

TRANSFORMATIONAL

DISCIPLESHIP



**A Report of Interviews with  
New England Pastors and Evangelical Leaders**

**by**

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# Transformational Discipleship in New England

## Rationale for the Survey

It's been widely reported that many established New England churches have been in trouble for years. Some estimates report as many as 80% of churches today are stagnant or in decline. A major contributing factor to this condition is the failure of Christian believers to make disciples and reproduce themselves. Consequently, generations of New Englanders have grown up with no knowledge of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Conversely, newer church plants are on the rise, and in many cases intentional effective evangelism and disciple-making are the primary focus of these churches. This is accomplished in a variety of ways employing methods that are contextualized to the unique demographics of each church.

Our previous paper, *Thriving in New England*, addressed characteristics common to churches growing through conversions as evidenced by **the number of reported baptisms**. We discovered that thriving churches share several key ingredients including **focused mission and vision, highly competent leadership, engaged but not overly-restrictive church governance, contagious evangelistic approaches, emphasis on prayer, and intentional disciple-making**.

The purpose of this project is **to examine effective disciple-making strategies** among thriving New England churches. We do this with the hopeful expectation that churches in the 80% category mentioned above might find helpful insights and ideas as they contemplate the shifts necessary to become **mission-focused, disciple-making entities**. The churches surveyed varied in size, age, and denominational status. Some are well-established churches with well entrenched traditions, others are newer church plants with few hindrances to make quick changes when needed. Still others are churches belonging to larger organizations where resources are readily available to help encourage disciple-making.

From observations made over years of visiting churches in New England, we've seen that many of the established churches are **busy with activities focused on the**

**members.** These are often calendar driven events that have become traditions maintained for many years, often with little concern for their effectiveness in advancing the church's mission. In many of these cases, the mission of the church has drifted with only a few members aware of the real reason for the church's existence – *to make reproducing disciples by means of consistent evangelism and intentional discipleship, as spoken by Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20.*

Our process for assessing effective disciple-making included the following steps:

1. During our scheduled visits with churches, we informed them of our desire to examine disciple-making strategies looking for **intentional, effective methods.** Although there are many varieties of disciple-making, we'd be especially interested in looking for strategies that are **biblically rich**, involve some aspects of **apprenticeship/mentoring**, and occur over a **significant time period.**
2. We gathered content that could be recommended to churches not yet intentional in their discipleship strategies.
3. We discovered and consulted with those who have contributed significantly to the discussion of disciple-making.
4. We prepared our findings in this report to be distributed where helpful.

In considering the need for effective discipleship, we first need to define discipleship.

One particularly helpful source defines it this way:

**Discipleship Definition – What is it? (www.allaboutfollowingjesus.org)**

*“To be a learner” is the literal answer to the question, “What is a discipleship definition?” Dictionary.com defines a disciple as:*

*‘A person who is a pupil or adherent to the doctrines of another. One who embraces and assists in spreading the teaching of another. Any follower of another person.’*

*“Disciple” is a word that’s not generally considered a part of everyday vocabulary in contemporary society, but it gets tossed around a lot in Christian circles. You might hear phrases like: “called to be disciples of Christ,” “make disciples of all nations,” “walk as a disciple.” The concept*

*seems very intimidating, and to a person who hasn't spent a lifetime in church, but who wants to know God, it can be confusing. ...In the Bible, Christ's final command to His followers is to "Therefore, as you go, disciple people in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19)... What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ, much less to make more disciples? The important distinction with Christian discipleship is that we are not only called to learn the teachings of Jesus Christ, we are also called to live them. A disciple who bases his or her life on the teachings of Christ "like a person building a house, who dug a deep hole to lay the foundation on rock" (Luke 6:48). When we make our initial declaration of faith and ask Christ to be our Savior, He will begin changing us from the inside, giving us the ability to understand His word and the desire to live it...  
...And while it is true that when we become Christians we're called to make disciples of others, we have to remember that discipleship has to start somewhere. Nobody becomes a disciple-maker overnight. God knows our hearts, He understands that we're going to have to take baby steps to get from point A to point B..."*

The key take-away from this explanation appears to be the emphasis on a **transformational process** where the old life is passing away and a **new life emerges** based upon the foundation of Christ and His teachings. Clearly, each believer has a **personal responsibility**, along with the Holy Spirit's empowerment, to grow as a disciple. A full engagement of knowledge, understanding, and application – **Head, Heart and Hands** – is indicative of effective disciple-making strategies. Time is a factor, and the process of change involves more mature believers investing in the lives of newer believers.

