

Interview with Pastor Chris Galanos of Experience Life

AN INTERVIEW OF
CHRIS GALANOS (CG)
 QUESTIONS ASKED BY
MISSION FRONTIERS (MF)

Chris Galanos is the Founding and Lead Pastor of Experience Life Church in Lubbock, Texas. *Outreach Magazine* named Chris the Youngest Megachurch Pastor in America several years in a row and named Experience Life one of the Top 100 Fastest-Growing Churches in the country five different times. Chris lives in Lubbock with his wife, Emilie, and daughters, McKinley and Charis.



MF: How did you go about casting the vision for disciple-making to your church members?

CG: We started by introducing the concepts through two sermon series at our church. The first sermon series was called “Meltdown: The Decline of the American Church” and it was based on the book, *The Great Evangelical Recession* by John Dickerson. In order to cast a compelling vision for disciple-making, you first need to establish that you’re either not doing it or not doing it very well. If people assume they’re already doing it well, casting vision for it is more difficult because they’re already convinced they’re doing what you’re casting vision for. This book by Dickerson does a great job looking at trends in the American church and calling out our lack of focus on disciple-making. I believe this series stirred our church to recognize that there was a problem and we needed to find a solution. A few months later we did a sermon series on the solution to this problem. We called it “Miraculous Movements,” based on the popular book by that same name by Jerry Trousdale. We took several weeks to tell the stories of disciple-making in these movements in Africa. We introduced movements as the solution to the problem we discussed in the Meltdown series. Then a few months after that, on our 10 year anniversary, I shared with our church the prayer we felt led to pray for the next 10 years, namely that we’d see 1,000,000 disciples made through implementing a Disciple Making Movements (DMM) strategy. We’ve been pursuing this vision ever since.

MF: How difficult was it for your large body of church members to catch the vision for making disciples?

CG: I think, generally speaking, people like the idea of growing as disciple-makers. If you ask a crowd on Sunday morning to raise their hands if they'd like to make more disciples, I bet you'd get a majority of people to raise their hands. But, when you start talking about the details of how to go about making disciples and what we'd need to do, the interest will usually begin to wane. Here are a few examples. In order to make disciples, we know we must go out among the lost and engage them. I've found that many Christians are not very interested in doing that. Another big part of making disciples is meeting together to pray and asking God to open hearts of lost people and give us boldness as we go out. I've found that many Christians are not very interested in doing that either. And there's no question that a lifestyle of making disciples requires some big changes to our calendar. I've found that many Christians are very busy and aren't interested, at this point, in making the changes necessary to create the time to make disciples.

As we began to cast vision for making disciples at our church, we had some people catch the vision and get excited and others that weren't as interested. The ones that caught the vision went through a DMM training with us and many of them are now in DMM churches making disciples among the lost each week. Others loved coming on Sunday mornings but the idea of going out from the church building to make disciples in this way was probably not what they were looking for and, as a result they've moved on to other churches in our city.

MF: As you have relaunched eLife as a more missional form of doing church, talk about those who have come to join you.

CG: In any church, there's a small group of people that are hungry for more. They read the New Testament and they want to experience what they're reading. They want to be a part of a Book-of-Acts-like movement in our day. When you start casting vision to people like that they get fired up and are excited to begin. I'd say a majority of people who have joined us

could be described that way. We could always tell they were the "radicals" in our church that were eager to be sent out to reach many for Jesus.

MF: Share some statistics for the glory of God. Where are you today in the number of people who have gone through trainings? How many people have been baptized, churches birthed and so on?

CG: We feel like we're still just getting started, but we've seen God do some amazing things over the last year and a half.

- We've taken 474 people through our DMM training, many of whom were pastors and church leaders. Quite a few of these churches that went through the training have decided to join us on the journey toward catalyzing movements in America.
- We've seen God start 15 "Generation 0" DMM churches. These are churches of believers that have been planted by our church or through our training and who are seeking to start Generation 1 churches among the lost. One of these Generation 0 DMM churches has seen a Generation 1 church started from these efforts.
- 11 more Generation 0 DMM churches are in formation.
- We've started 161 Discovery Groups with lost people. 40 of these DGs are still active (DGs becoming inactive is a common pattern in DMM – along the lines of the 4 soils parable). Of these 161 DGs, we have had one stream reach 4th Generation and several other streams reach 2nd Generation.
- We've had more than 5,200 spiritual conversations (likely more, this is just the number we've tracked).
- We've had more than 2,600 hours of corporate prayer (likely more, this is just the number we've tracked).
- We've had right around 90 half-night prayer meetings (four-five hours of prayer through the night).
- We've sent 11 long-term workers to Thailand with six of them still actively serving there with us. They are working toward catalyzing movements while we're working to mobilize many more to join them long-term. The vision we cast to our

church about five years ago is that we wanted to send a tithe of our church to the nations which was 500 people at that time. We are still praying to send 500 to the nations long-term and feel they will be much better equipped to catalyze disciple-making movements overseas because they will have been working toward it in America before they leave.

MF: What has been the most difficult part for your members to learn to make disciples?

