

# JOINING THE Discipleship revolution

Robby Butler

*He who does the work is not so profitably employed as he who multiplies the doers. —John R. Mott (1865–1955)*

From the time Jesus selected the twelve, His continuing public ministry was filled with lessons for his disciples as He prepared them to produce future generations of disciplers.

In our urgency to complete the assignment He gave us, have we neglected the wisdom of following His method under the empowering of the Holy Spirit?

## Generations of Disciplers

In 1902 Andrew Murray widely publicized the observation that one discipler, winning one person to Christ each year and building them up to do the same in successive generations, would win the whole world in just 32 years.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950s, Navigator founder Dawson Trotman noted that, if this spiritual reproduction happened every six months, such generations of disciplers would win the whole world in just 16 years (see page 19).

## How do Generations of Disciplers Develop?

Jesus' strategy for revealing Himself to the whole world was through successive generations of disciplers. Rather than being consumed with meeting every need He could in His own generation, He foresaw that the greatest fruit for all generations would come from the faithful spiritual reproduction of the small community He was discipling.

Jesus did not simply use the twelve as assistants to service ever-increasing crowds. Mk 3:14–15 tells us that He chose them “that they might be with Him,” “that He might send them out to preach,” and “to have authority to drive out demons.”

Neither did Jesus focus solely on:

- bringing the twelve to maturity,
- giving them deeper understanding, or
- teaching them to love Him and one another.

From the outset they understood that they were also in training to carry on a mission: “I will make you fishers of men” (Mt 4:19).

What I find fascinating is that Jesus didn't just pick individuals and disciple them in isolation from one another. He started with four friends—two sets of brothers—and built a community to practice and prove His teaching.

## “I Was Never Discipled”?

My friend Dave Browning leads a global network of churches which aim to stay small and simple so they can multiply.<sup>3</sup> A year ago, in discussing the need to be intentional in making disciples, I complained, “I was never discipled.” Reflecting on the insights I had already shared with him from Dr. Winter, Dave replied immediately, “It looks to me like you were discipled by Ralph Winter.”

Dave's reaction stirred me to realize that Dr. Winter's pattern of discipleship with peers around a task, was much richer than my superficial stereotype of discipleship as a weekly meeting focused on my own spiritual growth.

I had joined the U.S. Center for World Mission (USCWM) shortly before graduating from Caltech in 1980. During my 24 years at the USCWM, many people invested in me and I learned and grew through a wide variety of assignments and meetings. In working alongside Dr. Winter and others, I grew to love Jesus more deeply, pursue His Kingdom ahead of my own interests, and enlist others in discipling all

Discipleship Generations	
1	1
2	2
3	4
4	8
5	16
...	...
10	512
...	...
15	16,384
...	...
20	524,288
...	...
30	536,870,912
31	1,073,741,824
32	2,147,483,648
33	4,294,967,296
34	8,589,934,582

Light gray = range of est. Practicing Christians  
Dark gray = range of est. World Population<sup>1</sup>



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peoples. Eventually I wrote a booklet detailing 34 important lessons I learned under Dr. Winter's discipleship and modeling.<sup>4</sup>

### **"Hit and Run" Ministry**

At the USCWM, even after marrying and having children, I naively lived a self-induced, sleep-deprived scramble to take advantage of every opportunity to learn and serve. I remember misquoting Lk 10:2: "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few, **so we have to work extra hard to make up for what others aren't doing that they should be doing.**"

My first interest in alternate ministry models came when Dr. Winter described the USCWM as a "hit and run" ministry, typified by my own long-standing practice:

- Meet someone.
- Fill their available time with every insight and resource I thought could benefit them.
- Then part without expecting further contact.

This ministry model isn't bad, but it is very different from Jesus' use of passing ministry opportunities in His focus on developing the twelve into "fishers of men."

Dr. Winter's comment provoked me to wonder: **Is there a more fruitful way to minister than simply giving all I can to as many as possible?**

### **Slowing Down to Bear Greater Fruit**

When I first heard about the book *Margin*,<sup>5</sup> my reaction was "What heresy is this, to encourage laziness in discipling all nations?"

It wasn't until our third child was born with Down Syndrome that the Lord slowed me down enough to take a serious look at Dr. Swenson's work, and to repent from my own chronic busyness. Eventually I came to the conviction that I have an addiction to pursuing exciting opportunities ahead of taking care of basic responsibilities.

As a result I was often running ahead of God to do things He may have planned for others to do, misusing the resources He had entrusted to me, and missing out on "walking" with Him. I was also simply raising my kids, rather than discipling them.

As personnel director for the USCWM I led our staff through a discussion of *The Overload Syndrome*<sup>6</sup> and invited Dr. Swenson to speak at our annual staff conference. I concluded that God does not value our busyness, but desires instead our sensitivity and obedience to His voice.

Our "world" presses us to conform to productivity standards, but we can overcome this pressure by the

renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2), which frees us to work in God's leading under the empowering of His Holy Spirit.

