church Planter Manual*, 86.

⁵ I will provide a brief theology of mission in the next section.

ministry context. They understand their gospel identity and purpose but fail to think through how they will carry out their mission in the area where God has called them to plant. These planters struggle to accomplish their God-given mission in a contextually appropriate manner. Their church plants are theologically faithful but culturally disengaged. As a result, the gospel doesn't take root or advance in the cultural context. It is paramount, therefore, that church planters develop a philosophy of ministry prior to embarking in church planting ministry.

Developing a Disciple-Making Philosophy of Ministry

The first step in developing a disciple-making philosophy of ministry is to understand the mission of the church. Like so many other terms in evangelicalism, mission is frequently talked about but often not clearly defined. Greg Gilbert notes, "Mission... is not everything we do in Jesus's name, nor everything we do in obedience to Christ. Mission is the task we are given to fulfill."⁶ What then is the task that the church has been entrusted to fulfill? According to the Scriptures, the church's mission is to make, mature, and multiply disciples by the Word of God for the glory of God.⁷ As Gilbert states, "The Mission of the church is it to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship and obey Jesus now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father."⁸

Comprehending the church's mission begins with an understanding of God's mission. Keith Whitefield notes, "Because the Trinity is the ground of all reality, the mission of the triune God is the mission for everything. The church is redeemed for this purpose, and the church's mission it to participate in this God-glorifying mission."⁹ Connecting the church's mission to

⁶ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 29.

⁷ See Matt 28:18-20; Eph 4:11-16; Col 1:28-29; 2 Tim 2:2; etc.

⁸ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* 62.

⁹ Bruce Riley Ashford, ed., *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, The Church, and the Nations* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 27.

God's mission raises several important questions. First, what is the mission of God? Keith Whitefield explains, "God's mission it to make himself known to his creation... this is the driving plan for God's purpose for all of history... Missions is from our point of view the privileged participation in God's mission to make himself known."¹⁰ In what sense does the church make God known? Has God specified in His Word how His church should labor with Him in His revelatory and redemptive purposes? According to texts like Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 3:8-11; 4:11-16; and Rev. 7:9-12, the church participates with God's mission as it fulfills its God-given commission to make, mature, and multiply Christlike disciples who glorify God and impact the nations with the gospel. This disciple-making mission is shaped by God's mission, driven by God's glory, and in accord with His redemptive purposes.

The church's disciple-making mission encompasses both evangelism and the ongoing formation of a people who faithfully bear God's image in obedience to Gods' Word for God's glory. Doug Coleman states, "Jesus defined his followers' task as making disciples, a more comprehensive assignment that includes teaching believers to obey all that Christ commanded. In biblical or theological terms, the aim is sanctification and conformation to the image of Christ."¹¹ The most well-known passage that articulates the church's mission is Matthew 28:18-20. Jesus' command to make disciples in Matthew 28:19 was not merely intended for the apostles alone. D.A. Carson notes, "The injunction is given... to the Eleven in their role as disciples (Matthew 28:16). Therefore, they are paradigms for all disciples... It is binding on all Jesus' disciples to make others what they themselves are - disciples of Jesus Christ."¹² The Great

¹⁰ Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission*, 22.

¹¹ Ashford, 44.

¹² D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, ed. Frank Gaebelin, vol. 8, *The Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 596.

Commission therefore “makes disciple-making the normal agenda and priority of every church and every Christian disciple”¹³

God has ordained the church to be His primary discipling agent in the world today. J.T. English notes, “The local church is meant to be the primary spiritual guide for disciples who are on the journey of growing deeper in the love and knowledge of God.”¹⁴ Through the accountability, leadership, and ministry of the local church, the gospel is advanced and believers are built up in the faith (see Eph 4:11-16; Col 1:28-29). Each church is called to labor with God in His Kingdom-advancing, disciple-making, God-revealing mission. This point is especially important in a time when many people look outside the context of the local church for their primary spiritual formation. English states, “Discipleship outside the local church is exploding because discipleship inside the local church is neglected, but... Jesus has commissioned the local church specifically to teach, form, and develop maturing followers of Christ”¹⁵ When churches fail to fulfill their God-given mission, God’s people are tempted to turn to parachurch ministries or outside voices for their spiritual nourishment. Once again, English notes, “Someone should be able to come to faith, grow in the faith, and walk in Christian maturity solely from being formed by a local church”¹⁶ If church planters are to plant healthy, fruitful churches that will endure for the long haul, they must be shape their ministry practices around God’s disciple-making mission for the local church.

