

The article below on building an intentional disciple making culture is a part of topical series on outreach for church leaders, found online.

We believe there is a perspective here to be caught, freeing 'discipleship' from association with 'teaching', opening it up to a more conversational and storytelling-based approach, engaged with intent through the fabric of everyday life and conversation. If caught, this can deliver measurable results.



How to build an Intentional disciple-making culture?

The key dynamic of discipleship is contained in the word 'intentionality'.

Many intended 'discipleship' efforts are not very fruitful.

To help, it is important to **demystify 'discipleship'**. When many think of 'discipleship' they think of a teacher in a classroom or pastor in a pulpit.

Disciple-making is not about 'teaching' and 'Bible studies' – as important as they are. It's about a lot more!

In this article we start with a Biblical foundation and then consider:

1. The goal
2. The methodology
3. The context (Natural contexts for disciple-making)
4. The content – including best approaches (Habits trump content)
5. The importance of measurable results



A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Here are some Scriptures with bullet-points.

Matthew 28:19-20

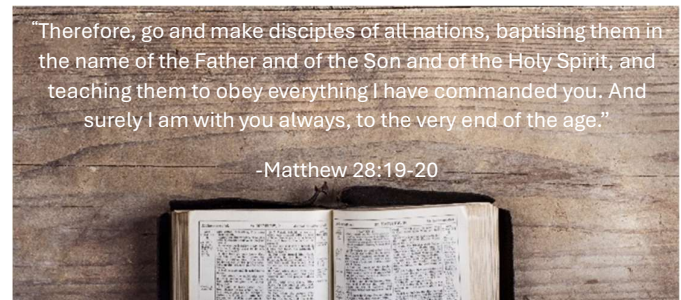
- Making disciples is the great commission.
- The assumption is that this refers firstly to evangelism, to make disciples out of non-disciples.
- Baptism is then the outward sign of the inner change.
- This commission goes on to instruct us not merely to teach Jesus' teachings, but instead to teach people to OBEY them. This requires far more than teaching the content. It is application centred. Put differently, the Great Commission is results oriented!

2 Timothy 2:2

"And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others."

- Paul, his audience, and the reliable people they choose, who then teach others.
- We aren't called to merely disciple disciples. We're called to disciple disciple-makers!

The goal of discipleship is **QUALITATIVE**
(the quality of the disciple),
not merely **QUANTITATIVE**
(what they have academically learned).



1 Corinthians 11.1

"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

Philippians 4:9

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

- Disciple-making is about life-on-life. At the core of it is our own example.
- Discipleship is application centred and practical, in contrast to being knowledge centred and academic.

The key word for a disciple is 'choice'.

The key word for a disciple-maker is 'intentionality'.



1. THE GOAL

If the goal of discipleship is someone who knows and obeys Jesus' teachings, a course that merely explains Jesus' teachings will never achieve it.

To consider an alternative way of understanding disciple-making, consider the intriguing similarity there is in the below definitions of 'evangelism' and 'discipleship'.

- 1. Discipleship is about engaging continued conversations with these interested people - with the teachings of Jesus in mind.**
- 2. Evangelism is about engaging conversations with interested people - with the gospel in mind.**

Some points

- The methodology for evangelism and discipleship can be one and the same.
- Conversational and storytelling skills are highly significant to both.
- The goal of evangelism and discipleship are one and the same: Namely, to help people take steps toward Jesus.
- However, the content discussed with a believer and non-believer is different. For the non-believer, it is content purposed to help them know Jesus. For the believer, it is content purposed to help them to know and then obey Jesus' teachings (Matthew 28)

“Disciple-making is more about taking someone on a conversational journey than simply teaching a set of beliefs or ideas”



2. THE METHODOLOGY

As a skill, our effectiveness in disciple-making is significantly determined by our ability to connect with a person's current felt interests or needs, so as to then impart knowledge or perspectives with hope of helping them forwards in their journey.

As a 'method' or skillset, this is principally done by utilising conversational and storytelling skills to initiate and continue conversations. Only by this means will conversations stay both enjoyable and meaningful, therefore continuing. The truth of these points cannot be underestimated. Most 'discipleship' attempts never get past one or two meetings with a person! What is going on?

Our context of perceived failure

It is to be noted that most new believers rarely attend new believers' classes at all or continue for only one to four sessions if they do.

