

Coaching the Discipling Leader

By John Purcell

For a while now I have been using the term “Discipling Leader,” and I firmly believe it describes an idea that could change the church world. The simplest statement of the concept is this: Christian leaders in any ministry role inside or outside the church should have as ONE of their goals to strive to intentionally help others grow as Disciples of Christ.

This is a concept that seems at first blush simple and obvious. In fact, in the business world it is becoming more accepted that leaders should continually invest significant time in developing other leaders. However, in reality the Discipling Leader idea is huge, complex, and daunting.

The concept seems to be simple and obvious because the Church has always *assumed* that when we get our people involved in Sunday School, a small group, or a serving ministry they will grow. But do we see that happening in practice? Well, we have lots of people in our churches involved in Sunday School and more and more in home groups. And we have lots of people in our churches serving in numerous different capacities, including Nursery, Welcome, Worship, Community Ministry, Missions, etc.

I will ask two questions about this. First, is our experience that we actually *SEE* significant growth happening on an ongoing basis as a result of this ministry exposure? I’m sure we can point to examples of people who have grown from their Sunday School, small group, or serving experience. But is this the norm or the exception? Sunday Schools are good for fellowship and teaching. Small groups are great for fellowship, assimilation, and study. Serving ministries are aimed at accomplishing ministry tasks, and we can all grow from applying our gifts and serving the needs of others. However, how many mature and equipped disciples of Christ do we see being produced because of their involvement in these?

Secondly, should we *EXPECT* deep growth to result from the processes that are happening here? Should classroom teaching in Sunday School produce maturity and life change? Should the process of discussion of the Bible and life issues in a mixed small group or even a gender specific group lead to serious and ongoing spiritual growth? And should using your gifts in serving (assuming you *HAVE* found that sweet spot in ministry) by itself lead to serious life transformation?

My answer to these questions is this. It is rare for serious, significant transformation and growth to come from these vehicles, but whether some of it occurs totally depends on the goals of the Leader and the process the Leader uses in the ministry. And this is where a Coach can add so much value.

In a Sunday School class, the goal of good teaching can add to our “head” knowledge and some discussion can increase retention of that knowledge. In the small group, if the Leader’s goal is to have a spirited group discussion and the process is to meet on a regular basis for that discussion, there can be some life change. In a serving ministry, if the Leader’s goal is to accomplish the serving task and the process is to get together to do the serving, there can certainly be some limited transformation. And this probably describes the typical goal and processes of these ministries.

However, we assume that the people sitting in a class, meeting in a small group, and serving in a ministry are supposed to grow without the leader doing much *intentionally* toward that end.

And yet if you ask churches all over the world how they make disciples, they will name those three vehicles – Sunday School classes, small home groups, and serving ministries. You can read it on many church’s websites and in numerous books about how to be an effective church.

This is exactly where the concept of the “Discipling Leader” can make a radical difference. However, these Leaders must be a radically different kind of Leader. First of all, they must have different GOALS. They must have the right target to shoot for or they will be aiming the wrong weapon in the wrong direction.

In the case of the small group Leader, the goals should be to have meaningful fellowship together AND TO MAKE MATURE BELIEVERS. For the serving ministry Leader, the goals should be to accomplish the ministry serving task IN COMMUNITY together AND TO MAKE MATURE BELIEVERS. If Coaches encourage Leaders to follow an effective goal setting and execution process, they could make an absolutely HUGE difference in the outcomes of those ministries. In the case of the Sunday School class, the best goals might be to educate the mind AND TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION IN OTHER MORE RELATIONAL VEHICLES FOR GROWTH.

Well, being astute, you are probably asking, “What exactly is the definition of a ‘mature Disciple?’” In fact, the first task of the Discipling Leader should be to define that term. And, actually, that would be an excellent task for each church to take on. The result could be a combination of “head” knowledge underlying knowing God, “heart” issues underlying faith in God, and “hands” actions indicating the fruit of faith that is alive. My favorite Bible passage addressing this is Luke 14:25-35, where Jesus Himself describes the cost of discipleship, but, of course, there are many others.

Having the right GOAL for growth, Leaders then must develop a PROCESS that will lead to accomplishment of that goal. Where can they look for help with that? Again, I would look to Jesus and His process for discipling the 12. Robert Coleman captured this process succinctly in his classic, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, reducing it to the eight principles of selection, association, consecration, impartation, demonstration, delegation, supervision, and reproduction. A. B. Bruce did a more thorough and extensive job in *The Training of the Twelve*. Or you can do what I have done numerous times with churches, list for yourself the many things Jesus did to disciple the 12.

Now comes the really hard work. How do Discipling Leaders apply these principles in the context of their small groups or serving ministries? Now you can begin to see how this role must become fundamentally different from our traditional ones, involving a process we call *Life on Life*. We’re talking about things like these:

- Meeting outside the group or serving venue one on one with members of the group
- Getting to know each other in the group on a much deeper level, possibly requiring some time of the men being with the men and the women with the women, for instance

- Not only discussing God’s truth relating to life issues, but providing support, encouragement, and accountability to applying those in individual lives
- The Leader modeling what the member needs to learn
- The Leader delegating first small then significant tasks and roles to the members for the purpose of their growth
- The Leader observing the members and giving feedback so they can grow
- The Leader having specific growth goals *for individual members*
- Significant prayer for each other

Now we’re talking about an *intentional* process with the potential for spiritual growth, lead by a leader who is truly discipling. You can see that the Discipling Leader must apply many of the skills of coaching.

The absolute best way to do this is to have a Discipleship Group that is intentionally focused on spiritual growth, with fellowship and serving as secondary goals. This is what we call *Life on Life Discipleship*, and you can read more about this in my article on that subject.

But elements of this process can, with a lot of intentionality and effort, be added to the small group or serving ministry. It will take a significant change of focus, additional time or time utilized in a different way, and a lot of energy. Will “less” of the ministry task get done? Very possibly. That time and focus needs to come from somewhere. But will more kingdom ministry get done as people grow through their fellowship and their service and utilize this growth to impact their whole world around them? Unquestionably.

An excellent example of Discipling Leaders in action is occurring in the Worship Ministry of Perimeter Church in Duluth, GA. The Pastor, Randy Schlichting, knows how to grow disciples through Discipleship Groups because he oversaw the Life on Life Discipleship Ministry of the church for many years as Adult Ministry Director. So he applied this experience to his Worship teams. Teams at Perimeter lead worship once/month on average, so they had been coming in mid-week to rehearse twice/month. Adding spiritual growth to the goals of the ministry required rethinking the process, and it was decided that worship teams would go to a weekly gathering. On the first week, the team is disciplined as a group by an Elder with discipleship experience. On the second and third weeks, they focus on discipleship discussion half the time and rehearse half the time. On the fourth week they spend almost the whole time rehearsing. Randy coaches the disciplers.

The ministry result of applying discipling leadership to a worship ministry? Randy says the teams love God more and love each other more, and therefore the congregation experiences their worship leading as more authentic and less as a performance.

So, the Discipling Leader is a person who applies intentional planning, energy, time, and love to growing the people who are participating in his or her ministry. It is a journey that could change the church world, and that is a journey worth taking.

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