Chronic busyness comes when we are ruled by expectations we place on ourselves and accept from others. This yoke invariably reduces our time in prayer and in God's Word to token offerings, unworthy of our King.

We will only escape by listening better, not by working harder. And we will only engage in discipling when we walk by faith (in God's wisdom and sovereignty) rather than sight (scrambling to meet all the needs we can see).

When by faith we consistently make adequate time in God's word and His presence we can then live out the reality that He is bigger than the needs and expectations pressing on us. As we focus on listening to and obeying Him, we rediscover the abundant life He promises, in which His yoke is easy and His burden light.

The cycle of chronic busyness can only be broken with God's help and the support of spouses and other relationships of mutual submission.

### **Rediscovering Our Role**

Occasional busyness is unavoidable, but chronic busyness is driven by a flawed view of God and our role in His purpose. This flawed view is often represented and reinforced in the way we challenge others to mission involvement, as we present God as having gotten Himself into a jam from which He needs our help to escape.

God is still able to make the rocks cry out in praise to Him; He is *NOT* wringing His hands, waiting for us to finally awaken to the fact that He needs our help.

God doesn't wait and engage us in His plan because He "needs" us, but for the same reason we enlist the "help" of our children: He enjoys our company and wants us to mature by working with Him in witnessing to and discipling others.

Andrew Murray's *The Key to the Missionary Problem*<sup>7</sup> offers a brilliant analysis of the missionary movement of 1900, how it was slipping toward busy reliance on human efforts, and what to do about this trend. His analysis is just as applicable to today's mission effort as when he wrote it, and we are fortunate that this small volume is back in circulation.

### **Discipleship Must be Reproducible**

Greg Ogden's *Transforming Discipleship*<sup>8</sup> further showed me that:

- Labeling a classroom presentation of basic doctrines "discipleship" doesn't make it discipleship. Discipleship must be reproducible by the recipients.

- We can intentionally structure our ministries to produce generations of disciples.
- And discipling others yields far greater long-term fruit than any other ministry.

### Finding an Effective U.S. Church Model

Jim Downing of the Navigators<sup>9</sup> taught me that information transfer alone is inadequate; guided experience is also necessary to impart the skills and motivation for disciples to reproduce.

Jim and I attended an experience in the church discipleship model developed by Real Life Ministries (RLM), a church in northern Idaho.<sup>10</sup> There we experienced firsthand what a useful tool Bible storytelling<sup>11</sup> can be in the right context, even here in the U.S.<sup>12</sup> Jim and I subsequently visited RLM's headquarters to learn more about their model.

RLM has a masterful structure for coaching small group leaders (spiritual parents) to multiply reproducing disciples. They have discovered the critical importance of engaging each member in growth to reproducing maturity, and of providing coaching (spiritual grandparenting) to those who are leading this process.

### Learning from One Another

David Platt's sermon series *Follow Me*<sup>13</sup> explores the practicality and benefits of laying down our lives to work with God in making disciples.

Among many gems in Dr. Platt's series, I appreciate these in particular:

- In John 17 Jesus assessed His life solely by His investment in the twelve, not by the standards we often use to measure our ministries (see p. 21).
- An illustration of how two disciples, working together in the same outreach, can help each other to grow faster.
- A detailed analysis of how our investment in the growth of others accelerates our own growth.

We learn and grow even more as we tackle the additional challenges in making disciples in other cultures.

### Aiming Beyond a Single Generation

The *Training For Trainers* (T4T) church planting movement has, in the last decade, started an estimated 140,000 new house churches and baptized 1.7 million new believers, keeping pace with Dawson Trotman's theoretical potential in the opening table.

Many mass-produced materials are available for those wanting to shift from *ministering to the masses* to *making disciples*, but the kind of fruit T4T and RLM are producing does *not* result from simply

adopting these few discipleship principles and hoping God will take it from there:

- Spending more time with fewer people,
- Focusing on leaders who can pass on information (2 Ti 2:2),
- Communicating basic spiritual truths.

Yes, all of these are important, but Jesus didn't focus His time solely on these things. He engaged the twelve to become effective disciplers, teaching them to do for others what He was doing for them.

Jim Downing calls this "guided experience." RLM calls it "coaching" with "opportunities to play." T4T calls it "training."

Whatever we call it, amidst our other work or ministry involvements, we must learn from and follow Jesus' example to be intentional in bringing others along, enlisting and coaching them to become disciplers who, amidst their own work or ministry, will also enlist and coach others.

I wasn't disciplined by exposure to important insights but by peer coaching through decades of opportunity to "get in the game."

### From Fixed Curriculum to Coaching

One common weakness of discipling models is a "content only" approach—bringing someone through a curriculum which they are then to bring others through. Whatever this gains in apparent efficiency, it loses far more:

- in adaptability to the Spirit's leading and the needs of those involved, and
- in modeling and coaching through unexpected developments.