Many Christians have a negative perception of 'discipleship' because of this – thinking 'people aren't interested', 'it doesn't work', and 'There is no point in trying here because it won't work'.

I suspect many of our churches have backed away from being more intentional in their disciple-making because of these kinds of discouragements when attempting to run new believers' courses or similar.

Concurrently, our churches do many amazing things that could be called 'disciple-making' were we to look at this from a different angle.

What is being suggested is that we became too content oriented – and insufficiently people oriented. Our 'methodology' failed!

A telling observation

Consider that nearly every person who ever stopped attending a new believer's course *might have happily continued to enjoy coffee and conversation with the person who invited them!*

If our approach were relational and our methodology conversational and story-based, we wouldn't have this problem! However, the need for INTENTIONALITY remains. Our INTENTIONALITY is what makes it disciple-making! (The word 'making' holds no meaning otherwise).

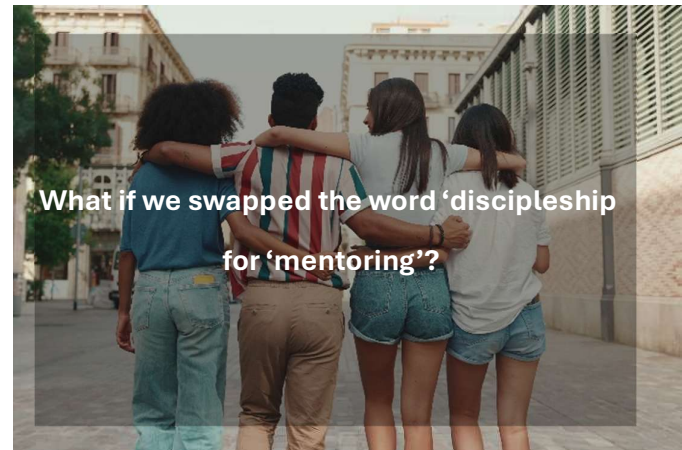
To give a different vocabulary to this

It is often said that "Programmes don't reach people; it takes people to reach people!" Church people seem to understand this point.

Consider now that it is equally true that, "Programmes don't disciple people; it takes people to disciple people!"

A course cannot do it!

The intentionality of a person to 'make' a disciple, enacted through the context of relationship and conversation, is needed!



We have noted how the word 'discipleship' has taken on meaning in our culture more associated with 'formal teaching' than 'relationally encouraging'.

The word 'mentoring' carries some very positive connotations – when considering how the process of 'discipleship' actually works in practice. For example, compare even the question, "Can I disciple you?" with "Can I mentor you?" These have different connotations. The word 'mentoring' is also in common use within our wider society.

So, what if we used the word 'mentoring' instead?



3. THE CONTEXT (NATURAL CONTEXTS FOR DISCIPLE-MAKING)

What might the PROCESS of discipleship look like – if no course or formal meeting were involved?

It is of note in the Scriptures that we see Jesus discipling his disciples by many means!

- Jesus sat to teach his disciples with no one else present
(*Matthew 24:3, Mark 9:25*)
- Jesus taught the crowds – in front of his disciples
(*Matthew 5:1-2*)
- Jesus engaged conversations while travelling
(*Matthew 24:1, Luke 24:13*)
- Jesus engaged conversations over meals - modelling ministry (*Luke 19:1-10*)
- Jesus sent them on mission trips, sending out the 12
(*Matthew 10*) and 72 (*Luke 10:1-23*) – likely followed by debrief meetings to consolidate learning (*Mark 6:30*)
- ...and Jesus modelled selfcare by withdrawing from both the crowds and his own disciples to pray
(*Luke 5:16, Matthew 14:23, 26:36*).



The process of disciple-making is therefore multifaceted.

Consider, this means that a person being disciplined or mentored doesn't necessarily have to know that this is what we are doing. It doesn't have to be a formalised relationship. The fact that it is discipleship is **MADE REAL THROUGH OUR INTENTIONALITY!** It is possible to influence a person toward greater faith and fervour for Christ through friendship and conversation. In fact, sometimes the freedom and authenticity of a relationship is reduced by formalising it, because it changes the dynamics and expectations.

