

REAL-LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

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*Building
Churches
That Make
Disciples*

JIM PUTMAN

NavPress 

A NavPress resource published in alliance
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Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples

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ISBN 979-8-89802-029-3

Printed in the United States of America

31 30 29 28 27 26 25
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my parents, who taught me what discipleship looks like.

To my wife and children, who have journeyed with me through all my stages of growth spiritually and my lapses back to childhood.

To the Real Life family and team, God has brought us together for our part of the mission to be a spiritual family who enjoys the mission and journey together. What a ride and what a blessing.

INTRODUCTION

I was in a grocery store the other day, and it happened again: an all-too-familiar discussion. Standing next to me in the dairy section was a man with a Bible college and seminary degree and years of ministry experience as a counselor. When I asked him where he was going to church, he answered, “Nowhere really.”

When I asked him why not, he said he was tired of the organized church. He was unconnected, searching, disillusioned. Like many I have talked with, this believer loved Jesus and the Word, but he had lost faith in what he called organized religion. He longed for relationships and purpose inside of a local body of believers who valued biblical theology, but he had lost faith that such a church was possible to find. Oh, he had started his ministry journey as so many believers do: idealistic, full of zeal and confidence. God was going to change the world through him and through the church he would help to lead.

Then he accepted a leadership position in a church.

There he found little intentionality and passion, mostly just people failing to get along. He saw hurting, lonely people in the congregation and in the staff—especially the staff. He saw a semi-organized church that had become an internal political nightmare with little life inside its walls. Few came to know Jesus there.

What had made matters worse was that most of the people this counselor saw in his practice were Christians, many of them pastors. Most were a mess, yet on Sunday morning—in public—they acted

as if things in their lives were great. But this man knew better. These same people had been in his office the week before. It all seemed wrong. He didn't expect Christians to be perfect, just real. Changed. He no longer wanted any part of a local church. He figured there had to be something else besides what the church had become. His solution was to become organic—just get together with a few believing friends and shy away from anything that looked as if it had been planned or designed “by men,” as he said it.

But as I listened to him, I became convinced that he had made a mistake in his calculations. Granted, his assessment of the American evangelical church today was on target in many respects. There is often too little life in many of our churches. Christians do put on masks, hiding and pretending they are okay when they are not. They fight over the color of the carpet or their musical preferences. The ministry life of many churches is dominated by committee meetings and worship services and counseling sessions, but in many cases these produce little lasting fruit. Our churches make few converts. Few Christians have authentic, accountable relationships, and many are not growing in their faith. Few give, few serve in the church, and most live for the same things that nonbelievers do. When asked, most Christians say they don't experience God when they go to church. Godly leaders are getting harder and harder to find. I know of church planting organizations and congregations who have set aside the money to plant five new churches, but they can't find any qualified, capable leaders to plant the churches, so the money sits unused.

Sadly, we are making a mess of what God intended the church to be.

While many churches acknowledge that they are in trouble, they too frequently come up with the wrong solutions. Some are chasing fads. Others are asking how to modernize biblical words, worship services, or even our theology so it will be more to the liking of the potential consumers. I believe that in the end, all these solutions will only end up dooming the church to the steady decline it is already on. Don't get me wrong: I am not against using words that people can

understand or having music that appeals to a younger crowd. However, whenever we stray from God's Word, we will not have God's blessing, and without that blessing, the forces of hell *will* prevail against the church (see Matthew 16:18). Jesus said that the gates of hell will not prevail against *His* church; He did not say *any* church. If the church is no longer His church, it has no protection from the Enemy. It cannot crash through the walls that protect the lost from the light. Walking away from the church is not an option either, particularly if we want to be a part of the Lord's plan to rescue the world. The church is God's idea, and we must seek to restore it to its purpose and blessing. Rather than swing the pendulum too far, let's get back to basics.

Although I can see the same problems my counselor friend sees, I believe he has misdiagnosed the cause of the problems. The problem is not organization. Why do I think he is wrong about this? Because as I look at Scripture, I see organization everywhere. For example, Jethro advised his son-in-law Moses to organize the Israelites into subgroups so that Moses would not work himself to death (see Exodus 18). In the New Testament, Paul lists administration as a specific gift given by the Holy Spirit so that there could be order in the church (see 1 Corinthians 12:28). An elder's job was to make sure that the church body functioned in an orderly, God-glorifying way.

