

# Life on Life Discipleship

*By John Purcell*

As I work with churches all over the country and internationally, one of the things I help them do is figure out how to intentionally move toward becoming more effective at their calling. To that end, they develop what I call a Ministry Plan, consisting of a Purpose, Vision, Core Values, and Mission. Next they must work on their “Strategy” for how they will actually move the church toward that “target.”

In almost every single case, the church identifies making “mature disciples” (regardless of how they say it) as a core issue, either because it’s a foundational part of the Plan or because they realize they must have mature disciples in order to accomplish every other part of their Plan. Usually, they decide that both are true.

Then they typically ask themselves, “What are the things we do that we need to do better to accomplish this?” I then point out that they are missing a key element, a definition of the “mature disciple, etc.” So we brainstorm various definitions until we arrive at one or a few potential definitions that they can pare back later. Next comes the big question, “What are the things you are now doing that are accomplishing or that you would hope would accomplish this?” The church leaders then list Sunday School, home groups, Bible studies, and sometimes leadership classes. I ask whether these are producing mature and equipped believers by their new definition, and the answer is always, “No, not really” or “they are maturing them some, but not producing what we described.” Then we examine whether new and improved versions of the same vehicles will produce them. Usually, the leaders are skeptical about that.

So we seem to have a gap between what we hope to produce in the Church and our methods and vehicles to produce it. Why is that? Well, we have four major competencies in the church -- worshipping, teaching, fellowshiping, and discussing. Worship services do worship and teaching, Sunday School classes do teaching and fellowshiping, and small groups do fellowshiping and discussing. The question is whether any combination of these activities will produce mature and equipped believers. What is the limiting factor here?

There are several ways we can look at what we are missing. One is the concept of the head, heart, and hands. Teaching and discussing put information into our heads, but don’t get much into our hearts which then can lead to changes in our behaviors (hands). Another view is the behavioral change principle that change must be supported to be effective, and none of these vehicles include real and effective support. A third way to look at this is demonstrated by the key personal growth principle that I teach, which is that “we grow from evaluated experience through intentional relationships.” None of our typical church vehicles aim at this.

Most importantly, we should ask how Jesus disciplined the twelve. When I ask this at workshops, I get the following answers: He spent time with them, He modeled, He asked questions, He told stories, He taught from the Scriptures, He sent them out, He debriefed, He prayed, He showed them how to pray, He sacrificed for them, He worked with them individually, He brought them with Him, He chastised them,

He loved them, He selected them, He washed their feet, He ate with them, He showed them how to tell people about Him, etc.

How many of these things do we do in the church? What's missing is what we call the "life-on-life" stuff. It's what gets to the heart and hands and supports change in heart and behaviors. It is intentional relationship helping people evaluate their experiences as they live them.

So what we need in the church is a life-on-life approach that emulates the things that Jesus did. That approach is taking a small group of men or women (not both together) and doing intentional things that include all of the elements above. One on one time is a part of it, but Jesus showed us that the small group will be more effective because there is "more iron sharpening iron." (In fact, *Iron Sharpening Iron* is the title of a book by Howard Hendricks, who is one of the best known disciplers of our age. Dr. Hendricks told me that only late in his life did he realize that discipling in small groups is more effective than one on one, and the statement in quotes is his stated reason for that.)

Discipling a small group of men or women requires a fundamentally different set of skills than what we utilize to lead other types of small groups. And "Discipleship Leaders" will most often be effective and successful if they have coaches in their lives to provide support, encouragement, and accountability to do those different things.

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