Once a thorough, biblical understanding of the church’s mission is embraced, the next step in developing a disciple-making philosophy of ministry is to consider the cultural context of the church plant. In this step, the church planter moves from the questions, “*Who are we?*” and

¹³ Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything*. (Matthias Media, 2009), 13.

¹⁴ J.T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2020), Kindle Ed. 49, 727.

¹⁵ English, *Deep Discipleship*. Kindle Ed. 10, 321.

¹⁶ English, *Deep Discipleship*. Kindle Ed. 50, 740-741.

“*What are we called to do?*” to “*Who are the people that we are called to reach?*” A church planter must understand the importance and role of contextualization in the church’s disciple-making mission. Contextualization is communicating the message of Christ so that the truths of the gospel take root and flourish indigenously in a new cultural context. As Keller states, contextualization is “giving people *the Bible’s answers*, which they may not want to hear, *to questions about life* that people in their particular time and place are asking, *in language and forms* that they can comprehend, *and through appeals and arguments* with force they can feel, even if they reject them.”¹⁷ Contextualization takes place when the truth is communicated in such a way that the message, meaning, and implications of the gospel are not “unnecessarily alien at the merely cultural level.”¹⁸ Cultural barriers are gradually removed so that the truth of God’s Word can be understood in terms and ways that resonate with native hearers.

The challenges of contextualization for church-planters in the twenty-first century are legion. Almost no aspect of American society is monolithic. Even in areas predominately made up of one ethnicity, conflicting ideologies, worldviews, religious beliefs, and philosophies abound. With the rise of technology, people are exposed to more ideas than ever before. Postmodern philosophies about truth have made just about everything fluid. Today, a person can determine their “own truth” about who they are and how they should live. Judeo-Christian perspectives cannot be assumed. Expressive individualism, the sexual revolution, and religious skepticism dominate the cultural landscape. Churches and church planters cannot rely on outdated, obsolete strategies for reaching people. Rather, they must consider new ways of engaging people with the good news of the gospel.

¹⁷ Keller, *Center Church*. 89.

¹⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 122.

Key Components of a Disciple-Making Philosophy of Ministry

If disciple-making is the heart of church's mission, then it's paramount to understand what Jesus meant when He said, "Go and make disciples." As noted earlier, disciple-making is a comprehensive term that includes both the church's work in evangelizing the lost and its ongoing ministry of helping believers grow in maturity through the prayerful proclamation of Scriptures. The three components of disciple-making ministry will be explored below:

Making Disciples

Definition. A disciple is someone who responds to the gospel in repentant faith and thus begins a life-long journey learning, following, and obeying Jesus. The term "disciple" was used historically to refer to a student, pupil, or learner.¹⁹ In ancient times, a disciple would apprentice under a teacher or Rabbi, following them closely to learn their teachings and imitate their lifestyle. When a person believes the gospel, they become a follower or student of Jesus (see John 10:27). All true believers therefore are disciples. Mark Dever notes: "To be a Christian means to be a disciple. There are no Christians who are not disciples. And to be a disciple of Jesus means that you follow Jesus."²⁰ In the New Testament, terms like *believer*, *saint*, and *disciple* are used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people: those who are saved by grace through faith in Christ (see Acts 6:1,7; 11:26; 14:20).