Organization itself is not the problem. And because organization is not the problem, moving to an unorganized church model will not be the solution. So where did the church go wrong, and what is the solution if not the trend toward the "organic" church movement?

The solution, I believe, is to create a clear and uncomplicated way to train disciples to make disciples. In this book, I am going to focus on what should happen in the life of every Christian and in every small group within the church so that the organized church is all that God intended it to be: an army of believers who understand they are on mission with Jesus to see the world saved from eternal separation from our heavenly Father. At Real Life Ministries, our overriding goal is to train disciples who know how to disciple others. In our church, everyday

Christians do the work of disciple-making and fill the majority of our staff positions. We are able to reach the lost in our area because everyone in our congregation plays a part in the church's mission. The people are encouraged and equipped to do so by their leaders.

I wrote this book in order to show how Real Life Ministries makes and trains disciples. My goal is not to shove our specific methodology or wording down anyone's throat. However, there are principles that can be gleaned from the Word that work in any context or culture. I say this because God knew what He was doing when He created His team, the church. You might need to take the principles and then reshape the wording or the application to fit your context and culture; in fact, I suggest you do so. Your team is unique, and so is your place of service. You may need to use different ways of explaining these principles, and you certainly need to develop your plans with the team God has given you.

It is my goal to share with you how at Real Life we seek to make our church a place where real relationships, real authenticity, real teaching, and thus real discipleship can happen. Rather than throw organization out the window, we built a reproducible discipleship process into everything we do. Much of the purposes and structure of our church were outlined in my first book, *Church as a Team Sport*. Therefore, in this book, I want to explain the process we use to teach every believer in our congregation how to be a disciple who discipless others. This process gives our people a way to clearly see where they are on their own discipleship journey, and it helps our leadership team clearly see if we are effectively training disciples who can disciple others.

Our church does not have all the answers, and we have made many mistakes along the way. But what we have experienced in the past eleven years is so exciting, so fulfilling, so opposite of what my counselor friend experienced in the churches he attended that we can't help but share the story of what God is doing here in Post Falls, Idaho.

Come along beside us and let me tell you what He is teaching our church about making and training disciples.

*To learn more about Real Life Ministries, how it was founded,
and how the people involved live out discipleship,
go to thestoryofreallife.com.*

A MESSAGE TO THOSE NOT ON A CHURCH STAFF

If you picked up this book but are not on a church staff, there is still much you can benefit from. Discipleship is every believer's privilege and responsibility. It is my hope that this book will give you a vision for how Jesus intended to win the world one person at a time and for how He wants to use you to bring change in the lives of people you know. It is my prayer that you will decide it is *your* privilege and responsibility to make disciples, even if your church is not focused on making and training disciples. It is also my hope that you not leave your church unless it is teaching heresy as it pertains to essential doctrine. (If that is the case, you should have already left!) Even if the church is dressed in shopworn clothes and seems somewhat disheveled, she remains the bride of Christ. Don't abandon her. Continue to meet in your church's large gatherings and participate in its ministries, but also do become a disciple who in turn makes disciples. It is my great hope that you will decide to lead a small group and that you will begin to intentionally, relationally, and strategically disciple others.

*You can find additional tools and resources at
reallifediscipleship.com.*

Part 1

SETTING THE STAGE FOR DISCIPLESHIP

HOW DO WE CREATE CHURCHES THAT SUCCEED?

Real Life Ministries began eleven years ago when two couples met in one of their homes and began to pray that God would work in and through them to bring a disciple-making church to a sparsely populated area in northern Idaho. The Pacific Northwest is not an easy place to start a new church. Far away from the Bible Belt, we have a large number of people who either have never been inside a church or never want to go back.

This little group loved the Lord and longed for something more than the church experiences of their past. Church as they had known it was missing something. They determined to pray that a mighty work of God would begin with them. Over the next weeks, new families joined them, and the little band grew. They sensed God was at work in their lives and in their fledgling church, but they also had no idea what the future would look like.

Today those of us involved in the early days of Real Life stand in awe of what God has done. Our little band has grown to 8,500 strong. We have watched more than four thousand conversions and baptisms. More than seven thousand people participate in small groups. Not too long ago, most of the leaders of these small groups were either non-believers or unengaged Christians sitting on a church pew. Several of our members now serve as international missionaries, and a few have started six new churches, with thousands already in attendance. The little band that started out so small in the corner of Idaho is now training churches all over the world.

