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DISCIPLESHIP AND TRAINING

The Man Who Started a Discipleship Movement

When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father. — JOHN 15:8

⚙ We may see a wide variety of so-called Christians, but the Bible recognizes only one kind—disciples. Disciples are those people whose hearts burn with an unquenchable hunger for God, desiring to know Him better every day. They are not perfect, but they love Him and continue to draw near Him to learn how to trust Him more and be changed into His likeness.

— WAYNE JACOBSEN, *The Naked Church*

“YOU’LL COME BACK here!”

Neil was sitting in a meeting in Long Beach, California, when the Lord clearly spoke these words into his heart. Not only did the Lord speak plainly, but He gave Neil an impression of the house he and his family would be living in; Neil knew the exact residence because he had lived in Long Beach for ten years earlier in his life.

Neil grew up on the beach and loved the ocean. He had been a lifeguard for several years in Long Beach but he had moved away and become a pastor in a traditional church.

Over time, Neil’s passion for discipleship, church planting, and mission made him rethink his calling to a traditional church. He began training someone with more of a pastoral heart to take over his position as pastor of the church so he would be free to plant churches. He had a vision to multiply small groups in an organic fashion—organic churches. He wanted to work in an urban area with a large university population—a city with a beach for baptisms, of course! Long Beach fit the description perfectly.

Neil had a team of a dozen people and a set of well-laid plans. They picked a location for a coffeehouse that they would use for evangelistic outreach.

The house Neil sensed God had chosen for him and his family became available. He and his wife, Dana, packed up their house and set out with their three kids, Lacey the dog, a cat, a bird, and all their possessions. They were ready to go into the coffeehouse business.

But when they went to pick up the key to their new

house, the owner broke the bad news: “The current tenant has decided not to move.”

Neil and his family stored all their possessions in the coffeehouse, then began a series of moves. The family slept on friends’ borrowed couches when they could; they stayed at a friend’s cabin in the mountains for a couple of days; for two weeks they stayed in a motel room.

One evening while they were still living in the motel, Neil was walking Lacey to their usual spot on top of a hill in the middle of Long Beach. There, surrounded by the sounds of the city—gunshots, cars screeching, people yelling at each other, dogs barking, sirens—he began weeping for the city and the darkness present there.

“Lord of the harvest, send workers to this city and change this place. Carve a church out of the darkness,” Neil begged God.

“I did not send you here to start coffeehouses; I sent you to start churches. Find an existing coffeehouse and pray a church into being there,” the Lord told him. So much for his team’s business plans!

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Seven weeks later, the tenant vacated the house. When Neil’s family was finally able to move in, someone even paid their motel bill. “It was God’s way of teaching us that we had to follow His way rather than pursuing our own plans,” Neil says.

One day when Neil and Lacey were exploring their new

neighborhood, Neil saw a coffeehouse four blocks away. He and the other team members started hanging out daily at the coffeehouse—drinking coffee, playing games, listening to people’s stories, and praying.

The team members met for church in Neil’s home. With a dozen adults, it was already a large group, but without a single new believer. Their mission to the city was clear. Every day, team members spent time at the coffeehouse getting to know the clientele.

The first night that someone from the coffeehouse came to the church, she said, “I go to a large church all the time, but God is here in this place!” The next week the woman brought her best friend, who then brought her best friend, who brought her best friend! One by one people began to come to Christ.

Multiplying God’s Way

In just a short time, Neil’s living room was filled with both new and older Christians. It was time to find a second coffeehouse.

The new coffeehouse turned out to be the hangout of a witches’ coven and various satanic groups, including some who believed they were vampires (some of them drank blood, filed their teeth down, or slept in coffins!). Two churches started from this new place, the second of these in the home of a believer named Michael.

As a younger man, Michael had prayed a “prayer of salva-

tion,” but he had never really committed everything in his life to Jesus. Michael had a painting business, but he also had a drug habit that eventually caused him to lose everything. His truck was repossessed, his house was foreclosed, his business went into bankruptcy, and all his employees left. His wife was fed up with Michael and his friends who were doing drugs, dealing drugs at their house, or stealing from them. When she left her husband, he hit rock bottom.