But disciple-making should also be **every church's responsibility**. Church leadership cannot be content with simply informing converts they need to grow and develop into mature Christians without intentionally providing resources, guidance and support. Simply providing a discipleship Sunday School class has proven to be ineffective for making life-long disciples. A disciple-making church **will develop a "pathway"** along

with a “**roadmap**” for new believers with appropriate mentors or “disciple-makers” providing counsel and assistance along the way.

### **Observations from Surveys**

In our visits we’ve seen a wide variety of curriculum and methods for making-disciples across the New England landscape. Some are effective, and some achieve less than effective results. **Often, the deciding factor in whether a method is effective is the church’s understanding of discipleship as a command found in the Great Commission.** Too many churches appear to have lost this as the mission and reason for the church’s existence.

This report will summarize the findings of churches engaged in good disciple-making. **Surprisingly, in none of our interviews did we find leaders willing to say they were confident they had found the most effective method!** Perhaps this is due to the ever-changing culture of society today. Many good methods were shared with measurable levels of effectiveness. Yet disciple-making, it seems, needs to be contextualized to the unique demographics of each church. Even within individual churches, several methods are employed targeting different age groups, life situations, and other special interests. **There doesn’t seem to be a one-size-fits-all blueprint!**

Following is a summary of **nine common attributes** found among churches presently doing an effective job making disciples who reproduce. We want to emphasize that we believe the Church of Jesus Christ is His Church, and He promises to build it (Mt. 16:18). We also don’t want to diminish the work of the **Holy Spirit as the source of power** for bringing about true transformation in an individual who comes by faith to Jesus Christ. But we’re also convinced Jesus has given His Church clear instructions for making disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that He has commanded.

#### **1. Biblical Foundation**

Churches effectively making reproducing disciples all agree that a strong biblical foundation is necessary for every follower of Christ. This engages the “**Head**” or knowledge elements of disciple-making. Basic doctrines and strong theological

perspectives are crucial for transformation to occur. Otherwise, the church operates more along the lines of a social organization without a Great Commission purpose. Many excellent resources are available for biblical engagement and growth as maturing disciples of Christ. The attached appendix gives many suggestions proven to be effective.

## **2. Trained Leadership in Discipleship**

In most cases where disciple-making is thriving, leadership at the highest levels is engaged. Often, intentional training has been present with leaders having effectively been discipled by other serious leaders who took an interest in them and assisted in the transformation process. Discipleship training is critical to success since so many churches appear to have lost the vision, purpose, and strategies for making real disciples.

## **3. Pathway or Journey Approach**

Churches attempting to disciple well **understand discipleship as a pathway leading to a deeper and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ.** This engages the “Heart” with its passions and emotions as a follower of Jesus. Several pastors described in detail how every aspect of their discipleship process has “next steps” for the disciple as he/she becomes evermore transformed into the image of Jesus. Along the pathway, lessons are learned through intentional life-on-life relationships with more mature believers acting as mentors and coaches to encourage growth and transformation.

Several models of the pathway approach were shared utilizing definite markers along the way. One pastor described his church’s disciple-making process as **a life-long series of steps.** The first step is from **spiritual infancy to childhood** where the essentials of the faith are taught, and spiritual disciplines are introduced. Next, a disciple moves from **childhood to young adulthood.** At this stage the disciple would engage in more intense Bible study with a deepening understanding of how scriptural truths are important for navigating through the complexities of life, at the same time building upon the framework established at the previous stage. Next, the disciple travels further on the path, not merely to adulthood – but **parenthood**, because at this stage he or she needs to be concerned with sharing his/her faith with others and

seeking to make more disciples for the Kingdom – hence obeying the Great Commission.

Several churches have built their process around a series of alliterative steps making it easier and more memorable to the church. One church used a progression of steps beginning with **Seek ► Save ► School ► Serve ► Send** as waypoints for a disciple understanding that months and years may be involved in bringing someone through the journey from initial interest in spiritual things as a seeker to eventually being sent on missional service outside the walls of the church. These churches were clear on the need for discipleship reflecting a “next steps” movement that continues throughout the life of the believer. An interesting observation has been that among millennials, especially, the serving stage often follows seeking, prior to making a faith commitment and becoming spiritually equipped. They typically want to engage their “**Hands**” doing things that have a significant impact on society.

