

EDITORIAL COMMENT



A Discipleship Revolution: The Key to Discipling all Peoples

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In the 2000 years since Jesus came to Earth we have made great strides in technology. Our ability to communicate the gospel to huge numbers of people all over the planet has never been greater. We have a greater wealth of resources than ever before for proclaiming the gospel to every person, tribe and tongue. Yet many unreached peoples still await a fair opportunity to know and follow Jesus. At the same time the Church in the West is at best stalled. In Europe the Church is in serious decline. We are forced to ask ourselves, "Have we missed something? What is keeping us from making the progress we would all like to see?"

For 32 years now *Mission Frontiers* has been identifying the systemic problems and obstacles that hinder us from bringing the gospel to every tribe and tongue. We have sought to highlight the mission strategies that can help us overcome the obstacles and bring the love of Christ to every person regardless of their location, language or culture.

In this issue of *MF* we focus on one of the most troubling obstacles to world evangelization facing us today: the failure of the Church (especially in the West) to equip most followers of Jesus to reproduce their faith in the lives of others. The vast majority of Bible-believing followers of Jesus are not regularly sharing their faith nor investing their lives in helping to bring others to maturity in Christ. And those who are concerned about this don't seem to know what to do about it. We are not simply pointing fingers here. Both the guest editor for this issue and I are convicted that we need to figure out how to be more successful in this area ourselves.

Tom Nelson of Denton Bible Church in Texas wrote (see p. 21 of this issue),

If we as a church succeed in every area, but fail to make disciples who can spiritually multiply, then

ultimately we have failed. Yet if we fail in every other area, but succeed in spiritual multiplication, then ultimately we have succeeded.

Our churches in the West seem to be succeeding at lesser things while failing at Jesus' core strategy for world evangelization. We are succeeding in collecting tens of billions of dollars each year to gather large crowds into beautiful and expensive church buildings on Sunday. We have succeeded in putting on a great show and developing programs that attract people to our churches. In the process we have put an unbearable burden on our pastors to do nearly all the ministry while failing to activate the laity. As a result many pastors are skating on the edge of burnout, while the majority of church members do not see that God has any other role for them except as spectators.

In short, we are largely failing to develop mature followers of Jesus who are able to make disciples who can make disciples.

The people in our churches are not growing to spiritual maturity where they are able to carry on the work of spreading the gospel within our own culture, not to mention cross-culturally to every tribe and tongue. This is having a devastating impact on our ability to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The dirty little secret of missions is that we are sending missionaries all over the world who have not demonstrated the ability to make disciples who can make disciples. Most have not seen or participated in effective models of church-planting or discipleship at home, but we send them out in the hope that going cross-culturally will turn them into effective church planters and disciplers. This is wishful thinking at best, and it has to change.

We must learn from and refine effective biblical models of doing church

and discipleship, both at home and abroad, where the focus is on spiritual reproduction and multiplication of mature disciplers and discipleship teams. The often overlooked secret of Christian maturity is that we learn and grow the most when we are involved in sharing our faith and discipling others. Until believers have demonstrated their ability to produce reproducing disciples, we must provide mentoring and peer coaching aimed at helping them learn to succeed in this fundamental task as we deploy them into ministry here or abroad. Otherwise we are only sending people out to replicate a failed model of doing church. Overcoming this failure of the church to equip believers to make disciples who can make disciples is one of the most critical needs in the church today. What we need is a "Discipleship Revolution" that transforms the way we do church and mission, and vastly multiplies the number of disciplers who can disciple all peoples both near and far. This will require effective disciplers to go cross-culturally to every people to begin a discipleship movement within each people.

In this issue we present some foundational principles and models of discipler multiplication that have shown great promise for equipping people to make disciples who can make disciples. The *Discipleship Revolution* starts on page 6 with the story of Avery Willis and his last dream to change the way we do church. His dream has become reality in the discipleship model of Real Life Ministries. They are effectively transforming thousands of average Americans into *disciples who are making disciples*.