Consider these contexts in today's world

- **Helping someone** with practical tasks – like firewood, childcare, gardening, house cleaning, cooking them a meal. Etc.. These create a context for relationship and conversation. The intentionality of our questions is then what counts.
- **Intentionally driving somewhere with someone**, in view of the relational and conversational opportunity this enables – with encouragements or questions in mind.
- **Inviting someone to a course or seminar at church** - whether about Jesus, marriage, parenting, finances, emotional health or physical health (exercise / good diet).
- Inviting someone over for a **meal** – knowing that we get to know people a lot more personally through home hospitality – while taking an interest, with questions in mind.
- Remembering to connect with someone for a **coffee every six months.**
- Lending or giving a person a **book** – which after their reading we also ask about.
- **Referring a person** to an online article, website, devotional resource or book.
- Sending a meaningful thought, note, reminder or encouragement through an **email, text message** – or similar means to keep a connection and conversation going.
- Thinking to ask intelligent and thoughtful questions about things over coffee **after Sunday morning church services.**

To the pastor

It is likely that many of your church members are already intentional in these kinds of efforts. It is just that this isn't perceived or recognised as 'disciple-making'. Recognition given to this could enhance and expand these efforts.

It is also likely that other church members do these things – but with no intentionality. Were a vision to be painted by you regarding HOW discipleship takes place – *they might become more INTENTIONAL, and this might change their results – which are also your results as a church!*

How could you pass on the perspectives in this article – and then disciple your members – to make this their practice?

The defining factor that makes a relationship 'disciple-making' is the INTENTIONALITY that we bring to it!

The instruction to 'make disciples' was a call to intentionality!



4. THE CONTENT (INCLUDING BEST APPROACHES)

Having considered the **(1) goal**, **(2) methodology** and the **(3) context** of disciple-making today, let's now consider **(4) the content**.

Our approaches have to be simple. Only then can they be transferable to our members for their application.

Let's look very-briefly at four simple dynamics of disciple-making, in reference to content.

- **(a) Disciple-making content for discussions with a non-believer**
- **(b) Disciple-making content for discussions with believers**
- **(c) The higher goal (habits embraced trump content taught)**
- **(d) The thought-process when meeting to 'disciple' someone**

These are points you could share with your members, to help them become ever-more effective disciple-makers.

(a) Disciple-making content for discussions with a non-believer

If our goal is that people take steps toward Jesus, anything at all that helps to bring esteem to Jesus within their thinking is a valid part of our content - while our methodology remains one of conversation and storytelling.

Regarding a relevant scope of content:

- **The gospel** – Explaining this simple message at some point is very important – while discussing it is better. However, any lack of immediate response suggests that a wider array of evidence (both rational and experiential) might be needed before they are ready to consider the truth of the message.
- **The Bible** – For example, you could meet with someone to read and discuss your way through the Gospel of Luke together – or you simply share a parable of Jesus as an illustration and then ask a question.
- **Personal testimony** – including the testimonies of others, enables stories to be shared that are relevant to a wide range of challenging experiences, bringing hope.
- **The testimony of history** – The Christian faith has established many of our cultural values, enabling high levels of freedom, prosperity, equality, charity and more. History stories are interesting and can counter a negative public perception of our faith.
- **The testimony of nature** – There are a myriad of stories of amazing and complex things in nature that reflect design, intelligence and the intent of a Creator.

(b) Disciple-making content for discussions with believers

Content for new believers is principally about anything that helps them know *and obey* Jesus' teachings – as per the definition of the Great Commission found in Matthew 28.

However, it needs noting that stories from personal testimony, the testimony of history and the testimony of nature are still relevant. New believers often doubt. These stories bring perspective and encouragement. All of these areas of testimony (the story of things God has done) have relevance to discipleship, and at all stages and 'levels'. (Failure to recognise this can result in content-based 'discipleship' which has a weak connection to their everyday lives - which is why some lose interest.)

Of note:

- The wider body of Scripture is now also relevant.
- Relational 'accountability' (through encouraging questions) now becomes a core part of our disciple-making, noting the instruction is 'teaching to obey'.

How do we bring 'accountability'?

If someone commits to reading the Bible every day, it might be very helpful if you asked a week later how they were going. Many would fail in their goal without your intentional encouragement. This is how we can gently bring 'accountability' – enabling results.

