

Making Disciples in a Local Church Context.

Chris Densham

I suppose my initial reaction was; “It all depends what you mean by making disciples”. For me it’s the whole process of seeing not-yet Christians come to faith and then seeing them grow to become mature followers of Jesus.

There’s a lot of very helpful material around connected with the coming-to-faith bit. In particular the shift from a decision-making event to a process. From conversations I have had, I’m not sure how far down this concept has filtered into many of our churches but we’ll get there!

My experience of the coming-to-faith process is that things like Alpha, the Y-Course and so on are invaluable, but it does take people time. Many are coming from so far back. I still remember a lady attending one of our midweek small groups for the first time and after a little while as the discussion around Ephesians continued asking: “Will this bloke Paul you keep talking about be here next week?” It really did happen!

The time factor has meant that we’ve had quite a few folk stay in a small group after Alpha, still not knowing what they believe. Eighteen months to two years later they discover that they now believe this stuff!

In the UK we face a situation we’ve not faced for generations and traditional approaches don’t work anymore. Historically most of our post-conversion discipling material has been information based. The assumption being, presumably, that if you give people the right information, then it will transform their lives. If we are to see the transformation of people’s lives it’s not merely information they need, but values-based material.

There is a bit of a clash here with some of our evangelical culture where we see telling people the truth is sufficient. If coming to faith is seen increasingly within the context of a journey, then how much more is discipleship an on-going journey? In the journey to faith and especially making progress afterwards Lyn and I have found three of the more significant factors to have been:

a. Relationships and Community.

People need to be in relationship with people they trust. For us that has been belonging to a group where they can ask tough questions and not be given pat answers. In a group where there is authenticity, where experienced Christians admit their struggles but re-affirm that absolute trust in God. For many discovering there were people here they could trust was a significant step towards a willingness to deal with tough issues in their lives. It often means relaxing together on “their” patch (i.e. in their homes).

b. The way issues are dealt with

We have discovered that as people begin to talk openly and freely their theology is often warped and there are significant issues in their lives that need addressing. Our temptation is jump into “fix-it” mode, to explain where they are wrong and tell them how they should behave. We have discovered that God is a better judge of these things and He does really know what He’s doing! Obviously there may be things that do need addressing at the time but we found that over a period of time, as people determined to follow Jesus, He raised these things in their lives. They were then *really* ready to deal with them.

It becomes a careful balance between what is on our agenda for the evening and what may be on theirs because of what's happening in their lives. Sometimes (often?) what is going on in their lives is a God-given opportunity for us to grasp. People are much more teachable in these moments because we're addressing their real issues and we need to allow the Spirit to lead us into truth.

c. Get them to take responsibility right from the beginning

In the context of the small group we followed what is I suppose a classic cell format so:

- We studied the Bible together; but stuck to straightforward applications with an emphasis on "Is there anything you need to do in the light of this?" Many of the studies were around values and behaviour.
- We taught them to pray by using simple methods (such as sticking to one sentence, write them out first etc.) and we expected them to pray.
- We got them to prepare and lead some parts of the evening. So we encouraged them to choose two Christian songs they enjoyed from a CD and play them to us. We never called it leading worship as it would frighten the life out of them.
- We encouraged faith sharing, even when there wasn't any yet, because when they are excited about the journey of discovery they talk about it. We supported them within non-Christian friendships. Indeed when they had friends in trouble they would often bring them to the group for prayer and support.

In summary making disciples would be great if we could get a one size fits all package that we simply stuck people through. Secretly many of us are still looking for the package!! The reality is it's not supposed to be like that, every person is different so each journey is different. It's often very messy!! But then so are babies and early childhood, come to think of it so are the teenage years! Paul's words in I Thessalonians 2:8 sum up his approach "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us."