The Starting Point. Making disciples starts with the church's responsibility to evangelize those who are not yet disciples. The Greek verb that Christians frequently translate as *evangelize* or *preach the gospel* (εὐαγγελίζω) comes from the noun *evangel* (εὐαγγέλιον) or gospel. To evangelize literally means "to gospelize."²¹ Church planters, of course, can't "gospelize" if they haven't personally understood and received the gospel (I Cor. 15:3a). They

¹⁹ M.J. Wilkins, "Disciples," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 176.

²⁰ Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus*, 9Marks (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 15.

²¹ William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 402.

must be fluent in the truths of the gospel so that they can persuade unbelievers to repent and believe in Christ.

Sadly, much of what is called “evangelism” lacks gospel clarity. As J. Mack Stiles notes, “The gospel often remains untaught, and unbiblical words water down the poignant true meaning of sin, death, and hell, or confuse those who are genuinely seeking truth”²² The church planter and his core team must be clear not only on what the central truths of gospel are, but how they can communicate those truths in a biblically faithful, culturally engaging manner if they are going to effectively make new disciples of Christ.

Church planters not only need to be clear on the gospel message; they must also be clear on the goal of evangelizing. When church planters evangelize, they aren’t simply presenting facts; they are calling sinners to respond to Christ in repentance and faith. They do this because they know that apart from Christ, people are condemned and heading to eternal damnation. The goal then is to persuade unbelievers to repent and believe the gospel. Persuasion, however, is not manipulation. Manipulation occurs when church planters seek to provoke a response from unbelievers that is hasty, emotional, or ill-informed. Persuasion takes place when the planter communicates from the overflow of a heart fully convinced of the gospel’s truth and power.

In summary, the church makes disciples through the prayerful, persuasive proclamation of the gospel message. The church is responsible to teach the truths of the gospel and call unbelievers to repent and believe in Christ. Many, of course, will not receive the message. Those who do repent and believe become disciples who must now be incorporated into the life of the church. Within the context of the local church, they are baptized and taught to live a God-glorifying life of obedience to Christ (see Matt 28:19-20).

²² J. Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 28.

Maturing Disciples

Evangelism is the beginning, not the culmination, of the Great Commission. When a person professes faith in Christ, the church is now responsible to teach, love, and help the new believer become a mature follower of Christ. According to Ephesians 4:11-16, a mature disciple is someone who is grounded in the Word, growing in walk, and going out as a gospel witness. A brief profile of each characteristic of a mature disciple will be provided below.

Characteristics of a Mature Disciple. A mature believer is grounded in the Word. Unlike a spiritually immature person who is “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes,” a mature disciple is rooted and grounded in the faith “once delivers to the saints” (Eph 4:13-15; Jude 3).²³ They feed their souls with the “solid food” of God’s Word and are therefore able to discern between truth and error (Heb 5:20). Practically, this means that mature believers have a firm grasp of core Biblical doctrines and the overall message of the Bible. They know how the various “pieces of the puzzle” in God’s Word work together to communicate God’s redemptive story. They can study the Bible on their own in a life-transforming manner (2 Cor 3:18). They consistently nourish their souls with the truths of God’s Word so that they can actively “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18).

Mature disciples are not only grounded in the Word but also growing in a Christlike walk. Maturity ultimately is measured in terms of Christlikeness (Eph 4:13). A Christlike walk encompasses both a person’s inward character and outward conduct. Mature believers bear the fruit of the Spirit and embrace a life of loving service to God and others. By God’s grace, they daily strive to mortify sin, grow in grace, and delight in the glory of God through the consistent, prayerful practice of spiritual disciplines. They “speak the truth in love” as they use their gifts to build up the body of Christ (Eph 4:15-16).

²³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Finally, mature believers are witnesses to the transforming power of the gospel. Mature believers are equipped to do the work of the ministry (Eph 4:12). They use their gifts to minister so that the gospel is advanced, disciples are reproduced, and the church built up (2 Tim 2:2). Mature believers testify to the power of the gospel, communicating the message of Christ in ways that are winsome, faithful, and compelling. They can explain the hope of Christianity (1 Pet 3:15) as they call unbelievers to a life of repentance and faith. They embrace their gospel identity as “ambassadors of Christ” (2 Cor 5:20) as they actively engage unbelievers with the good news of Jesus.