One day at the coffeehouse, a team member told Michael about Jesus. It was the message Michael wanted to hear; he fell on his knees and gave his life back to Christ. Immediately, he began sharing about Jesus with his friends.

A few weeks later, in the ocean on a frigid December day, Michael baptized four new disciples—people who used to do drugs with him. Neil believes the church was born at this point.

Neil intentionally separated the people meeting at Michael’s house from all the other Christians. He wanted it to be a church born out of the harvest of Michael’s relationships. The church was very evangelistic and grew quickly. It was kind of messy; it had no music and Neil was the only mature Christian involved. Everyone else was either a new believer or still a seeker. He tried encouraging a new Christian to lead the worship, but that person quit. So they started without music and with only the friends Michael had reached.

Another church started out of Michael’s house in a

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low-income apartment complex, but it only lasted about a year. As people became Christians, they moved out because they didn't want to stay in the ghetto.

But in six years, the church in Michael's home has started around thirty daughter churches, several granddaughter churches, and a few great-granddaughter churches. They have trained missionaries and sent them around the United States and to other countries, such as France, North Africa, Kosovo, Spain, Jordan, and Thailand.

Why are these churches multiplying so rapidly?

"Churches with this kind of reproduction are very harvest-oriented," Neil observes. "They start with nonbelievers, and the people who come to the Lord are trained right from the start to reach out to their circle of influence or *oikos*, the Greek word used in the New Testament that is often translated as 'household.' The other major factor is our use of Life Transformation Groups (LTGs). We find these make a big difference."

Life Transformation Groups

Neil developed LTGs when he was in a legacy church. Knowing that disciple making was the key to church growth, he experimented with different methods of making disciples. He used every curriculum he could find on the subject, but he would get bored after the third or fourth time through it. So he developed his own curriculum—and got bored with that even faster!

Neil brought together a group of people once a week to discuss whatever Christian book was new and interesting. He was soon tired of that too.

“What book could anyone read that would transform their life?” he asked himself one day.

At that moment the light went on. “The Bible!”

At their next meeting, he told the three college students in his group to put their other books away. “I want you to read the entire book of Proverbs before we get together again.”

“That much in one week? Don’t you know it’s thirty-one chapters?”

“Yes, the whole book in one week,” Neil insisted.

“What book could anyone read that would transform their life?”

Neil wanted to begin with the book of Proverbs because one of the young men he was working with was an extremely angry person. None of the other books they had been studying addressed that problem, whereas the book of Proverbs talks a lot about foolishness and anger.

As Neil himself read through Proverbs, he realized how powerful it was to read the entire book in one week. As he read, he designed symbols to identify what the verses were about. For example, if the verse was on money, he put a dollar symbol beside the verse. If it was on communication, he drew a tongue, or if it talked about anger or violence, he drew a pair of angry eyes. The book of Proverbs came alive to him.

When the group got together, the students admitted that they had read only six or seven chapters.

As Neil read, he designed symbols to identify what the verses were about. The book of Proverbs came alive to him.

Neil explained how using the symbols had made the difference for him. “You need to try this; it’s powerful!” Neil told them. “Let’s start again at chapter 1 and read it all the way through this week. Try using these symbols.”

Neil read the entire book again the next week. He gained even more insights and couldn’t wait to share with his students again. This time, no one had read even ten chapters.

“Okay, we’re going to keep reading Proverbs until we all finish it in the same week,” Neil announced, his frustration evident.

Then it dawned on him: “That’s not a bad idea!”

At the end of four weeks, they had all read the entire book of Proverbs in one week. Neil had read it all the way through, four weeks in a row, and it was changing him.

“I found wisdom pouring out of my life in every kind of situation,” he says.

But he recognized that the one student still had an anger issue. Neil decided it was time to move on to the book of James, which also addresses anger.

“Let’s read James seven times in one week. That’s once a day,” he instructed the group.

After reading the book of James forty-eight times, the angry student left the group. But there was another student, Kent, who had a drinking problem. At the age of twenty, Kent already had a DUI on his record. He had been involved

in an accident and his license had been revoked. His life was circling the drain before he gave his life to Christ. He immediately took to the Word and began to grow. Then came the week they were supposed to read through the book of Romans twice in one week.

