



Discipleship revolution: AVERY WILLIS' LAST DREAM

Lisa Sells

Dr. Avery T. Willis, Jr. (1934-2010) viewed discipleship through the eyes of a missionary. He was president of a seminary in Indonesia during the 1970s when a work of the Holy Spirit among the Indonesian missionaries led them to train leaders to go out to the villages and do “theological education by extension” rather than bringing potential pastors back to the seminary. Inspired by the discipling he had received from Navigator Skip Gray, Avery developed the discipling materials for this work.

Upon returning to the U.S., Avery went to work for the Southern Baptist Convention (and the publisher that eventually became Life Way Christian Resources) with a missionary’s heart burdened for the American church. He wrote and published *MasterLife* from the discipleship material he had developed in Indonesia. *MasterLife* has been used in more than 100 countries and published in more than 50 languages. That alone would be enough to define a career.

But there would be more.... Later, Avery worked to develop and promote Henry Blackaby’s *Experiencing God*—a great example of Avery’s keen eye for seeing where God was at work in someone’s life and ministry and helping bring that ministry to the forefront of the kingdom. Avery would eventually return to the Southern Baptist International Mission Board as a



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To discuss this article with me and others related to RLM and DNA21, join us at the new interactive MF website: MissionFrontiers.org—Lisa

senior vice-president to lead the strategy and work of 5,500 missionaries, a role he would fill for 10 years.

The Discipleship Revolution

In 2009, on a pleasant, summer day in Colorado Springs, this “retired” pastor, missionary, author, and mission agency executive was in meetings at the Navigator’s Glen Eyrie, working on his latest projects. He sat across from me at a restaurant, eating breakfast while happily spinning off rapid-fire ideas about multiple subjects. He was in Colorado because God had given him another vision: a vision he came to call DNA21: A Discipleship Revolution.¹

WHAT AVERY DID AS A MISSIONARY IN INDONESIA, IN THE PROLIFERATION OF *MASTERLIFE*, AND THROUGH HIS OVERSEAS LEADERSHIP WITH THE IMB PALES IN COMPARISON TO THE GLOBAL IMPACT [HE] MADE IN BECOMING AN ADVOCATE AND LEADER OF ORALITY STRATEGIES. — JERRY RANKIN

Avery talked energetically about his vision to see 21st-century churches and disciples making disciples the way Jesus did in the first century, enhanced with all the tools and technology of our era. Over the next months he would develop this idea further. He envisioned a rapid revitalization and multiplication of churches, focused on the Great Commission mandate of making disciples. As he saw this revolution, the Word of God applied by the Holy Spirit represents the DNA “double helix” upon which discipleship is built from four basic components:

- small group transparency,
- intentional discipling,
- Bible storytelling, and
- multiplication.

As he talked that morning about discipleship, the American church, missions—and the significance

of Bible Storytelling for all of them—neither of us would have guessed that the projects that had brought him to Colorado Springs would be the last great effort he would throw himself into this side of glory. That particular morning, he was simply laying the groundwork for what he passionately hoped would be a sea change in the way the American church did discipleship. It was a change he earnestly felt was needed to keep the American church from falling under the judgment of God.

Developing Discipleship for Oral Learners

This turn toward the American church was a shift in Avery's recent focus. After his retirement from the SBC International Mission Board, he had thrown his heart and his untiring efforts into the International Orality Network (ION). At the

IMB he had interacted with missionaries around the world and had observed that the most unreached peoples also had the least access to the Bible as well as the strongest oral learning traditions. In fact, oral learners make up 70% of the world's unreached people groups. These people, even if there is a written Bible in their language, prefer to learn by oral methods.

Jerry Rankin, recently retired president of the IMB, writes,

Some field workers had developed chronological Bible stories as a method of evangelical witness among these peoples, but no one had found a way to disciple them, train leaders and plant churches without literacy tools. Avery took this gap in global evangelization as a personal challenge and devoted himself to work with others in developing an orality strategy. What Avery did as a missionary in Indonesia, in the proliferation of MasterLife, and through his overseas leadership with the IMB, pales in comparison to the global impact [he] made in becoming an advocate and leader of orality strategies.²

Real Life Ministries

But that morning in Colorado our talk was not about the use of Bible Storytelling in unreached people groups. Instead, we talked about the use of Bible Storytelling in one of the United States fastest-growing churches. In 1998, two families in Post Falls, Idaho had convinced Jim Putman and his family to help them plant a church. He joined them, and Real Life Ministries (RLM) took off.

Avery met Jim Putman at a Finishing The Task conference, where he overheard Jim talking energetically with Brandon Guindon, RLM's executive pastor. They were disagreeing strongly with a conference speaker's assertion that the American Church was dying and should focus on casting her seed to the nations. Avery joined their conversation and was intrigued by what was happening at their church.