Discipling Towards Maturity. Having a clear picture of what a mature disciple looks like should guide church planters in their discipling efforts. Church planters need to recognize that there are limits to what they alone are able to do to help people mature in the faith. New believers need a whole lot more than a personal instructor or mentor to grow in Christlikeness. They need a family of believers to teach and show them how to live in the light of the gospel. They need the gifts, experience, friendship, exhortation, teaching, instruction, and care of the *entire church family*. As J.T. English states,

The local church is the family that is growing up in Christ. What Paul is aiming for in Ephesians is that gifted people in the church have the responsibility of helping others find and use their gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. That process will continue until all believers mature into the measure of the fullness of Christ. The purpose of the local church is to point people to that end and equip them on that journey. The primary purpose of discipleship in the local church is maturing in Christ together.²⁴

Discipling requires the entire church to embrace a lifestyle of prayerfully proclaiming and humbly modeling the truths of God’s Word so that each member can help one another grow in Christlikeness. This discipling ministry of prayerful speaking the truth in love is built on two key Biblical convictions. First, the disciple-making church believes that God uses His Word to build His people. Through the power of His Word, God redeems and transforms a people for Himself (1 Peter 1:23; John 17:17; 2 Cor. 3:18; etc.). God’s Word is what nourishes, sustains,

²⁴ English, *Deep Discipleship*. Kindle Ed. 72, 982.

and strengthens His people in their pilgrimage to the celestial city (Mt. 4:4). There is no life in the truest sense apart from God's Word.

Disciple-making churches also recognize that spiritual growth is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. Nothing spiritual happens apart from the work of the Spirit. He is the One who makes the Word come alive, enabling God's people to see its manifold glories (Ps 119:18-18). He is the one who opens our eyes to the significance, meaning, and application of God's Word (I Cor 2:11-16). He assures us, comforts us, teaches us, and empowers us to grow in Christlikeness. In prayerful dependence upon the Spirit, disciple-makers speak the truths of God's Word to one another so that together, we can "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13).

Based on these biblical convictions, the planter must model a life of prayerful proclamation and equip fellow laborers to do the same. Church planters should labor to make discipling a normal part of the life and gathering of the church. The disciple-making church equips those in his core team to actively, prayerfully, and intentionally help others trust in and follow Jesus from the very beginning of the church plant.

Multiplying Disciples

Ministry multiplication should be the norm, not the exception, for gospel ministry. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul charged Timothy, one of his protégés in the faith, to disciple faithful men who would in turn teach and disciple others also. Paul was not content with his gospel ministry and influence stopping with Timothy. Rather, he fully expected that his discipling efforts would multiply as Timothy faithfully trained disciple-making disciples.

Multiplication is one of those things that churches frequently talk about but rarely plan for or actually do. Multiplication takes place as leaders are developed and then deployed to make Christlike disciples locally in the church and globally for the gospel's advance. Multiplication has two essential ingredients: leadership development and leadership commissioning.

Developing Leaders. Church planters are called to equip God’s people for God’s work so that the body of Christ is built up (Eph 4:11-12). Equipping God’s people to be all that God has called and gifted them to be requires a commitment to leadership multiplication. Mac Lake wisely notes, “The long-term health and spirituality of any church is dependent upon leadership development.”²⁵ Church planters must prayerfully seek to cultivate a culture where leaders are continually raised up and trained to serve in various ways for the advance of God’s Kingdom.