“Did you read Romans through twice?” Neil asked Kent at their regular weekly meeting.

“No, I didn’t finish it,” Kent said. But he had a smile on his face.

“How far did you get?”

“I read it all through once, and the second time through I read fifteen and a half chapters.”

“But Kent, why didn’t you finish the last chapter? Romans is only sixteen chapters long!”

“Because I want to read it again!”

What a change! This is a young man who spends hours in the Word and he is growing and being transformed.

One day, Neil went alone to the restaurant where the group usually met. He sat down at a table and pulled out his Bible to spend some time with the Lord.

“You should be really proud of Kent. He’s doing great with his group,” Mary, a waitress, said to him. (She would later become a Christian.)

“Kent has a group?” asked Neil.

“Yes, every Monday morning he meets with a bunch of people here. I remember the ‘before’ Kent—before you started meeting together; the ‘after’ Kent is quite a change!”

Neil was astounded. “Kent has a group? Kent has a group!”

Neil called Kent. “What’s this I hear about you having a group?”

“I just started doing with some of my other friends what you do with me,” he explained.

Kent’s group grew into a larger group that broke into several smaller groups. Those groups then continued while Kent started another group in a different place with different people.

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Scripture reading, a list of accountability questions that Neil

had written, and prayer for nonbelievers form the foundation for the Life Transformation Groups. They have been used throughout the world to make disciples, leaders, leaders of leaders, church planters, missionaries, and pastors. LTGs are one of the main reasons that Michael’s church grew so rapidly. From the start, the new Christians were reading large quantities of Scripture (or listening to an audio version, if literacy was a problem), praying for their friends, and confessing their sins to one another.

Mentoring and Training

Neil devotes his life to creatively overseeing the reproduction of healthy disciples, leaders, churches, and movements, so leadership and training are second nature to him. In the traditional church he was part of, he created a leadership development system for training leaders within the context of the

local church. But after it was published, the Lord spoke to him.

“I want you to do it again from scratch, but with new converts this time.”

When Neil moved to Long Beach, he wasn't interested in starting churches as much as he wanted to create leadership farm systems.

“I wanted to produce leaders that would start organic churches that develop into movements,” he explains. “That involves mentoring and coaching church planters out in the field and creating resources to help them while they are on the job. That's how ‘Greenhouse’ started. My coworker Paul worked with me from the beginning to develop leadership farm systems for those starting organic churches. What has emerged is two weekends of training along with local monthly meetings. We have related everything to the principles used in gardening and farming—hence the name Greenhouse. We even use the term ‘organic church’ rather than house church, which has too many negative connotations in this country. People tend to associate that term with a small, inward-looking group of disgruntled Christians rather than a vibrant and missional church.

“Mentoring is very important in raising leaders for the harvest. Organic mentoring is dictated by the needs of the person being mentored, rather than a program designed by the mentor. I find that early on, a new Christian is eager to be mentored, but he hasn't done anything yet. I don't spend a lot of time with him at this stage, but I throw out the challenge

for him to do something in ministry. I'll spend time with him informally at church; then when he becomes fruitful, I will take more time with him.

"If I find someone very excited about serving the Lord, I'll say to him, 'Go and win someone to Jesus and start an LTG with him.' When they have done it once, I tell them to do it again. They can multiply these groups and start a church. At this point, when they have followers, I will mentor them. The mentoring process at this stage occurs once a week or every other week. As they grow more and more fruitful, they become more time conscious, and they mentor others. Then I shift to mentoring them once a month and coaching them quarterly. Finally I will say to them, 'Just call me if you need something or if a crisis arises.' Or maybe I will bump into them at a conference and spend time with them. It's a layer-upon-layer progression as they begin to invest in others and become less and less needy and dependent on me.

"It's a very organic process based on the needs of the person being mentored. A cookie-cutter approach doesn't work because people are different. But we had no way of knowing that until we got out there and got our hands in the soil.