On page 17 of this issue, Jim Downing, a close friend of Navigators founder, Dawson Trotman, explains why he feels Real Life Ministries is the best model of

church-based discipleship he has seen in his 75 years of discipleship ministry: “Real Life Ministries has identified the stages of Christian growth, from *infancy* to *maturity*, and has innovated a plan and resource to meet the need at each stage of growth. They have mastered *spiritual parenting*.” See the chart on page 8 describing this process by which disciple-makers move people forward towards spiritual maturity. Real Life Ministries makes the personal fruitfulness of each person a priority, and has trained and equipped a large portion of their members to lead others in learning to be fruitful. With this model, spiritual growth is not a haphazard process but one that is deliberate and focused on maturity and spiritual reproduction. For more information on their monthly training in their model, go to RealLifeMinistries.com/immersion-one.

The good news is that all of us have the potential to become “reproducers.” On page 11 we present the incredible discipleship training model called T4T (Training for Trainers), which started just ten years ago from the passionate dream of one church-planting couple to reach a people of 20 million. To date T4T has baptized *1.7 million people*. And this model has proven its reproducibility in a dozen similar movements it has stirred and informed.

The models we present in this issue demonstrate that all of us have the potential to become disciple-makers and to have multiple generations of spiritual descendants. We just need the conviction that this is God’s will, and the determination to learn together how to do it.

Simply working harder at the current model of church will not succeed in bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth. God’s strategy for fulfilling the Great Commission requires reproducing disciples.

Why Not Use the Model Jesus Gave Us?

Jesus preached to crowds, but didn’t leave the fruit to rot. He balanced public ministry with roughly equal attention to the development of 12 individuals, rather than simply attracting larger crowds. During the latter part of his ministry, He withdrew increasingly from public proclamation to change the lives of 12 men. Eleven of them would go on to change the world, even without modern technology. Jesus was intentionally relational in discipling the Twelve. He shared His life with them and used stories and parables to embed the truths of His Kingdom in their hearts. His focus was not on simply communicating a message or filling their heads with knowledge, but on guiding them to maturity as spiritual reproducers. That should be the focus of our churches today as well.

We will never bring the gospel to every tribe and tongue if we continue to rely on professional clergy to do “discipling” as a transfer of knowledge. As followers of Jesus, we must all aim to become disciples who can follow Jesus’ example in making disciples. None of us is excused from active duty in the service of our King.

A Special Note:

I want to extend a special word of thanks to our Guest Editor, Robby Butler, for all of his help in putting this issue together. His efforts were invaluable to me as I have prepared for cornea transplant surgery. Your prayers for my recovery would be appreciated. Also please take note of our greatly expanded website with many new features that will allow you to interact with us more effectively. Come join the discussion, at missionfrontiers.org 

www.missionfrontiers.org

Race for Limited Treasure: A Free Book to A Few Alert MF Readers

In the last *MF* we arranged bulk discounts on three books for potential Christmas gifts. *MF* has once again worked out special deals for *MF* readers. This time the “early reader” gets the book.

Here’s how this offer works:

Four publishers, of four books mentioned in this *MF*, are offering a limited number (25-50 copies) of their books to *MF* readers in exchange for your pledge to publish a public review (Amazon or the blog of your choice) within two months.

Rules: Visit MissionFrontiers.org to learn about the titles currently offered and to submit your request. There you will

1. Indicate which book you would like.
2. Identify an article where this book is mentioned.
3. Include an indication of your sphere of influence (nothing required, we’re just curious).
4. Provide a link to a review you’ve published on another book (on Amazon or a blog). (Is it time to write a book review on which you’ve been procrastinating?)
5. Affirm your intention of posting a public review of the book within two months of receiving it. (Once you’ve posted your review, go to MissionFrontiers.org to send us the link and qualify for future offers.)
6. Note these hints for writing a helpful review:
 - Read a few positive and negative reviews of the same book on Amazon.
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 - Be honest about the book’s strengths and weaknesses.
 - Specify what audiences you believe will value the book.
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