Weekend services draw 8,500 to this small town of 26,000, but that's not the most exciting part of their story. About 6,400 of RLM's members meet weekly in 600 small groups where they are intentionally

discipled by trained leaders to become reproducing disciples. Small group members commonly "do life together" outside their weekly meetings, strengthening relationships and connections throughout this church body.

And most of the "shepherding" in this large congregation is done by these small group leaders under the coaching of a large network of community pastors who were drawn from group leaders who showed leadership gifting. It is a church where disciples are made and leaders are developed.

RLM's impact isn't limited to spiritual matters. More than 400 attend weekly recovery programs through the church, and RLM is financially the largest provider of services in the county—bigger than the government. As a result, the community was very supportive when RLM sought its second building permit.

Additionally, several members have relocated to start other churches using the same model, and some of

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these churches have also grown rapidly to disciple thousands of members in small groups. And their church discipleship model is bearing similar fruit in Ethiopia and Mexico, and drawing interest from non-English-speaking sub-populations in the U.S.

Making Disciples Who Make Disciples

Post Falls doesn't readily fit the profile for a place to establish a successful church plant. The largely unchurched Pacific Northwest is not an easy demographic to win over, and this city is strikingly blue-collar and non-urban. But from its inception, Real Life Ministries built into its DNA key principles to make it a church where real life transformation consistently happens. Among its distinctives:

1. Understand that Jesus gave the church just one game plan: make disciples who can make disciples. Measure everything by this discipling yardstick. If we make disciples who make disciples, our church will succeed.
2. Make the definition of disciple clear and central.
3. Follow the model Jesus used when he made disciples: be an intentional leader, disciple in a relational environment, and use a reproducible process.

With these core principles, even in a place where church-planting success was not a given, Real Life Ministries has flourished. Avery went to see firsthand what God was doing and found a church that was discipling people in a way that was church-based, relational, and incredibly effective. They had built a church that was succeeding at the most important level of doing church: they were making disciples who were able to make disciples.

Unlike many other models of discipleship, the RLM model is not based on a fixed core of knowledge. Instead, it uses a simple grid for helping believers learn where they are in the spiritual growth process, as well as where others are. This grid helps disciples see how to move people along in the spiritual growth process. Their model also emphasizes relationship: do life with people, learn where they are in their spiritual growth, and develop an individual plan to move each person forward.

RLM uses readily understandable biblical stages: spiritually dead, infants, children, young adults, and parents. The inspired linkage of understanding these stages with a practical process for moving a disciple from one stage to another gives disciple makers a common language and understanding for how to disciple someone at each stage. The Share, Connect, Minister, and Disciple (SCMD)

grid overlays the stages of spiritual growth and provides a road map for the disciple-maker.

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Getting Everyone in the Game

Putman was a wrestler and a coach before he became a pastor, so it is no surprise that the church discipleship model his team developed is based on insights gained from coaching—a model that insists every disciple be a coach, coming alongside the people in his or her sphere of influence and moving them off the bench and into the game. Though RLM has indeed drawn a crowd, it operates from the conviction that the Sunday morning worship service is only a gateway for getting people into small groups where discipleship can start, with the intention of discipling relationships extending outside the small group time. Thus, they give relatively little energy to what Putman calls the “Sunday morning show.” Small groups, with intentional leaders trained to make disciples, are at the core of their church program.



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Besides providing an effective church-based model for discipleship, RLM's model offers a way for pastors to get their life back. Many American churches focus their energies on attracting both visitors and members to weekend services so the pastor can minister to them. In that context the pastor is expected to both nurture the mature and win the lost through a one-way monologue. Then through the week the pastor is expected to satisfy member needs for personal love and concern.

In this model of church, members are urged to be active (in church and outreach), but given little or no coaching to make disciples. The result is often a membership that watches the pastor try to do all the ministry as well as a pastor that is overextended and skating on the edge of burnout. Meanwhile, more mature members drift off in search of some place to be more useful (which all too often means using their gifts and talents outside the church).

Many churches employ small groups primarily to "close the back door" by tying new members into relationships when they come into the church through the Sunday services. RLM uses their small groups as a "front door" through which members intentionally and effectively draw unsaved family, friends and neighbors to faith in Christ. These groups assist in providing spiritual parenting for these new believers. There have been periods in RLM's history when they have had more people in their small groups than they had attending their worship services.

Rather than being overwhelmed with individual member care needs of a large and growing congregation, RLM's senior pastoral staff spends time developing and strengthening a system for making leaders who can disciple others, finds time for personal relationships and recreation, and gives time to other churches who want to learn from their model. All of these pieces of the RLM story were already in place when Avery met the RLM team.



Real Life Ministries campus, Post Falls, Idaho

RLM'S DISCIPLESHIP MODEL OFFERS A WAY FOR PASTORS TO GET THEIR LIFE BACK.