"Many years ago we tried to start a church using conventional church growth methods. We produced a full-color brochure that went to thousands of homes in a new community. We had a worship band and did everything right. But it failed, and we realized we had not been planting a church, but were trying to buy a church.

"When the LTGs started, we realized we were planting

seed. It was a much more organic approach to raising leaders for the harvest. Mentoring waters that seed so it can bear much fruit.

“Greenhouse teaches that the best soil in which to plant seeds is where people are most needy. ‘Bad people make good soil—there’s a lot of fertilizer in their lives!’ So we need to be out in the fields, where the soil is good, planting seed. The seed of the Kingdom is the Word of God. We are looking for a ‘person of peace,’ someone who will open up his or her circle of influence to us and who will be the laborer within that people group.”

The best soil in which to plant seeds of faith is where people are most needy.

Greenhouse itself is producing an abundant harvest. Since 2000, Neil estimates that Greenhouse has trained 21,000 people from forty-five states and more than thirty countries in the principles of starting organic churches. Last year they averaged a weekend training every week somewhere in the world with over fifty trainers involved in teaching the principles. At least 20 percent of those trained go on to start a church. Greenhouse estimates that they are seeing more than a church a day as a result of the training. (This does not take into account all the daughter and subsequent generation churches that are starting too. When these are taken into account, that figure rises to more than two churches per day worldwide.)

In 2007, Ed Stetzer conducted a survey of some of the leaders who attended the Church Multiplication Associates (CMA) annual conference. Of the churches surveyed,

there was almost a 100 percent rate of reproduction—these churches were producing daughter churches. Around 25 percent of the growth was through new believers.¹

Discipleship and Training

Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus tell us to plant churches—He tells us to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). And when we do, church happens. As Roger Thoman says in his blog,

When I reach and disciple a viral discipler, that person is going to gather with other viral disciplers for encouragement, and then, as each of them reaches others, still more gatherings will take place. So, along the way, house churches are started. But rather than being the end game, they become a means to support the life that is being reproduced from one disciple to the next. The house church gatherings themselves will shift, change, morph, end, and re-establish themselves in new forms but *the movement of disciples who are reproducing disciples will continue.*²

LTGs are a pattern, not a program, of discipleship that produces outstanding results in people's lives. But more than that, anyone can start one! Their genius lies in their simplicity. Research conducted by Kent Smith of Abilene Christian University in 2003 showed that churches, whether legacy or simple, that also encouraged very small groups (two to three people) grew stronger and multiplied more rapidly than those that did not.³

Discipleship and training are important. Jesus spent much of His life with only twelve men. He lived with them, ate with them, and shared His heart with them. They saw Him cope with every kind of person and situation. Much of the discipling process consisted in answering their questions. He gave them tasks to do and instructions on how they were to be done and then asked them to report back to Him. He used their experiences for further training (Luke 10:1-23).

New Christians do not need mere head knowledge. They do not need our Christianity 101 courses. They need to become followers of Jesus. John 17:3 says, “And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.” As the new believer spends time with us in the presence of the Father, he will learn to know Jesus and how to recognize His voice. As she studies the Word with us, she will catch our hunger and love for the Word. As he watches us pray with others for their needs to be met, he will gain faith to go and do the same. The important thing is that he or she is constantly pointed to Jesus as the model.

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The second part of Luke 11:23 (NKJV) says, “He who does not gather with Me scatters.” A friend of ours in India tells of some interesting research. When a major evangelistic crusade comes to an Indian village, hundreds of people may become Christians. However, if you follow up a year later, the churches haven’t grown. Instead, the

Indian temples, which may not have had much activity prior to the crusade, have all increased and become livelier. It's as though people have become more spiritual, but because they have not been gathered into communities, the end effect has been to scatter them.

An important part of the follow-up for new believers is that they are gathered into small communities where they can grow. It may be as simple as two or three sharing their lives together in some kind of accountability group where they read (or listen to) Scripture, share their struggles, and pray for their friends. This provides a safe place from which the new believer can be encouraged to reach out to his or her old friends. New wine needs new wineskins.

Visit <http://www.cmresources.org> for more information on Life Transformation Groups and Greenhouse training.