Church planters are called to use “their gift of leadership by taking initiative to focus, harmonize, and enhance the gifts of others for the sake of developing people and cultivating the kingdom of God.”²⁶ The multiplication strategy for disciple-making church planters begins with people, not programs. It’s tempting for church planters to simply plug willing people into ministry programs instead of developing their unique gifts for gospel ministry. When this happens, people can easily become cogs in the ministry wheel instead of dynamic disciple-makers who are equipped and empowered to use their gifts to serve others. Collin Marshall and Tony Payne advise, “Start with the people in your church, having no particular structures or programs in mind and then consider who are these people God has given you, how you can help them grow in Christian maturity, and what form their gifts and opportunities might take.”²⁷

For the church to cultivate a multiplication mindset, church planters need to do a lot more than simply teach or exhort people to be reproducing disciples. Planters must model what reproductive disciple-making ministry looks like so that others can see and follow their example. Irving and Straus note, “The best way to lead is not to tell people what to do but to show them by

²⁵ Mac Lake, *The Multiplication Effect: Building a Leadership Pipeline That Solves Your Leadership Shortage*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020), 25.

²⁶ James Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 15.

²⁷ Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 18.

example. And showing involves more than just a training session. It is a complete lifestyle that exemplifies what matters most.”²⁸

Commissioning Leaders. Church planters should prayerfully consider how their disciple-making ministry will multiply so that the gospel “sounds forth” from their initial church plant to other areas as well (I Thess 1:8). Ed Stetzer states, “Church planting should not end with the establishment of one church. The process can repeat itself when a new church matures to the point of becoming a sponsoring [planting] church. The kingdom is best advanced through multiplication and not just addition.”²⁹ Church planters who embrace a disciple-making mindset are not content with merely planting and growing a single church. A wise church planter realizes that gospel ministry is not about any one church. No single church has the capacity to effectively reach a community or city for Christ. If church planters genuinely long to see their community reached for Christ, they need to have a vision and agenda beyond the four walls of his own church plant.

It’s tempting for planters to become so fixated on numerical growth that they fail to pursue after exponential gospel growth. Church planters need to guard against a “My kingdom” instead of “Thy kingdom” mentality. J.D. Greear urges leaders need to continually ask the following questions to avoid falling prey to a small kingdom mindset: “Whose kingdom are we actually building: ours, or God’s? Do we really believe that Jesus grows his kingdom most as we ‘give away’ what he’s given to us?”³⁰ Multiplying ministry flourishes when church leaders have a vision bigger than themselves and their church. Churches that multiply are captivated by God’s eternal purpose to advance His Kingdom and glory to the ends of the earth. Beginning with the big picture in view guards the planter from the temptation of hoarding people instead of sending

²⁸ Justin A. Irving and Mark L. Strauss, *Leadership in Christian Perspective: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Practices for Servant Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 19.

²⁹ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church That’s Biblically Sound and Reaching People in Culture*, Kindle (Nasville: B&H Academic, 2006), 316.

³⁰ J.D. Greear, *Gaining by Losing: Why the Church Belongs to Churches That Send* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 17.

people. Churches committed to God’s mission seek to win people to Christ, build them up in the faith, and send them into the world to make more Christlike disciples.

Ministry Strategies Based on a Disciple-Making Philosophy of Ministry

A disciple-making philosophy of ministry that is divorced from clear, compelling, and contextual disciple-making plans is doomed to fail. In this section, strategies will be offered to help church planters consider how they can make, mature, and multiply Christlike disciples through their church planting endeavors.

Strategies for Making Disciples

A true church planter is first and foremost an evangelist. He longs to see the gospel take root and flourish in an area where a gospel-preaching church is needed. How the planter goes about sowing the seed of the gospel is largely dependent upon the context in which he ministers. Nevertheless, there are some strategies that are culturally flexible. I’ve used the following strategies in two very different contexts (Ghana, W. Africa and Buffalo, NY) with a degree of disciple-making success.

Establish Meaningful Presence. Demographic surveys can greatly aid church planters in understanding their cultural context. Nevertheless, nothing beats first-hand cultural engagement as the planter establishes a meaningful presence in the community. A planter must immerse himself in the life of people he is called to reach so that he can understand their needs, struggles, questions, and worldviews. Keller notes,

“Immersion in the pastoral needs of people in our community and continued involvement in evangelistic venues could not be more important [to gospel contextualization]. If we are deeply involved in the lives, questions, and concerns of the people, then we will study the Bible in order to preach it to them, we will see God’s answers to their questions. If we are living in the culture and developing friendships with people, contextualization should be natural and organic. It will simply bubble up from the relationships in our lives and in our pastoral ministry.”³¹

³¹ Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 122.