When you read our story, you might think that we were incredibly fortunate to plant a church in a place where there were so many gifted and trained leaders to make it all happen. When visitors come to see what God is doing here and see our team at work, they often say, “If we had the kind of people that you have in Post Falls, God could do great things through us, too.” At this point in the conversation, I love to share the story about our ninety-plus staff members—who they used to be and what they used to do. In our church’s administrative structure, we have seven key leaders who work under an executive pastor, who in turn works under me, the senior pastor. Only two of the seven worked in any church before they became pastors at Real Life. The rest started as volunteer leaders, later took on lower-level jobs within our church, and are now leading a movement that is stretching across the globe. There was a time that no church would have hired these individuals (or for that matter most anyone else on our staff, including me) for a significant ministry position because of their lack of formal training or because of their past issues. Now there isn’t a month that goes by that someone isn’t trying to take a staff member away from us.

In *Church as a Team Sport*, I said the difference between a high school coach and a college coach is that a college coach travels all over the country seeking proven athletes but that a high school coach has to identify and develop his own players. He knows he must start with the little kids who feed into the junior high program, as they will eventually be part of the high school program. Most pastors today use the college-recruiting model in order to fill staff positions at their churches: They hire people from seminaries, Bible colleges, or other churches rather than develop a team from within their own ministry. Churches even hire professional recruitment firms when they look for pastors. Every time a church hires from the outside, it reinforces to its people that they cannot become what is needed for their own church to succeed.

I am not against hiring from outside the church. We have done such hiring ourselves. But I am passionately committed to discipleship

within the church, and I am just as passionate in my conviction that when done right, discipleship will produce the leaders every church needs to succeed. God has placed leaders *within* every church because He cares for the people the church needs to reach. These leaders often sit in the pews, waiting to be developed, to be released into ministry, but often they never are. Our churches are filled with diamonds in the rough, and when pastors and church leaders begin to take seriously our mandate to disciple our people, these leaders will emerge.

So why don't most American churches tap into the hidden talent buried on their benches? I believe it is because they do not focus on making and training disciples. They spend so much time putting on a show that they do not have the time to know or invest in their people. Perhaps they might think they are making disciples because their show (large group events, weekend services) are really good, but discipleship is so much more than gathering a crowd and wowing them with amazing videos or good music or even good preaching. I am not against a good worship service; it plays a part in the process, but by itself it does not make disciples. Yes, Jesus gathered a crowd and preached inspiring messages, but He went much further. He cared very much about the gospel message that would be delivered but cared just as much about the process of making messengers who could deliver the gospel message accurately.

WHY DISCIPLE?

Jesus made it very clear what His church should do:

Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

Notice that Jesus says that all authority belongs to Him. He is Lord. As believers and as a church, we recognize His leadership. He is in charge; we are His followers. As Christians, we exist for His glory and for His purposes. In this passage, He has given us a sacred mission: to go and make disciples. Two things come to mind when I think of this command. First, many pastors and Bible college professors have propagated the idea that this mission is given to only those trained in a seminary or Bible college. However, according to this command, it is the job of *every* believer to make disciples. The church is supposed to equip its people (every person) to be an army released on its community. Second, this command calls us to make disciples and not converts, and there is a big difference (more on this later).

The discipleship process Jesus modeled was essential to His plan to reach the world. In John 17:3-4, Jesus said, "This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do." It is not surprising to me *that* Jesus made this claim that His work was finished; it is *when* He said it that is worth commenting on. In this passage, Jesus claims that His work was done, even though He had not yet gone to the Cross. As believers we know that His primary purpose for coming to earth was to pay for the sins of all who would accept His grace through faith. The Cross is clearly central to His mission. However, this passage reveals something else. Jesus is praying to the Father before the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. He says here that He has finished something. Finished what? I believe He was talking about having finished the training of His twelve disciples. He was ready to release them into the world to make disciples themselves.

Too often Christians focus rightly on the gospel message of the Cross but forget about the discipleship process Jesus revealed and modeled. Again, He came not only to die but also to give us a model for disciple-making that trains Christians so they can accurately represent Him and deliver His message to the world. If Jesus had not trained disciples who could in turn train others, the gospel message would

have been lost. No one would have heard about it after the disciples were dead.

