Becoming a Church that Makes Disciple-Making Leaders: Part I

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Introduction

It was around Halloween in 1968 when I got the call that changed my life and gave me a model of leadership that I have followed ever since. Dave Veerman, the leader of Campus Life in my high school, called me and invited me, a freshman, to a barn party. What did Dave do that was so life changing? Empowered by the Spirit of God and motivated by love, he first identified me as a potential follower of Jesus and then reached out to pull me into Christian community. There I found not only lasting friendship, but Christ himself. Before long, I too began to identify and recruit future leaders for the harvest. In reality, Dave’s intent was not just to introduce me to Christ. No, his sights were on gathering potential disciple-makers, leaders like those Paul exhorted Timothy to find who would be qualified to teach others (2 Tim. 2:2). In this article I want to share a lifetime of lessons taught to me by others about developing churches that focus not just on making disciples but on producing disciple-making leaders.

Disciple-making Leaders: the Basics

The Master Plan of Evangelism

As Robert Coleman pointed out in his classic book, The Master Plan of Evangelism (1963), Jesus’ plan for fulfilling what I call the “Eden Project” (Jackson 2011) i.e., the storyline of the Bible, was not to focus on making as many disciples as he could but asking God who among his ragged group of followers could be trained to become disciple-makers, leaders who could take the things they had been taught—and were beginning to live—and entrust those treasures to reliable men and women. Jesus’ master plan for changing the world, then, was...

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to spend the majority of his time with twelve men, selected under divine guidance in prayer. He taught them in word and deed, publically and privately, formally and informally one subject, the kingdom of God. He wanted to take them deeply into knowing the Father to ground them in the relational safety of the Trinitarian God and his Word of Truth. He also wanted to give them a clear mental picture of God’s plan for them to rule as his coregents over his realm. The fog began to lift when they received their endowment of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) to give them guidance and to enable them to succeed in the mission. Through the Spirit the apostles saw that every knee would bow and confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2:10) and that people from every tongue and tribe and language and nation would worship God at his throne (Rev. 7:9). The Eden Project would be fulfilled in the dawning of a New Creation (Rev. 21), all things would be brought together under one head, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10), and God would be all in all (1 Cor. 15:58). Once Jesus’ leaders had this vision in their hearts, minds, habits and hands they could impart it to the next generation of leaders…and this is why Luke ends Acts with Paul alive and proclaiming Jesus as the Christ and teaching about the kingdom of God. Luke was saying that there would be an Acts 29 and 30 and on down through church history. We were going to get our shot to do what Jesus did, to continue his mission.

Raising up leaders, then, is the key to continuing the mission of Jesus. Jesus did it by modeling authentic Christianity and then choosing in prayer twelve men who were trying to model it also that would carry the torch after he was gone. As sociologist Max Weber argued a century ago, institutions endure not because of the charisma of the founder but because the vision of the founder has been successfully transferred to a second generation of leaders (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee 2004: 36). Church growth expert, Aubrey Malphurs, says that a church is only one generation of leaders away from extinction (2004: 28). The focus, therefore, must be on those that God is raising up to leadership.

This process begins, as it did with Jesus, by identifying in prayer those among Jesus’ apprentices that modeled Jesus’ core values and who had the call and gifts to make other disciples. In his study of Jesus’ methodology, John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement of churches, described this as a seven step process (Wimber 1996):

- Identify: each week I study the flock. As I do I am praying that God would show me who the next leaders are. I look for a number of things, insights that I learned from Wimber. First, I look for those who are coming early and staying late; those with the “lingering ministry” are often those who just can’t get enough of God and his people. Second, I look for those who want to follow me or the other leaders, who are asking questions, emulating us, taking risks. Finally, as I pray I am asking God to show me those whom he is “on” and is calling to ministry.

- Recruit: the recruiting phase assumes that I have something to recruit them to. It is the genius of leadership to harness the available energy of people and direct it toward tasks that will energize them and help the church fulfill its mission; all recruiting efforts should aim at finding win-win solutions for all parties involved. Robert Logan says that before we recruit someone for a ministry role we need to have thought through all aspects of that ministry, such as its purpose in not only helping the church fulfill its mission by modeling its values, priorities and practices but how it helps to advance the kingdom. We should be clear about what the recruit’s role will be, when that role will start and stop, who will be responsible for the recruit’s oversight and growth and how evaluation will occur (Logan 1991).

- Train: training can occur in both formal and informal settings and should have both a pre-service introduction and in-service opportunities to develop as a disciple, a worker or a leader.