There are, of course, a plethora of ways to get involved in the community. Coaching, volunteering, tutoring, joining community groups, or even opting for bi-vocational ministry are all ways a planter can establish a meaningful presence in the community.

Discover Peoples' Stories and Hopes. As the planter builds relationships in the community, he should listen carefully to the stories people share and tell. Stories powerfully shape who we are and how we process the challenges of life. Joshua Chatraw notes, “The stories we hear and tell each day frame how we live and answer the big questions of life. Who are we? What is the meaning of life? What is the fundamental problem, and how can it be fixed? Is there reason to have hope?”³² In both Ghana and Buffalo, I would often ask people that I had built relationships with to tell me about their life story. I would also ask people about their hopes, dreams, and goals in life. By asking probing questions and showing personal interest, I was able to understand a great deal about what people were looking to for meaning and purpose in life. Once I understood these things, I was able to explain how the gospel provides true salvation, purpose, and hope in life and death.

Host Gospel Bible Studies. I doubt that most church planters need to be convinced that they're living and ministering in a post-Christian culture. Church planters cannot assume that the average unbeliever has any Biblically informed understanding about God, man, sin, Christ, or repentance and faith. “Hit and run” evangelistic efforts or gospel presentations are not effective strategies for reaching a community for Christ. Church planters need to consider a long-haul approach for engaging unbelievers with the good news of Jesus. In both Ghana and Buffalo, my wife and I hosted inductive gospel Bible studies at our home to introduce people to Christ. “Gospel Bible studies are designed to methodically present the redemptive truths of Scripture to people with little or no Christian background. They typically blend inductive Bible study questions with clear explanations so that readers can see and understand Biblical truth for

³² Joshua D. Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk about God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 5.

themselves. Evangelistic studies help unbelievers explore essential redemptive truths about God the Creator, man the sinner, Jesus the Savior, and the need for repentance and faith.”³³ There are several good resources that a church planter can use to lead a gospel Bible study.³⁴

Strategies for Maturing Disciples

David Wells wisely states, “It is very easy to build churches in which seekers congregate; it is very hard to build churches in which biblical faith is maturing into genuine discipleship.”³⁵ Disciple-making church planters are not satisfied with mere numerical growth. They’re sights are set on gospel growth. Following in the footsteps of history’s greatest church planter, they labor to present every person in their church mature in Christ (Col 1:28-29). They preach, teach, mentor, serve, pray, warn, admonish, and equip so that each person entrusted to their care is grounded in the Word, growing in a Christlike walk, and going out as gospel witnesses. The following are strategies that a church planter can use to help their congregation mature in Christlikeness:

Sunday Corporate Worship. A disciple-making church planter does not underestimate the powerful discipling effect the Sunday morning gathering has in the lives of God’s people. He carefully plans every aspect of the Sunday morning church gathering so that each part points people to a life of repentance, faith, and worship. He makes sure that the songs, liturgy, and preaching are gospel-shaped, biblically faithful, doctrinally rich, and culturally understandable. He also wisely instructs people on the elements of the church’s liturgy so that people understand why each part of the worship service is vital to their Christian life.

³³ Micah Colbert, “Evangelism in a Post-Christian Culture,” *Rooted Thinking* (blog), December 9, 2021, <http://rootedthinking.com/2021/12/09/evangelism-in-a-post-christian-culture/>.

³⁴ *Christianity Explored* and *The Story of Hope* are excellent resources that can be used for gospel Bible studies. I’ve also written a study that covers the redemptive theme and story of God’s Word in a series of eight lessons. See Micah Colbert, *Discovering Hope: Exploring the Good News of Jesus Christ* (Independently Published, 2020).