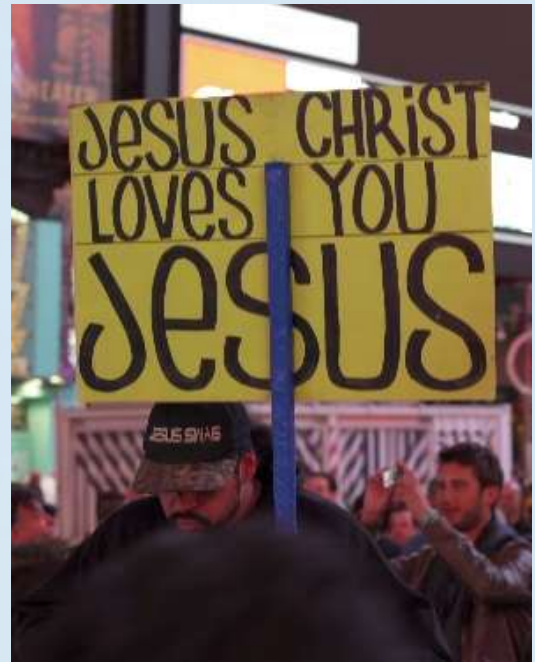
In the Parable of the Sower Jesus talked about seedlings choked by thistles (the worries of life and deceitfulness of wealth). If not for your intentionality to connect with and encourage a young believers persistence, they might not persist! This demonstrates again the significance of INTENTIONALITY to disciple-making. There is sometimes a lot of effort in our churches with very little measurable fruit. What if a key 'missing link' was the intentionality of our members to connect with others – to be active in making disciples?

A starting content for discipling believers

Here is one simple summary of some core teaching points for newer or younger believers.

- 1. Loving God:** How are we to have a relationship with a God we cannot see?
 - We talk to God through prayer
 - We hear from God through the Bible
 - We can also hear from God through the inner whispers of the Holy Spirit (including our conscience), through circumstances and through other people – but all of these need discerning.
- 2. Loving one another:** How does this affect our relationship with other Christians?
 - We meet in large groups to celebrate and learn.
 - We meet in small groups to love and care.
- 3. Loving the world around:** How does this affect our relationship with the wider world?
 - Our 'ministry' is to use our gifts, abilities, resources and opportunities to love, help and care for others where we are.
 - Our 'mission' is to help other people come to know Jesus – just as someone once helped us.

The thought-process of the underlined words is easy to remember, providing a 'syllabus' – with no notes needed.



(c) A goal greater than content: The greatest fruit will come from HABITS embraced!

You will have heard the saying, "Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime." Regarding disciple-making, if results matter, this applies! Let me illustrate.

If we consider the above-mentioned three areas, here is what the habit-focused dynamic of discipleship could look like:

Regarding #1: Loving God – Were we able to help them embrace a HABIT of reading the Bible each day (followed by reflection and prayer), their relationship with God would have an anchor - outlasting and outperforming the things we teach them.

Regarding area #2: Loving one another – Were we able to help them embrace a HABIT of participating with both a weekend church service and weekday church small group, their relationship with other believers would have a significant anchor – outlasting and outperforming the encouragement we give them, while empowering their love to others.

Regarding area #3: Loving the world around – Were those leading the church and small groups to have HABITS in place that facilitate (a) a monthly time of prayer together for the non-believing friends each person is seeking to encourage – and also (b) an encouraging monthly testimony drawn out about how someone came to (or shared) faith after which (c) a motivational or equipping point related to outreach is reiterated, leveraging the encouragement of the testimony... their 'ministry' and 'mission' would have a significant anchor, platform and team!

To illustrate: Imagine a VERY YOUNG youth leader

Imagine a young youth leader who – with no intent to criticise them - really doesn't know very much at all. As a result, their Bible teaching is very weak. However, because of their intentionality in a few leadership HABITS we discover that the youth they are there to make disciples out of have all done the following.

(a) They've embraced a HABIT of daily Bible reading,

(b) They've embraced the HABIT of going to a church service each weekend and a church small group (the youth group),

(c) and as a result of the intentional encouragements of these groups to serve God and be a witness in daily life, they are actively seeking to do this as a witness to their peers.

Would you say that this young leader has failed as a disciple-maker – or might they have succeeded to the highest degree?

This is the importance of HABITS in leadership and disciple-making. They create the CONTEXT for growth.