CG: I think the most difficult part for all of us is that we're accustomed to a typical American Christian's schedule and that usually doesn't include much time for making disciples. We're busy doing many other things. We've all realized that if we want to be effective in making disciples, it will require an overhaul of our lives and how/where we spend our time. Like most Christians, we realize we spend most of our time around saved people, but we recognize we can't be effective in making disciples until we spend a lot more time strategically around lost people. We've been talking a lot about starting over with our schedules. We want to put disciple-making on the calendar first since it's most important and then schedule other activities around that. If we put all of our activities on the schedule and see if there's room for disciple-making, there usually isn't. Instead, we've said it's best to just start from scratch and put the most important things on the calendar first. This mindset has been a huge help, but it will also require sacrifice. Many of us realize we're going to have to stop doing some things we enjoy in order to make room for things we enjoy more, like making disciples.

MF: What was it that surprised you in this whole process of transition and relaunch?

CG: I think what surprised us the most is how much impact a few devoted disciples can have. In our heyday as a church, we'd have 100-200 first-time guests come per weekend, many of whom were lost. It took a megachurch staff, budget, and resources to draw this many people in and what I realized in the transition is that one DMM church alone, with

no budget, buildings or resources, can share with about this many lost people all by themselves in a week fairly easily. Multiply that over our 26 churches and I believe our impact already is far greater than our megachurch could've ever had. When you start going to the lost rather than expecting them to come to you, you can engage with a lot more people. That probably shouldn't have been a surprise, but the American church model is based on doing whatever it takes to get lost people to come to church. What pastors realize after a while is most lost people aren't interested in coming to church. So, if you're going to reach them, you're going to have to leave the church and go to them. This realization alone has helped us see how 1,000,000 could truly be reached.

MF: What has been most "costly" to you and your church in making the switch? How has it been worth it?

CG: I think the most difficult part of a journey like this is persevering even when everyone thinks you're crazy - haha! When we first started Experience Life 12 years ago, people thought we were crazy in how we were doing church. I was 25 years old and people weren't sure I could be a senior pastor at my age. We met in a skating rink and people weren't sure how church could actually happen outside a church building. The list went on of things people thought were crazy. It took a while for people to understand what we were doing and to see the impact it was making. I feel, in some ways, we are back at that stage since we're choosing to do "church" in a different way again. I'm sure many think we're crazy, but we're doing our best to make sure we're listening to Jesus and staying focused on what He wants us to do. We want to follow Him regardless of the cost or how crazy it may seem to others!

MF: What suggestions would you have for any other church that wants to start doing DMM?

CG: You need a coach! I can't recommend anything more strongly than that. Stan Parks was our primary coach and we probably would've given up early in the process if it hadn't been for his wisdom, guidance and coaching. Movements are truly a "foreign" concept in the US and you shouldn't trust that you

can navigate trying to catalyze one on your own. We need to be trained and coached by men and women who have seen these happen in other parts of the world and can help us make sure we understand the overarching principles so we can apply them effectively in our context.

MF: What are some must-reads to help those who want to learn DMM and apply it in their own church?

CG: These are the must-reads that I list in my book:

- *The Great Evangelical Recession* (John Dickerson)
- *Miraculous Movements* (Jerry Trousdale)
- *Spent Matches* (Roy Moran)
- *Church Planting Movements* (David Garrison)
- *The Kingdom Unleashed* (Jerry Trousdale)

Also, if you're an American pastor, you should read Francis Chan's new book, *Letters to the Church*. It's not about DMM, but it's about the status of the American church and it helps you to recognize that we must begin looking for a solution. The DMM books will give you the solution.

MF: Talk about how you have empowered the kids in your body to do DMM. Do you have a short story?

CG: Students have loved applying DMM. Here is a recent story of God using an unlikely young person to do something extraordinary. First, let me give you a little background.

As we've been leveraging every area at our church for DMM, our youth pastors also made changes in our youth ministry. One of the things they've done is begin to expose the students to movement principles

and cast vision to them for reaching the 40,000 students in the area. They use the DBS process in their small groups. They'll often spend their corporate gatherings sharing testimonies and praying or going out on prayer walks rather than doing an attractional service like they've done in the past. They've been casting vision to the students that God can use them to make disciples and plant churches. They've been encouraging them to start groups at their schools. They even have what they call a "catalyst group" which is a group of students that they have taken through the DMM training and are deploying in schools. It's been amazing to watch! Recently a teacher at one of those schools sent me a message on Facebook. This is what she said:

Hey Chris! I wanted to share with you that one of my 7th grade students who is in the eLife youth group has started a Bible study in my room before school one day a week. He is a quiet young man who doesn't fit in socially (and seems to be fine with it). I was amazed as I listened to him read a portion of Scripture and say, "We are going to talk about what this says about God, what this says about people, and who we would share this with if we had the opportunity." He then went on to say that that is what they do in his youth group and that he had been encouraged by his youth leader to start that group. Wanted you to be able to share this with your staff. Good stuff!

Wow! A 7th grader starting groups!

Notice how the teacher described him. "A quiet young man that doesn't fit in socially." Sounds like just the type of *unlikely* person God would use to catalyze a movement! Can you even imagine the boldness it takes for a student like this to start a group with friends at school? That only happens if God fills you with his Spirit and you're *on fire* for him!

God loves to use *unlikely* people! 