³⁵ David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 119.

Theological Education. Teaching God’s Word in the power of the Spirit is the heart of discipling (Mt. 28:19). Teaching is simply helping people understand the meaning and application of God’s Word. It can take place behind a pulpit, in a classroom, one-on-one over a cup of coffee, or through a timely text message to a discouraged friend. Teaching is the primary duty of church leaders (2 Tim 4:1-4; Col 1:28-29) and the God-given responsibility of every Christian (Eph 4:11-16; Rom 15:14).

Churches today don’t need less teaching. They need more. Sadly, many churches today are eliminating teaching venues like Sunday School or Sunday evening services in favor of “simple church” models. English notes,

“The tragic irony of the demise of Christian education is that it is happening at precisely the wrong time. Study after study shows that Christians do not know their Bible, the basics of the faith, or how to practice spiritual disciplines. We are basically illiterate when it comes to the Christian faith, yet we are adopting philosophies of ministry that de-emphasize the importance of learning for the Christian life.”³⁶

Early on in both of my church plants, Sunday School classes were added to the Sunday gathering to so that people could engage in deeper theological learning. Classes were designed to promote transformational community learning through interactive studies in biblical, systematic, and practical theology. We rotated studies in God’s Word based upon these three categories of study so that people could acquire a comprehensive, life-changing knowledge of God’s Word over the course of several years. Not only did people clearly learn Bible in these environments, but potential ministry leaders had opportunities to explore and exercise their gifts for teaching. Through these opportunities, two men realized a call to eldership. One is currently serving as the pastor in the church planted in Ghana. The other will be starting elder training in the Fall of 2022.

Small Group Discipleship. Discipleship takes place within the context of loving, intentional, and meaningful relationships in local churches where believers actively pray for and encourage one another in the pursuit of Christlikeness. Well-trained small groups provide rich

³⁶ English, *Deep Discipleship*, Kindle Ed. 85,1116.

opportunities to cultivate such discipling relationships. Within a small group environment, openness and transparency can occur as each member seeks to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Small groups need to be organized around disciple-making convictions and practices if they are to foster deep discipleship. English notes, “Community is indispensable to discipleship, but community is not discipleship... it is not enough to connect people to community; it must be a community that is committed to learning the way of Jesus together. It must be a community that learns.”³⁷ Small groups should be a place where Christians share their lives together as they gather consistently for prayer, Bible study, accountability, and mission.

Strategies for Multiplying Disciples

Church planters must not only be confident in their *convictions* about leadership development, but also committed to cultivate a healthy leadership development *culture* by providing *constructs* to systematically train future leaders.³⁸ Leadership development doesn’t just happen. Church planters need to be intentional and clear about their development process. When I planted Gospel Life Church, I used the following three step process to choose, train, and equip disciple-making leaders for gospel-advancing ministry. This process is flexible enough to be adapted for nearly any cultural context.

Identify. The first step in leadership development is to identify people who can be trained and entrusted with real leadership responsibility. This first step in leadership development might be the most crucial. Leaders who desire a fruitful ministry that reaches beyond their immediate influence will spend most of their time and energy pouring into the lives of potential leaders. People, not programs, become the planter’s primary strategy for making disciples. Commenting on Paul’s strategy for gospel multiplication, Dr. Ken Cochrum writes,

³⁷ English, Kindle Ed. 83, 1094, 1096.

³⁸ Eric Geiger and Kevin Peck, *Designed to Lead: The Church and Leadership Development* (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2016), 14-15.

“Paul invested in people as his primary strategy. He aggressively entrusted others with the mission. Paul also had clear selection criteria for his missionary teams and local church leaders (Acts 15:36-40; 2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:5-9, 2:2-10).”³⁹

During my four-year church-planting ministry in Ghana, W. Africa, I spent most of my time pouring into the lives of five faithful men. By God’s grace, each one of those men have made disciple-making disciples. The multiplying effect of their ministry has not only strengthened the church that was planted, but has also resulted in the gospel spreading to unreached villages as well. When I planted in Buffalo, NY, I used the acrostic STAFF to identify the qualities that are essential for potential leaders. STAFF refers to servants who are teachable, able, faithful, and fruitful.