Effective Discipleship Meets Bible Storytelling

As Avery continued developing a relationship with RLM's leadership, he naturally talked about oral learners, pointing out that our own Western culture is filled with people who prefer to learn orally. He was a vocal proponent of storytelling: "God wired us for stories. We like stories. We remember stories. They penetrate beyond our heads and get down into our hearts." He

told Putman that the American culture was becoming more oral in learning style and that he was afraid the American church was going to be left behind.

The more Avery talked about Bible Storytelling, the more intrigued the RLM leadership team became. After a couple of years of discussion, they decided to try Bible Storytelling in a few small groups.

The experiment was so successful that they trained all their pastors, community pastors, and small group leaders to use Bible Storytelling. Some were reluctant at

first, but soon found that Bible Storytelling...

- helps people learn the Bible,
- makes it easier to recruit small group leaders,
- facilitates real learning,
- equips members for ministry,
- empowers parents to disciple their kids,
- helps small group leaders understand the spiritual needs of those they are discipling,
- keeps small groups from becoming boring, and
- encourages transparency and real relationships.

Serving the Discipleship Revolution

A steady stream of people from around the U.S. now trek to the church's campus to see what God is doing there and to learn about their church-based model for making disciples. So many, in fact, that the RLM staff was overwhelmed. In response they have

distilled a two-day *Immersion*³ for anyone who wants to experience their model. As part of their service to the Kingdom, *Immersion* is hosted monthly at roughly the cost RLM incurs to host it. Attendance is capped at 70–90 people per session. It is always full. RLM also hosts a “boot camp” for church planters and other opportunities for those wanting to learn from this proven model of church-based discipleship.⁴

Avery spent the last months of his life actively promoting Real Life Ministries as a working model of his vision for the “Discipleship Revolution,” but found it difficult to draw attention as so many leaders thought they already knew what he had to say about discipleship and Bible Storytelling.

The Cost of Non-Discipleship

The leukemia with which Avery was diagnosed near Christmas 2009 gave him new insight into a disease that plagues too many churches today. Avery wrote,

What happens in leukemia is an abnormal development of the DNA in the body, so that the body produces large numbers of immature cells that do not fulfill their design function. I think that is almost a direct parallel to the church today.

We produce a lot of members but they are not carrying out their functions because we have an overabundance of underdeveloped, abnormal cells.

With two millennia of build-up in its structure, the church has accumulated much unhealthy DNA.

If he were here today, Avery would urge all of us to join this discipleship revolution, to restore the healthy DNA of the early Church. He firmly believed that the American Church needs to change—has to change, really, for her own sake as well as for the sake of the Kingdom. When Frank Decker of *The Mission Society* experienced RLM’s *Immersion*, he said,

What RLM is doing is a good example of what we seek to teach our missionaries to do. A major challenge we face is that American Chris-

tians who apply for service as missionaries have rarely experienced this level of intentional discipleship in their home church.

Jim Putman and Real Life Ministries are relentless about one message: Sitting in a pew watching the paid staff put on a Sunday morning show is all too often the American view of discipleship; this view is not biblical, and it is killing the Church. Their experience in Post Falls is an encouraging demonstration that it doesn’t have to be that way.

A Lasting Legacy

Years ago in Indonesia, Avery understood the need for missionaries to effectively disciple people on the edges of the expanding Kingdom. Leveraging RLM’s working

model and working in partnership with them, Avery’s son Brett and other colleagues of Avery continue to serve a DNA21 discipleship revolution.⁵ This is a fitting last chapter to Avery Willis’ long and fruitful career. It is possibly his most important legacy.⁶ 



Avery and Shirley Willis, with the church they attended in Indonesia in the 1970s. (Photo Courtesy of IMB)

1 Two books came out of this week’s meetings in Colorado Springs between Avery, Jim Putman and Bill Krause, RLM’s family life minister: *Real Life Discipleship* by Jim Putman, and *Real Life Discipleship Training Manual* by Putman, Willis, Guindon, & Krause. In 2009 Avery co-wrote *Learning to Soar* with his grandson Matt Willis. Before his death in July 2010, Avery also managed to finish a book about the use of Bible Storytelling to make disciples: *Truth that Sticks* by Avery Willis & Mark Snowden. All are published by NavPress.

2 rankinconnecting.com/2010/08/tribute-to-avery-willis

3 reallifeministries.com/immersion-one. Note the 20-minute audio interview of Jim Putman at this link, describing RLM’s discipleship model. Also see navpress.com/dna21platt and navpress.com/dna21putman for 50-minute videos of Jim Putman and David Platt, recorded at a special *Immersion* that Avery Willis arranged at The Navigator headquarters in August 2010.

4 reallifeministries.com/association

5 For more information on DNA21, contact Brett Willis at: brettwillis1@gmail.com.

6 For other helpful resources developed by Avery Willis, visit learningtosoar.org and averywillis.org.