#### **4. Roadmaps for the Journey**

Along with the pathway approach, the more effective disciple-making churches have either **secured or developed curriculum materials** designed to encourage a deeper understanding of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as Beings with whom a relationship can be cultivated and strengthened. **This is truly the follower’s “roadmap” for ensuring growth along the pathway. Spiritual disciplines** are explained and encouraged along with instruction on effective **approaches to studying the Bible. Classic theological topics** are addressed, as well as the development of a **biblical worldview. Practical application** is stressed and opportunities to interact with more seasoned disciples are frequent. The disciple is encouraged to continue following a path of life-long study, never imagining they have arrived until they meet face-to-face with Jesus. Age appropriate materials are used with **significant waypoints** showing the levels of achievement each disciple has accomplished. Some churches have developed **high quality workbooks** updated as necessary to remain culturally relevant. Others use materials provided through various discipleship authors and publishers.

Somewhat common among many newer church plants has been a system of church orientation called “Growth Track”. This was a model utilized by several church planting

associations consisting of a four-to-five-week series of one-hour classes designed to help a new convert or church attender better understand what Christianity and church are about. Many fast-growing evangelism-oriented church plants used this as their discipleship model but soon discovered its shortcomings. Rather than a tool for creating life-long disciples, it was more of an introduction to the church and the Christian life. Consequently, churches are beginning to adjust and augment this model with more substantive content.

## **5. Small Groups Implementation**

Since the advent of mega-churches, **small groups have been the designated vehicle for disciple-making**. It was determined early on that the large weekly gathering within the seeker-friendly community was not the right venue for making life-long disciples. Small groups became the solution. In New England, these became part of the fabric of most churches seeking to develop a stronger sense of community and attachment to the larger church. Although it was thought that small groups were better suited for Bible study and spiritual formation, many newer churches found this to be lacking in their small groups.

Assessing the effectiveness of the groups was difficult, and many had developed into social gatherings rather than a place for consistent biblical training and transformative growth. They built a sense of connectedness but were not necessarily building up disciples. The problem was not the small group, but the lack of an intentional pathway with a roadmap as discussed above. Small group leaders lacked adequate biblical training, and the groups became more focused on special interests rather than discipleship intentionality. Meanwhile, the larger weekly gathering became the primary venue for biblical teaching, yet with the evangelistic, seeker-friendly, climate, **the teaching was often too light to effectively make whole-life disciples**.

More recently we're hearing church leaders addressing this problem with **better trained small-group leaders, sermon-based small groups studies, and more intentional and stronger biblically-based curriculum**. Many of these efforts are still too new for the leaders to report a change in effectiveness, but they were confident the strategies employed would lead to an improvement in their overall disciple-making results.



## **6. Highly Relational**

In nearly every instance of churches experiencing effective disciple-making, we heard a **common theme of intentional relational connectedness**. In addition to small group leaders, we also found **mentors and coaches to be crucial in helping disciples stay on the growth pathway**. Some churches have well-defined mentor-apprentice models, while others emphasize the personal responsibility of every believer to be investing time in someone not as far along the discipleship pathway as they are. This is sometimes referred to as **life-on-life discipling, the apprentice model, or making whole-life disciples**.

These closer relationships don't replace the traditional classroom teaching models, but instead augment what the new disciple is learning in a more formal setting. The relationship between the mentor and mentee is often the catalyst for going deeper with concepts learned in the classroom, as well as helping to provide coaching for applying the teaching in everyday life situations. Several examples of the curriculum we observed had **specialized manuals for the mentors**. When mentors have been recognized and trained, an important level of accountability and continuity is provided for the disciple-making process.

## **7. Consistency**

The churches with effective disciple-making strategies **understand the need for consistency**. As we discovered with evangelism in our previous study, churches that see evangelism and discipleship as tasks to be performed rather than crucial elements of a church's culture will have less success in making disciples. Disciple-making needs to be understood as a **central mission of the church** and not a topic to be taught only to new converts. **Creating a culture of disciple-making insures the church will not suffer from the "mission drift" often experienced by growing organizations**. As with anything worthy of a church's focus, disciple-making should be reviewed and adjusted to maintain its relevance as cultures change. Everything a church does should be seen through a lens of disciple-making. Activities that drain resources away from the Great Commission need to be examined carefully with consideration given to their elimination.

## **8. Reproduction**

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of an effective disciple-making church model is in **the number of disciples who are reproducing**. *“Disciples who make disciples”* is a common phrase in churches where there is true organic growth. This is a likely reason why newer church plants tend to be more effective at making disciples. Since evangelism is critical to the growth a new church plant, the culture often found around evangelism is the “next steps” discipleship activity for a new convert. Consequently, some of the best disciple-making strategies accompany an intentional evangelistic culture. **It’s always easier to begin with a culture of disciple-making rather than trying to shift a congregation that has lost its missional vision.** The process of church revitalization often includes a strong emphasis on making disciples who reproduce.