Develop. Once STAFF people are identified, they need to be trained and equipped so that they can effectively use their gifts to serve. Initial and ongoing training should focus on three major areas: convictions, character, and ministry competence. Training can take place formally through theological courses or classroom instruction. The most important, transformative equipping, however, takes place as the planter pours his time, energy, and resources into mentoring future leaders.

Deploy. People who prove themselves to be faithful and fruitful need to be entrusted with real ministry responsibility. Following Bill Hull’s six step approach to ministry development, a church planter should “tells them *what*, tells them *why*, shows them *how*, does it with them, lets them do it, and releases them” to lead in ministry.⁴⁰ For some, ministry deployment might take place in the local church plant where people will serve as elders, deacons, small group leaders, or ministry leaders. For others, deployment might result in the church planting sending leaders out of that church for disciple-making ministry in other contexts. Either

³⁹ Ken Cochrum, *Close: Leading Well Across Distance and Culture* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 29.

⁴⁰ Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Church: Leading A Body of Believers on the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 29.

way, the church that deploys leaders will experience the blessings of being used by God for gospel-increasing ministry.

Conclusion

Every church planter, whether he realizes it or not, has a philosophy of ministry that guides him in his church planting endeavors. His philosophy will shape the goals, priorities, and direction of his ministry endeavors. Those who embrace a disciple-making philosophy labor to make, mature, and multiply Christlike disciples in ways that are Biblically faithful and culturally engaging. They take the time necessary to carefully consider how they will reach their community with the gospel, mature and equip believers to grow in Christlikeness, and develop ministry leaders who will serve and lead for the gospel's advance.

*Honor Code: I have written this paper exclusively for 80616. If I received any editing or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arndt, William. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Ashford, Bruce Riley, ed. *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, The Church, and the Nations*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011.
- Carson, D.A. *Matthew*. Edited by Frank Gaebelein. Vol. 8. The Expositors Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.
- . *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from I Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.
- Chatraw, Joshua D. *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk about God in a Skeptical Age*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020.
- Cochrum, Ken. *Close: Leading Well Across Distance and Culture*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.
- Colbert, Micah. *Discovering Hope: Exploring the Good News of Jesus Christ*. Independently Published, 2020.
- . “Evangelism in a Post-Christian Culture.” *Rooted Thinking* (blog), December 9, 2021. <http://rootedthinking.com/2021/12/09/evangelism-in-a-post-christian-culture/>.
- Dever, Mark. *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus*. 9Marks. Wheaton: Crossway, 2016.
- DeYoung, Kevin, and Greg Gilbert. *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2011.
- English, J.T. *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus*. Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2020.
- Geiger, Eric, and Kevin Peck. *Designed to Lead: The Church and Leadership Development*. Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2016.
- Greear, J.D. *Gaining by Losing: Why the Church Belongs to Churches That Send*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015.

- Hull, Bill. *The Disciple-Making Church: Leading A Body of Believers on the Journey of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010.
- Irving, Justin A., and Mark L. Strauss. *Leadership in Christian Perspective: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Practices for Servant Leaders*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019.
- Keller, Tim. *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.
- Keller, Timothy, and J. Allen Thompson. *Church Planter Manual*. New York: Redeemer Church Planting Center, 2002.
- Lake, Mac. *The Multiplication Effect: Building a Leadership Pipeline That Solves Your Leadership Shortage*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020.
- Marshall, Colin, and Tony Payne. *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything*. Matthias Media, 2009.
- Plueddemann, James. *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009.
- Stetzer, Ed. *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church That's Biblically Sound and Reaching People in Culture*. Kindle. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006.
- Stiles, J. Mack. *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2014.
- Wells, David. *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.
- Wilkins, M.J. "Disciples." In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992.