LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Disciple Making Plan Paper

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Discipleship

by

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**Introduction**

The lack of effective discipleship training in American churches is a common topic that is deliberated by church leaders. In general, church leaders agree that the Great Commission is important for disciples to devote their efforts toward, and for the churches they attend to gather the disciples that were created by the members for worship. All of the main-line denominations are declining in attendance, which provides evidence that the disciple-making process in churches is not being effective.

This paper will present a disciple-making plan that will document the vision used to form the plan, the values which will provide the motivation and boundaries within which the plan will operate, the views of those who will operate the plan and the key nomenclature that these individuals will agree to utilize, the vehicles which will be used to organize, produce, and covey the discipleship process and the verifiers that will be established to monitor the effectiveness of the disciple-making plan.

This plan will be presented to the elders of The Crossing Church in Tampa, Fl for their consideration for implementation and inclusion into the ten-year strategic plan of the church. The Crossing Church has a vision to grow its active attendance from approximately 4,500 per week to 20,000 per week in 2027. This growth will require a successful effort to create generative disciples who are actively evangelizing in their community and are demonstrating Christ-like lives that others will find attractive. Each year, new disciples will need to be released to pursue their God-given tasks in the community for this plan to become effective. Beyond numerical growth, it is the Church’s desire to see men and women drawn closer to their Lord and for this church to become a plan that honors God and receives His blessing to greatly minister to the people in the Tampa Bay region.

**Vision**

The disciple-making plan of The Crossing Church seeks to specifically align with the mandate given by Jesus in Matthew 28: 19-20.[[1]](#footnote-2) The efforts of the church will be to reach those who are separated from God and share the gospel with them, where ever they might be. This will be done by the people of the church, who have become disciples of Jesus. They will engage with those around them and endeavor to establish trust relationships with those in their spheres of influence. This activity will fulfill the first part of the mandate to “go and tell” others about Jesus. The second part of the mandate is to teach others to obey the commandments that Jesus has given. This activity sprints forth from the hearts of disciples who wish to obey their Lord and who understand that this investment in others is foundational to how God intends to use disciples to share their faith with a lost and dying world.

Primarily, the disciples at The Crossing Church will be engaging with other individuals who live in the Tampa Bay region. Disciples are encouraged to be inventive and to be willing to disciple others where ever they might reside. Use of technology is encouraged and engaging via telephone or online video conferences are options that are encouraged. The goal of this effort is to support and train new believers to become competent in developing their relationship with the Lord Jesus and to be able to properly read and understand Scripture. They are then expected to be able to lead those that they interact with to a similar understanding of how to establish a relationship with Jesus and to behave as a disciple.

Overall, the vision of The Crossing Church is to see all of the believers of the church to be engaged in directly discipling at least one new believer each year. The ability to assist new believers become disciple making disciples is a key strategy of the church and one that is being given a considerable amount of focus by the ministry staff. This view of vision development is encouraged by Putnam.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**Values**

The Crossing Church seeks to follow the guidelines provided in Scripture to define the values by which its members operate. The first value answers the question that asks, “why do we gather”. Hebrews 10:25 encourages the gathering of the saints to encourage each other in the work of the Lord. This gathering allows the disciples to worship together, receive teaching and exhortation from the church leaders and coordinating activity to establish ministries that work to serve those inside and outside of the church body.

Another key value of the church is to follow the model of the early church and to gather in relational small groups that meet in homes or the marketplace (Acts 2: 42-27). The early church regularly met to discuss Scripture, share meals and fellowship, and to meet each other’s needs. Our desire is that small groups would become the primary connection point of the church for those that are lost or those that are new to the church. The small groups are also tasked with being outward facing towards the community rather than being inward facing towards other church members.

The church places a high value upon prioritizing unity among believers as was commanded by Jesus in John 13:35. This ability to choose each other is a powerful witness to those outside of faith in Jesus and a powerful detriment when others view believers undermining each other. The ability to see others as more important than themselves, as it encouraged in Phil 2:3, is a defining attribute of a disciple of Christ.

