

Foundation of The Five Steps: Disciple-making



We all know we should obey Great Commission and that the Great Commission commands we make disciples, but beyond the personal spiritual significance of that command, it's easy to forget the practical power of disciple-making in church growth. Building disciples isn't only what we are supposed to be doing, it's how to grow people and churches.

Discipleship ministry at first appears to take excessive time to develop a few people when aggressive outreach marketing seems to reach many more people much faster. But first appearances can be deceiving as this article will show you.

It's important to read this article before getting into the practical nuts and bolts of creating church communications. The purpose of The Five Steps is to fully fulfill the Great Commission and that means to make disciples. If discipleship is your goal, if fully fulfilling the Great Commission is the measure of success in your church communication process, you will approach your communication ministry much differently than if success is measured by how many people you get in the door on Sunday or how impressed visitors are with your website.

Why discipleship is essential for the church to survive —and why your communications are essential to develop disciples

Today we have aggressive atheists who are the darlings of the popular press. When men like Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris slander and malign the Christian faith in a way that is not only false, but nasty and vicious, their mockery is quoted and promoted without question throughout the internet and across the globe.

Church leaders who are exposed to public scandal are reported in the in press and individuals Christians don't fare much better. Studies frequently show Christians behave no differently than non-Christians in morality and that many people who call themselves Christian have little or no understanding of what the Bible says and how it teaches them to act (which is probably why their behavior is no different than that of their unbelieving friends).

I could bore you with reams of studies and statistics, but you know in the quietness of the your heart and the turmoil of your mind that the Christian church is losing ground, so let's skip the statistics and get to solutions.

The solution is to fully fulfill the Great Commission.

Fully fulling the Great Commission means more than simply getting people into the church to take part in an uplifting praise service and listen to a feel-good message. We fully fulfill the Great Commission by making disciples. To be satisfied with anything less for *all* of your people is incomplete obedience.

The church in North America isn't growing because of bad PR, ineffective marketing, or lack of technology, it isn't growing because few churches focus on making disciples.

Making disciples is a different way of doing church today

Making disciples as a priority would honestly be a shift in priorities for many churches today because most churches currently grow by adding attendees rather than making disciples. A key way to reverse the current slide into irrelevancy and moral decline is for the church to make it a priority to intentionally make disciples instead of just adding people to the pews.

The biblical view is that “*we all* reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4: 13—italics mine). I would venture to say that the expectation that the church work to help all members become totally like Jesus, in other words, a mature disciple, would come as a surprise to many.

Many people come to church expecting their pastor to help them feel good and to learn techniques for earthly prosperity, not to learn how to die to self and bear a cross. It's little wonder the lives of many Christians are no different from their unbelieving neighbors. Little wonder church growth is declining if going to church makes no more difference than a change in Sunday scheduling in the lives of its members.

Discipleship is also essential to church growth because only mature disciples reproduce themselves

Not only is maturity in Christ the biblical goal for all Christians, but it is the only realistic method for sustained church growth. My pastor husband often says, “Sheep have sheep, not the shepherd.” The point he's making is that adult mature sheep have the babies. Mature Christian disciples share their faith and have spiritual children. The shepherd's job (on the ranch or in the church) is to nurture and grow sheep to maturity so the adult sheep can reproduce.

We'd think a shepherd a bit odd if he tried to grow his flock by building a big sheep pen and making it exciting so other sheep would desert their sheep pen and come over to his. We'd wonder what he was doing if he worked harder on advertising for other sheep to join his flock than on feeding his own so his sheep would grow to maturity and naturally increase the herd.

The analogies are obvious—we don't need to build better sheep pens—we need to mature the sheep. Here's one way to do it:

Back to basics: multiplication vs. addition

When I was in college I was involved with Navigator ministry and our leaders constantly impressed on us the importance of growing a ministry through multiplication rather than addition. LeRoy Eims, my college Nav group leader, again and again would show us a checkerboard pattern of squares. He'd explain how if you start on square one, if you add one grain of wheat a day for a month on each square, when you get to the end of 30 days, you'll have 30 grains of wheat. The same thing would happen if you really hustle in your Christian life. If you knock on lots of dormitory doors, do lots of evangelism and work really hard, maybe you can add one person a day to the ministry—that would be 30 people added at the end of the month. Not bad, we'd be tempted to think—but LeRoy wasn't finished.

He'd remind us if you are so busy adding new believers, you don't have much time to take care of the ones you added the day before. You simply hope they are OK. You gave them a Bible, told them to read it and go to church. You press on because you want to grow the ministry. You're willing to burn out for Jesus and you keep up that pace for months. You make it all through the school year working like crazy and at the end of 9 months you've got 280 people in your campus ministry. LeRoy was not pleased. What's wrong with that, we'd wonder?