You might be thinking, *But we have the Word of God.* While that is true, think about it. How did we get the Gospels? From the apostles, Jesus' disciples. Or maybe you are thinking, *Well, after the apostles wrote the Word, the Holy Spirit takes it from there. The Spirit and the written Word work together to reach the world.* But if that is all it takes to reach the world, why did Jesus tell us to go and make disciples? And why did Paul say to train up reliable people who would teach others? Clearly, mature believers play a part in parenting spiritual children to know Jesus, and mature believers also play a part in training future disciples who will go on to train others.

Discipleship is so much more than just sharing the news about Jesus; it is also about teaching people to obey the commands Jesus gave us. Unfortunately, many churches have not taken this charge seriously, and they are experiencing significant problems. This whole issue of discipleship is critical if we want to save the church from the Sunday-morning show and make it a place where real relationship and real change takes place.

NO PLAN B

Many Christians believe that they are unimportant to the cause of Christ and that the work of the church is the job of the clergy. So when I ask Christians why they have never served in the church, they often say, "Because I didn't think I could." Yet the Bible clearly states that all believers have been given the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 6:19) and that we are all part of the priesthood of believers (see 1 Peter 2:5). We are all saved by grace through faith for good works, which God planned for us before time began (see Ephesians 2:8).

Matthew 16:18 makes it clear that Jesus intended to create a team: "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (ESV). The church is God's team.

Those on His team work together under His direction to accomplish the goal of taking light to a dark planet. We are saved and placed onto God's team to do the part He gifted us to do in the context of the team (see Romans 12:4-8). Again, we are all given abilities to edify and help the team be all it is supposed to be (see 1 Peter 4:10-11). These abilities are not for our own glory but for God's. Some might feel they have no real abilities to contribute to the team, but that isn't true. Paul says that everyone is important and everyone plays a role (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

Tragically, most believers do not know or do not accept that we are God's Plan A for reaching the world and that there is no Plan B. Too often our idea of being on a mission with God (if we think that is even our job) is inviting our unbelieving friends and family to church so the pastor can convince them to accept Christ. If we believe that these new converts should be taught at all, we certainly don't think we are qualified to teach them. We have no idea that conversion is just the beginning of a spiritual growth process and that what comes next—discipleship—will determine if a person matures spiritually to a stage where that disciple experiences real change that others will notice.

Because of this view of Christianity, most believers are not equipped to do more than attend church. Most have few unbelieving friends because they've moved away from folks who don't know Christ and entered into relationships with other Christians. Those who still have unbelieving friends often don't know enough theology to answer the spiritual questions their non-Christian friends might ask. Why is this the case? Once again, I believe it is because most Christians were not disciplined properly. Maybe they heard a sermon about discipleship once or attended a Sunday school class, but making disciples takes much more than listening to a lecture and knowing right theology. Discipleship requires real teaching and real learning. It requires conversation, modeling, encouragement, debriefing, and practice, all of which need to happen in the context of relationship. Without relationship between believers, there is no model to follow, no authenticity, no accountability, no application, and no support for the journey. These things come through personal contact. And

because that relational context for learning is lacking, life change is much rarer than it should be among Christians today.

Many believers who do share their faith are spiritually immature, self-absorbed, or unwise in how they relate to the lost. As a group, Christians are known more for what we are against than for our love. As a result of our spiritual immaturity, unbelievers don't want what we have, which is understandable. If we are spiritually immature and act like spiritual brats, why would unbelievers want to hang out with us in the church? They can find enough drama in their own lives without joining our drama-filled buildings on the weekends.

When a church spends most of its time and energy putting on a weekly show, the pastor is too busy to create a system by which people are being disciplined. This behavior reveals that the leaders have a player mentality rather than a coaching mindset. Consequently, Christians with gifts that the church needs, such as leadership, end up taking their abilities into the business or sports world because the church is not training and using them. If making biblical disciples is the business of the church, and business is good, every need of the church will be met. When we disciple our people, leaders naturally develop and emerge.

At this point you might be thinking, *I thought he wasn't for the organic church movement.* I say to you that I am not against an organized worship service done well (the show); I am against a worship service only. A worship service (show) can supplement the discipleship process, but it cannot create disciples alone. Discipleship demands intentionality and relationship—by which each person is invested in specifically. This cannot happen in the worship service.

It is my hope that every church will return to the model of discipleship found in the New Testament. The good news is that these problems can be remedied by getting back to a proper understanding and the practice of biblical discipleship.

*To learn more about discipleship at Real Life Ministries,
go to thestoryofreallife.com.*