The same HABIT-based approach applies to other areas of discipleship

For example, imagine you are trying to help a younger couple through marriage struggles. While you might give some good advice, in the long-term, imagine that you managed to help them embrace a HABIT of reading and discussing one book about marriage per year together as a couple. In all likelihood that HABIT would go on to achieve more in their lives and marriage than the temporary help received from things in just one period of their lives

This point is not to be underestimated.

If we **INTENTIONALLY TEACH** these understandings to our church members, this will **ENABLE AND EMPOWER THEIR INTENTIONALITY**, bringing **RESULTS!**



(d) The resulting thought-process when meeting to 'disciple' someone

In summarising the DNA of what is written above, imagine you are about to meet with someone to encourage their faith.

1. We show care first

'They don't care how much we know until they know how much we care'. So we ask, "How are you?"

2. We stay flexible to discuss the questions they are asking next

Again, this is about showing selfless care – while meeting them at their point of felt need or interest. Through asking questions we can ascertain where they are up to on their journey, to help them take their next step. The nature of that journey will be different for every person.

3. Only then do we bring a content that we have prepared

Everything above isn't to say content and preparation aren't important. Quite the opposite. God can lead us regarding the direction to take a conversation – or regarding a Scripture to read and discuss together. Preparation is necessary! It is in our preparation that love clarifies our thoughts – and the Spirit then prompts us to share a particular scripture or story, and to ask a particular question. Nothing said here is intended to undermine the importance of our preparation – but instead to expand what it involves. We aren't trying only to teach a content; we are trying to help a person stay interested and engaged on a journey!



5. THE IMPORTANCE OF MEASURABLE RESULTS

Christian churches have often downplayed the importance of measurable results in outreach and discipleship.

There is a truth that sits behind this scepticism. While we're responsible to share the gospel with others as Christians, we are not responsible for another person's response. It is therefore true that results aren't the only measure.

However, they are still one measure – and a very important one. We might otherwise be in danger of neglecting a balancing truth: *Namely, that we might be terrible communicators!*

If we focus too much on the fact that we are not responsible for a person's response, we might fail to see how we might improve.

Personal story

When a pastor, I had freedom to establish an intentional disciple-making approach in one sector of a larger church. This included just over 20 small groups. As a habit, I required that all groups spend their first week's discussion each year prayerfully setting personal goals in about eight different areas of life. (If a person only had goals in three of those areas, that was fine.)

With their group members' various goals in hand, the group leader could then plan their weekly activities / discussions with awareness of their members' various goals. They could concurrently make notes in their own planning calendar to encourage their members at relevant times. For example, they might make a note to encouraging someone who's goal was to run a particular 10km run in August to start their training in April. In August they might encourage someone wanting to strengthen their marriage to attend a Marriage Course run in the church in September, etc. The discipling of annual goal setting empowered the INTENTIONALITY of the leader – which helped the members to *measurably and observably grow!* *The discipline of annual goal setting empowers the INTENTIONALITY of the leader – which can result in the members to measurably and observably grow!*

Revision of the goals mid-year annually enabled the revitalising of these goals in the members' lives.

Now, consider the result of the above approach to ministry – as one picture.

At the end of each year, it was possible to have measurable changes and growth in nearly every members life and often in multiple areas.

This approach also generated continuous testimonies – because we had well-over 200 people who could attest to the fact that they had grown or changed. These were like fuel to the ministry, both building and sustaining momentum.

This is the thinking of an 'intentional disciple-maker'. It is a paradigm of leadership. (This article has primarily focused on one-on-one disciple-making. For more on intentionality in small groups see 3 video-teachings at <https://AllTogether.co.nz/small-groups>)

Embracing a new paradigm is like first riding a bicycle. It can feel awkward and 'programmatic' at the start. However, once the principles and dynamics are caught, it can be done with very little thought required!

In summary of 'an intentional disciple-making culture'

To end where we began: The key dynamic of discipleship is contained in the word "intentionality". If anything is gained from this topical update, we pray it would be a revelation regarding just how true this prior statement is. It is a paradigm of leadership – and it yields fruit!

- What could you take from this topical update to apply?
- What could you take from it to teach to others?
- How might you build an intentional disciple-making culture in your church – to see multiple members becoming engaged with greater intentionality?

We hope this helps