There is another way to grow a ministry LeRoy would explain. Imagine what could happen, if instead of just adding one person a day, you added one person and then the two of you each added two more, instead of simple addition, you'd see the power of multiplication. The charts below illustrate this:

growth by addition					growth by multiplication				
1	2	3	4	5	1	2	4	8	16
6	7	8	9	10	32	64	128	256	512
11	12	13	14	15	1,024	2,048	4,096	8,192	16,384
16	17	18	19	20	32,768	65,536	131,072	262,144	524,288
21	22	23	24	25	1,048,576	2,097,152	4,194,304	8,388,608	16,777,216
26	27	28	29	30	33,554,432	67,108,864	134,217,728	268,435,456	536,870,912

Charts comparing multiplication vs. addition in church growth

Obviously multiplication is a much more effective way to increase numbers than simple addition, but expecting a person to be a reproducing disciple in one day isn't realistic. More realistically, what if you took a month to intensely disciple that person: helping him or her study the Bible, learn to pray, get involved in church and a small group, learn share their faith? Though discipleship is a lifelong process, by the end of a month imagine your disciple-in-training is able to introduce one person to Jesus. If you do the same, there are now four of you. The next month is spent on intensive discipleship involving four people with the expectation that each one will introduce just one other person to Jesus during that month. Going into month four, you've got eight people.

Don't compare too soon, another chart to consider

Multiplication ministry can be discouraging if another campus minister or pastor of a church down the road is doing great job of addition ministry. As the chart below shows, at the end of four months the person inviting aggressively (or sending out slick direct mail campaigns) has 120 people coming to his or her church or campus ministry. Growing a ministry by multiplication you've got eight people. Looking at the numbers at that point could make you think what you are doing isn't working.

Numbers are important; evaluation is important, but don't evaluate the numbers too soon. In multiplication ministry, your focus is on discipling—making sure that your people become mature and can lead others to Jesus. If you do that, though it takes more time, the numbers will take care of themselves.

Month or year	Growth by Addition	Growth by Multiplication
1	30	2
2	60	4
3	90	8
4	120	16
5	150	32
6	180	64
7	210	128
8	240	256
9	280	512
10	300	1,024
11	330	2,048
12	360	4,096
13	390	8,192
14	420	16,384
15	450	32,768
16	480	65,536
17	510	131,072
18	540	262,144
19	570	524,288
20	600	1,048,576
21	630	2,097,152
22	660	4,194,304
23	690	8,388,608
24	720	16,777,216
25	750	33,554,432
26	780	67,108,864
27	810	134,217,728
28	840	268,435,456
29	870	536,870,912
30	900	1,073,741,824

Needless to say, this chart is for illustration purposes only, but notice what happens at month eight.

The church or other ministry doing addition is up to 240, but your slow and steady discipleship building process has reached 256 people. You're finally about even, but then things start to shift dramatically. At the church or ministry that continues to grow primarily by addition, unless it adds staff to keep growing the numbers, one person can only do so much. The main person will burn out.

In contrast, at the multiplication church where a core value is that the Great Commission is to be fully fulfilled and every convert is disciplined to reproducing maturity and expected to introduce other people to Jesus and to disciple them, no one person wears out. Part of discipleship is learning how to feed yourself and be responsible for your own spiritual growth.

By month or year 10, the church or ministry growing by addition is at 300 (and 80% of all churches in American are less than this in size). The church or ministry that has been growing by discipleship is now at 1,024. To carry the illustration out 30 months, the addition church is at 900, and the multiplication church at 1,073,741,824.

The chart illustrates contrasting processes—in a real world situation the actual growth of both groups will most likely be less. In churches that grow primarily by addition, the senior pastor will be exhausted far short of gathering 900 members. People who are never taught to get into God's Word and feed and care for themselves are bound to get frustrated if their needs aren't continuously met and their boredom

entertained. Many will wander off to another church with a more interesting (actually only different and new) pastor and praise service.

In churches that grow by multiplication a variety of issues can enter in to keep the church from reaching its full potential. Not everyone has the time or interest to become a disciple. Cross-bearing, sacrifice, self-discipline, and the reality of living as if we truly believe that our best life isn't now, but in heaven, is a tough sell in our world today.

Tough sell or not, growing people to mature discipleship is the command given to the church if we are to fully fulfill the Great Commission.

Make it practical

Staff commitment, prayer, time, money, vision—so many things go into the makeup of a Great Commission fulfilling church. Church communications aren't everything, but it has been my experience from observing many churches and their communications and from over two decades of church communication teaching, that a church can have the greatest vision and programs in place, but if they are not communicated effectively, nothing much happens. A vision that stays inside the heads and hearts of the pastor and staff and isn't communicated—isn't a vision, it's a fantasy.

In addition to not communicating the mission of their church, I've found very few churches have a progressive plan to develop disciples with their communications. Many churches think they have a ministry communication plan when the only things their communication plan consists of are outreach postcards to get people to special events and extra money for printing up a fancy bulletins for Christmas and Easter.

We've been entrusted with the words of eternal life. It takes more than one or two pretty pieces or today flashy websites to do the job. The Five Steps of Church Communication and Marketing outlines communication strategies and projects from outreach to mature discipleship. It is a lot more work, but it fulfills the expectations of the Great Commission.

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