- Deploy: deployment means letting the balloon fly. There is risk in deploying leaders because the laying “off” of hands is much harder than the laying “on” of hands. This is why Paul counseled his leaders to lay hands on no one quickly (1 Tim. 5:22).
Monitor: if the pre-service work has been done such as agreement on job description, goals, etc. then Blanchard’s One Minute Manager principles can be put to work here to great effect. If this work has not been done then oversight is much fuzzier and potentially counterproductive.

Feed: this phase has to do with in-service input, whether formal or informal. That we need to be intentional in the feeding of our workers and leaders goes without saying. The topics could be chosen to meet either real needs (leaders essentially choose topics) or felt needs (workers essentially choose topics).

Reproduce: the goal of the discipleship process is for one disciple to multiply himself/herself into the life of another. Wimber said, “Never do anything alone.” We are always going with an eye to multiplying disciples.

The Principle of Disequilibration

The discipleship process outlined above has one caveat. When one looks at how Jesus made disciples he generally switched the order of Train/Deploy to Deploy/Train. Classic to this is the story of the feeding of the five thousand, one of the only gospel stories that is in all four gospels, thus making it a critical passage to study. First, it is as an illustration of how Jesus made both disciples and leaders. When presented with the problem of feeding the multitudes, Jesus told the disciples, “You give them something to eat.” There did not appear to be any real solution to the problem as they had only gathered enough from the people for a few meals—not a solution, however, until Jesus told them to give away what they had. Jesus deployed them without enough information to see how they would respond. If they had responded without any faith they would have no doubt gotten Jesus’ version of the one-minute exhortation, often quite brutal (e.g., Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “Get behind me Satan,” Mk. 8:33).

In this case, however, they did step out on faith and had one of the greatest demonstrations of what it means to be a part of the Eden Project to that point in their ministry—the bread and fish multiplied as they gave it away. In John 6, it was when they were done and ready to learn that Jesus taught them the lesson of the Bread of Life.

This is the principle of disequilibration at work. While in the normal course of church life it is often prudent to give people pre-service training, the principle here usually applies when apprentices are in-service. Assignments can be given that a trainee is not ready for and it is sink-or-swim time for the would-be disciple. When Jesus’ followers were on the edge of failing, Jesus stepped in and gave them the missing piece of information (e.g., he instructed the disciples about deliverance only when they couldn’t cast the demon out of the boy in Luke 9). These could be called “teachable moments.” To miss one of these moments is to miss a golden opportunity in the disciple-making process. Once the disciple-maker realizes that a teachable moment it at hand, it is time to debrief. Without a time of debriefing where the experience is explored for its learning possibilities, the teachable moment is wasted.

When Jesus’ disciples succeeded, they received Jesus’ praise for their faith and then more instruction, thus the Deploy/Train sequence. The point of all this is that we don’t want to be speaking if no one is listening. We don’t know what we don’t know until our lack of knowledge is exposed through disequilibration where we are thrown out of our comfort zone. We then are suddenly vulnerable, humble and ready for input. Hopefully the trainee is humble enough to ask.

It is when apprentices are listening that they are ready to be taught. That can occur informally, such as debriefing a ministry experience with a new trainee at Starbucks or formally, when the inability to have answers for the atheist at work has created a felt need for signing up for the next evangelism training at church. As Jesus said, “To him who has ears to hear, let him hear!” Those who have ears are those who have been disequilibrated in Jesus’ “School of Ministry.”

Deployment and the Transfer of Authority

Before we move on we need to pause to ad-
dress the meaning of empowerment in deployment. Malphurs defines empowerment as the intentional transfer of authority to an emerging leader within specified boundaries (2004). When leaders are released, do they really have the authority to make decisions? Before we say “yes,” we need to realize that there are five different levels of empowerment:

- Report back and I will tell you what to do
- Report back with your recommendations and I’ll give you my input
- Report back and let me know what you are going to do
- Do whatever you think needs to be done and let me know how it came out
- Do whatever you think needs to be done; I don’t need to know about it

In order for leaders to be able to spread their wings, they need the authority to make decisions and make mistakes. This does not really occur until we are at the last two levels of delegation. Leaders need to know that they have the freedom to be creative in decision-making and are not going to be taken out of the game if they give up a few runs. They need the freedom to do it differently because, as I used to say when I was a carpenter, there are six different ways to cut a board. Those of us who would really empower apprentices need to realize that our students will probably do it differently, and even more poorly than we might hope. But, in order to make disciples we have to be willing to take these kinds of risks. John Wimber used to say that it always stinks in a nursery, but parents have to go through this stage to grow their children into maturity. We have to give them true power and take the risk that they might stumble. This is how children learn to walk. In the same way we need to accept that raising up leaders will be messy and that we’ll have to give up ministry efficiency in order to live past one generation.