Doctrinal correctness will not ensure a person's fruitfulness. However as we coach people to become disciplers, they will grow in

- Hungering for and abiding in God's word.
- Hearing and obeying God's voice.
- Living to please Him rather than others.
- Trusting His provision and empowering.
- Embracing His purpose and His Body.

We don't learn to drive by hearing a lecture or reading a book, but by getting behind the wheel. With coaching from another, we get better.

Coaching doesn't require knowing everything in advance, just a willingness to learn together. As we coach others who are discipling and then coaching others (both peers and disciples), we and they both learn new dimensions of things we may have previously assented to without really understanding.

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## Drawing Strength from Others

On our own we may find it difficult to pursue discipling in the face of cultural pressures to simply be productive, but we can find strength in community. In just a few hours a month we can start meeting with colleagues for peer coaching to be disciplers.

Each of us has spheres of influence where we can become intentional about sharing tasks and enlisting and coaching others to become disciplers. We can also engage intentionally as catalysts for peer coaching as we learn together to enlist and coach generations of disciplers.

At its heart, discipling individuals is about loving, enjoying and caring for those God has given us—our family, colleagues and friends—and coaching these to fruitbearing maturity as the path to greater fruitfulness rather than simply expecting them to support us in our “more important” ministry.

## Solving the Manpower Problem


In the Western church today, we generally pursue great achievements ahead of generations of disciplers. We thus perceive our primary need to be increased staffing to service our ministry vision.

If we would follow Jesus’ lead in discipling those He has given us, and in coaching them to produce generations of disciplers, this problem might disappear.

## Next Steps

Bearing fruit in generations of disciplers won’t happen by accident. Let me suggest three steps you can take:

1. On a weekly or daily basis, enter the King’s presence and stay there until you sense that His agenda is covered. (Too often we check in and let Him know what we need without taking time to hear from Him.)
2. Meet once a month for three hours with family, two or three colleagues or friends, or two other couples. Plan and pray together for how you will each become intentional in winning and discipling others, and training them as disciplers. Adapt the T4T format described on p. 13. Rotate leadership and have each report on a different article from this *MF*.
3. Invite three or four other friends to follow your example of starting a monthly discipleship training strategy team, then gather all these teams once a month to learn from one another and compare notes on how God is leading you. Again, rotate leadership.

If you follow some adaptation of this plan, pray and expect each participant to start one or more such groups, then join me at [MissionFrontiers.org](http://MissionFrontiers.org) to share your experiences so we can learn from one another.<sup>14</sup> 

- 1 Table shading reflects estimates in Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch’s article “Finishing the Task,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, William Carey Library Publishers, Fourth Edition (January 2009).
- 2 *The Key to the Missionary Problem*, Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1902.


- 3 *Deliberate Simplicity: How the Church Does More by Doing Less* (Zondervan, 2009).
- 4 See on-line bonus material at [MissionFrontiers.org](http://MissionFrontiers.org).
- 5 *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, by Richard Swenson, NavPress, 1995 (re-released in 2004).
- 6 *The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits*, by Richard Swenson, NavPress, 1998.
- 7 CLC Publications 1979, 2007 reprint in modernized English.
- 8 *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- 9 See Jim Downing’s interview, on p. 17 of this *MF*.
- 10 See Lisa Sells’ article on Avery Willis, DNA21, and Real Life Ministries, on p. 6 of this *MF*.
- 11 See [SimplyTheStory.org](http://SimplyTheStory.org) and [OralBible.com](http://OralBible.com) (International Orality Network).
- 12 The two-day experience Jim and I had in RLM’s model is available most months at RLM’s facility in Idaho (near Spokane, WA). See [RealLifeMinistries.com/immersion-one](http://RealLifeMinistries.com/immersion-one) for the schedule and other details.
- 13 Available free at [BrookHills.org/media/series/follow-me](http://BrookHills.org/media/series/follow-me).
- 14 For an interesting exploration of what more may be involved in discipling “peoples,” see Landa Cope’s book—*An Introduction To The Old Testament Template: Rediscovering God’s Principles for Discipling All Nations*, (The Template Institute Press, 2006). Note: a new 2011 edition is now available from YWAM Publishing. To find the entire book on-line, visit [MissionFrontiers.org](http://MissionFrontiers.org)

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## MF: Can spiritual reproduction really complete the Great Commission?

If Adam’s listed descendants each produced only 10 offspring during his lifetime, Adam would have had more than 10,000,000 descendants when he died at age 930. In *The Key to the Missionary Problem*<sup>2</sup> Andrew Murray quotes the appendix of the 1900 Student Missionary Conference:

IF there were only one Christian in the world, and he worked and prayed a year to win one friend to Christ, and IF these two then continued each year to win one more, and IF every person thus led into the kingdom led another to Christ every year, in thirty-one years every person in the world would be won for Christ.”

This information gives credence to Dawson Trotman’s theoretical belief that the world can only be reached for Christ when human population growth is matched by spiritual reproduction. 

- 1 See accompanying article on p 6.
- 2 Modernized in 1979 by Leona Choy (CLC Publishing), 2007 reprint