## **9. Tracking and Measuring Effectiveness**

A critical component of any discipleship strategy is determining if it’s effective. In other words, **are we really making more disciples who reproduce?** How do we know for sure? **What are the evidences of transformation in the life of a believer?** In churches where disciple-making is thriving, there is genuine evidence of spiritual growth as measured by such observable factors as a new **willingness to serve others, a thirst for God’s word, a growing distaste for worldliness, love for the brethren and for the lost, a cooperative spirit of unity, and sacrificial lifestyle** to name a few. Pastors have told us that it’s not hard to see transformation in people through their conversations, interests, and habits changing. Some have produced more formal testing mechanisms to gauge progress over time while others simply have a keen eye for observing transformation. Strong disciple-making churches tend to reproduce exponentially rather than linearly as each disciple sees a need to be reaching out to more than one at a time. Some well-established methods for discipleship training stress the importance of multiplying small groups of disciples.

## **Additional Findings**

For decades the flow of disciple-making materials came through evangelical denominations, campus ministries and Christian publishing houses. As we interviewed New England churches, we were curious where they found the most effective materials.

Among the more **mainline evangelical denominations**, we found many have developed excellent curriculum for assisting churches. Yet, we found in individual churches some very mixed results depending upon the emphasis of the local pastor. Within denominational structures, churches can be divided into two groups - **those that are more contemporary and those that are more traditional**.

The **more contemporary churches** are often newer, younger, and more modern in style. They are usually examples of thriving works where evangelism and outreach are strong, followed by effective discipleship strategies. Typically, curriculum is used that focuses on topics such as Bible engagement, basic doctrines of the Christian faith, spiritual disciplines, personal evangelism, building relationships, serving and multiplication. Depending upon the gifts and strengths of leadership, churches may use an existing curriculum or develop something in house. Several newer technologies incorporating tools with smartphone apps are available, but data on the effectiveness of these tools was not readily accessible. **All discipleship materials seem to be most effective when matched with a pathway or journey approach as described above.** Quite often, a major emphasis is placed upon teaching the denomination's doctrinal distinctives along with other aspects of cultivating a spiritual life. **The better methods incorporate strong mentoring/coaching models along with the academic study.**

In the **more traditional churches**, discipleship is often weak since the church, having plateaued or in decline, hasn't experienced much conversion growth. In many cases, it's been a long time since the church realized the need to be intentionally focused on disciple-making. **However, at least one traditional church interviewed had an excellent strategy for developing reproducing disciples** using very conventional methods. The main reason for this success appears to be in **the consistency of the approach** over several decades with appropriate adjustments made to adapt to current

culture such as the **inclusion of modern technologies** and **social media engagement**.

Outside of the denominational structures, independent churches and church planting associations have produced excellent materials for making disciples. They most often mirror the description of the contemporary denominational churches above. But the focus needs to shift from trying to build the church to building up disciples! As Michael Breen has said, *“If you make disciples, you will always get the church. But if you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples.”*

### **Summary**

The Cecil B. Day Foundation has always viewed evangelism and discipleship as two sides of the same coin. Real transformation in an individual’s life is not possible until conversion takes place and the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the new believer’s being. Once this occurs, the process of sanctification begins transforming the individual, as a new creation, into the image of Jesus Christ. As the new believer understands the process of “abiding in the Vine”, living in Jesus, he can expect to bear much fruit. **The local church has a responsibility** to help in the process of making the discipleship path clear, along with a roadmap for following the path as life’s journey unfolds.

Our findings in New England point out the need for more churches to be active in understanding their role in this process and becoming more intentional about providing the tools and strategies for multiplying disciples who make more disciples. These strategies need to **define the pathway, provide the roadmap with biblically rich content, enable relationships through small groups and seasoned mentors, and be consistent over a long time**. Additionally, they cannot be satisfied with their efforts if **reproduction** is not happening. Frequent review and assessment of the process is critical to make sure the efforts remain relevant to the every-changing culture of the times in which we live. **We are confident that churches who engage consistently in these efforts will see a transformation in both individuals and the church. And transformed churches will transform communities.** To God be the glory!

Following is a suggested bibliography gleaned from our visits. We particularly want to thank Dr. James Singleton for his contribution with many good recommendations from his syllabus at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

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