How bad can it be? If they sink, it will give us a teachable moment. The point is that there has to be a true transfer of authority or it is not real empowerment. Without empowerment, without the freedom to try and fail, we will never raise up leaders. Our desire for control needs to be called to attention. We keep this card on our refrigerator of a little kid dressed up like a little cowboy getting his picture taken. He’s obviously in deep agony. The card says, “Get over it.” Let’s get over our control and perfection issues so we can raise up the next generation. We gain power when we give up power. Someday, Lord willing, we will be old and our greatest legacy will be that they do it better than we did. That is true success and true fatherhood. The first time my oldest son legitimately beat me in a game of one-on-one basketball, it was one of the proudest days of my life.

The Discipleship Loop

Wimber also taught that the standard method of making disciples is through what he called the Discipleship Loop. It is modeled off the way Jesus apprenticed his followers (Wimber 1996). This process has four phases and is called a loop because it is intended to endlessly repeat itself:

- I do it: it is assumed that a disciple-maker will be Exhibit A of what he wants her/his disciple to be. This means that all disciples are generalists before they are specialists. A specialist is someone who operates in his/her gift-mix exclusively and tends to say, “I don’t do that because I am not gifted or skilled in it.” A generalist is someone who says, “I am gifted/skilled at X, Y, and Z but I’ve got the rest of the alphabet to find! To attract other letters I’m going to act like a Q, however poorly, all-the-while praying that God would raise up the real Q. Until that day comes, I will walk in the role of a Q and pray.” Once the rest of the alphabet is raised up I can focus on being X, Y and Z.

- I do it while others watch: Show and tell was the basic method of Jesus. Jesus did it and then did it while others watched. As they watched it created questions because Jesus’ risk-taking activities were taking the apprentices out of their comfort zone. This disequilibration led to vulnerability, which led to questions and teaching; show and tell.
Jesus also operated out of the philosophy ready-fire-aim rather than ready-aim-fire. The former shows that he was constantly being asked to step out on instructions from the Father without necessarily knowing where it would all lead. He readied himself in prayer, did what he saw the Father doing, and then made adjustments along the way. Wimber always said, “Faith is spelled r-i-s-k.”

- Others do it while I watch: at some point we have to let them loose. We will want to jump in because we can do it better, but we have to let them do it more poorly than us at first in the hope that they will do it better than us one day in the future.

- I leave them doing it and I do it someone else: the loop never stops. Hopefully the first disciple has already begun the process of multiplication.

**Organism vs. Organization**

Jesus spent the majority of his time with the twelve men that comprised the New Israel. They stood in fulfillment of God’s plan for the twelve tribes of Israel encamped around Immanuel (Is. 7:14), God “tabernacling” with his people (Jn. 1:14). These twelve represented the people of God, chosen for the sake of the world. Jesus’ strategy, as was said, was focused on raising up leaders that he would commission to disciple the nations. It would be safe to infer, then, that local churches should be in the leadership business in order to be in the disciple-making business. John Wimber was the first employee of Charles E. Fuller Institute of Church Growth and traveled extensively throughout the United States and spoke in every conceivable denomination. He said that his research showed that there was approximately a 1 to 4 ratio between leaders that were raised up and church attendance. Using the analogy of the human body, Wimber said that for every one part of skeleton (workers/leaders) added to the body there would be four parts of flesh (future workers/leaders). Whether this is because every new leader brings people with them from their social network, the increase of God, or a combination of both, is hard to say. What is clear is that those churches that give themselves to the work of raising up new leaders put themselves in a position to increase in numerous ways—attendance, morale, momentum, financially, etc.

There is also a ratio between organism and organization. The goal of every organization is to have life, whether that is maturing disciples in the church or product growth in business. The hope is that structure is always changing in relationship to the organism and is commensurate to enhancing its growth. The minute the organism begins to serve the organization, to prop up “the way it’s always been done,” the organism begins a slow decline. The point is that the leader and his/her team have to be ruthless with evaluating current programmatic structures. Are they producing workers and leaders? Are they expanding the infrastructure? Programs are simply jets on the rocket that propel the ship from point A to point B. They are to be run by personnel that own and model the values, priorities and practices and exist to make disciples and disciple-makers. If the boosters are done firing and are no longer propelling the organism to point B then it is time to rethink either the structures or the personnel running the structures. Every system in the church has to be monitored for its leadership and disciple-making status. If it is not producing, perhaps the leader needs coaching. Or, perhaps the program has seen its day and there’s another way, a better way to achieve the church’s objectives.

**Counting the Cost**

One of the price tags of being an authentic follower of Jesus is to be willing to suffer for the gospel. What if achieving the goals that God has given us puts us in a position to have to trust him by giving some things up? We’ve already talked about the need to give up control. What if it will also cost us financially? What if it might cause us to step into difficult relational pain? What if it will mean preaching the truth to those who don’t want to hear? What if it means not spending the kind of time with our families that we would like, having to be out at night, or on a plane, maybe...
even weeks at a time? What if, as so many pioneer Christians have had to do, it means putting their children into boarding school because where God was calling them was too dangerous for children? What if it means having to stand for Christ at the cost of family relationships? What if contextualizing the gospel means that an old dog is going to have to learn some new tricks, to adapt in stretching ways such as having to learn a new language or new technology such as Facebook™ or Twitter™ if that’s how the group you want to reach communicates? What if the skill-set required is outside of our gifts and even interests? What if, to make disciples it means that we are going to have to give up some of our dreams, our pulpit time, our ministry so they can have theirs? These are tough questions, all having to do with the cost that we have to pay to share in the sufferings of Christ if we want to raise up disciple-making leaders.

One of the biggest areas involving the cost of becoming a leadership training factory is that the current leaders have to learn to look squarely at reality by adopting an epistemology that isn’t afraid to look at the data to examine life as it really is. This kind of leader adapts to new situations and makes tough calls for the sake of growth. This is what Kouzes calls challenging the process (see below) and great leaders are always pressing in to look for ways to improve. This will require enough self-awareness to be in touch with our need for everything to be alright and the maturity to be able to ask the tough, evaluative questions for the sake of raising up the next generation of leaders. If the senior pastor’s goal is to be a great preacher, how will we raise up other great preachers if they never get a shot at preaching? What if the pastor’s goal is to be a great evangelist, but we never let anyone else give the invitation or to lead the outreach. Or maybe it’s only the elders that get to pray for the sick, or whatever. This issue comes back to control. Is it about me or is it about raising up leaders that make disciples? If it is the latter then we need to give young leaders their shot. This doesn’t mean that we give away our leadership, only that emerging leaders need to be given opportunities to spread their wings with supervision. Sunday morning might not be the best place for apprentices to learn, so we will need to intentionally create other venues. These leaders represent not only the growing organism but the personnel that will develop the appropriate organization that will enable the cycle to continue. Martyrdom can come in many different forms. Sharing the ministry is one of the ways we die daily, but we do it because we want to continue the mission of Jesus.

Leadership vs. Management

One of the reasons that structures can fail is that someone skilled in management can be set in place to run the structure. If a church is to be a leadership training factory, it has to know the difference between leaders and managers (Banks and Ledbetter 2004). Each is a different calling and requires a different set of gifts and skill-set. While the two generally overlap, the difference has to do with vision and followership. Leaders have vision and enlist followers to fulfill the vision. Managers are those who have been recruited by the leader to manage the vision and to help figure out how to achieve the objectives and goals necessary to accomplish the vision. In every successful company look for a visionary leader partnered with an effective manager(s).

Because leaders are usually brimming with ideas, it can drive those who serve them crazy if the leader comes in with a new idea that preempts the last idea, thus undercutting the managers and worker’s efforts to make the last set of ideas work. For this reason it is easy for managers and workers to want to foment a coup against the catalyst. In order to prevent these kinds of rebellions, the leader has to be either highly successful or cultivate a theory Y style of leadership (participatory) that prevents betrayal. On the other hand, managers need to be self aware enough to realize that you don’t shoot your idea man. Leaders often process externally (out loud) so managers are wise not to deposit this verbal bantering into the bank, unless told to do so. Otherwise it will seem like leaders are doing “bait and switch” all the time. Leaders
are not a dime a dozen and the vortex of energy they bring with them cannot be duplicated by subordinates that don’t have those gifts. If the team shoots the catalyst, they will quickly notice the law of entropy setting in. Followers who learn to work with catalytic leaders will benefit greatly from the synergy of leadership and management working together.

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