Another value that is assumed to be foundational to becoming a disciple is that the believer has recognized that they are a sinner, that they confess their sinful ways, and repent from continuing that lifestyle of rebellion. They confess that Jesus is Lord and believe He is risen from the dead. This establishes them as a child of God, and they are saved by their faith in Him and His gift of salvation (Rom 10:9).

The church teaches that salvation results in regeneration and the new believer is healed from the curse of sin. 2 Cor 5:17 declares that a person who is saved is a new creation in Christ. This newness occurs whenever the believer first turns their life over to the Lordship of Christ and they will remain His child forever. This allows the new believer to have security in their faith and to begin to build a new life as a disciple of Christ.

 This passage also conveys that the new believer has been set free from the power of sin in their lives. Before, they were slaves to sin. Now, the Holy Spirit comes to live in their lives and begins to teach them and lead them in the process of sanctification (John 14:26). The fact that God comes to indwell the believer is a key distinction for Christ-followers as compared to other religions.

Disciples should be known as “People of the book”. The choice to live according to the revelation that is provided in Scripture is a key attribute of a sold-out believer in Christ. 2 Tim 3:16 exhorts believers to recognize that all Scripture is valuable to their lives and disciples are to invest significant time and effort into exposing themselves to the Word and to using it to guide their behavior on a daily basis. By engaging in this on-going learning, they become equipped as disciples.

The church embraces the idea that the church members should be empowered to conduct ministry in view of the text of verse Eph 4:12. The church agrees with Dempsey’s view that “we understand the pastor’s main job is to “equip” the saints to do the works of service “[[3]](#footnote-4) The ministry staff works diligently to remove barriers for the disciples to work in service to others and to train the members to be effective in ministry. Each disciple is encouraged to find a place of service within the church and to actively seek ways to serve others outside of the church. This process aligns with Putnam’s view that ministries should “develop the process for creating disciples, then put this process into the hands of the frontline soldiers.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

**Views**

The church operates with a specific nomenclature that defines expectations and roles within the church. This process is advised by Putnam where he suggested that a ministry should create a “common language and definition of terms.”[[5]](#footnote-6) At The Crossing Church, we work with the following definitions and perspectives:

Church – the church is the word used to describe the gathering of the believers that worship and serve together under the leadership of a senior pastor. This gathering of believers gathers in differing locations, called campuses, that all work together in an effort to reach the lost in the Tampa Bay region.

Pastor – the term pastor is used to define the paid staff of the church whose role is to provide spiritual and operational leadership to the people of the church. Pastors are expected to have theological training and experience in leading people to understand spiritual concepts and to engage in the ministries of the church.

Gospel – the term gospel describes the “good news” of the saving work of Jesus Christ which is offered as a free gift to all mankind that are willing to acknowledge their sins, repent from those sins, and choose to follow Jesus’ commandments and guidance as disciples.

Evangelism – the term evangelism relates to the effort to share the gospel with those who have not heard it before or who have not understood Jesus’ message. Evangelism is proactive and seeks to bless others by working to develop relationships that enable sharing the gospel in a respectful manner that can be trusted by the hearer.

Discipleship – the term discipleship describes the journey that a new believer partakes in to learn and apply Scripture to their lives so that they can effectively understand and embrace the concepts and commands that Jesus provided to His followers. This journey is intended to be a guided tour where a mature disciple joins with a new believer and helps them to develop into a disciple in a respectful and caring relationship.

Disciple – a disciple is a follower of Jesus Christ who has accepted His lordship over their lives. They seek guidance from the Holy Spirit as they spend time reading Scripture and asking what tasks and purposes, they should be pursing to fulfill their specific calling in life. Disciples embrace the commandments given by Scripture; specifically, the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20) and the Great Commandment (Matt 22: 36-40).

**Vehicles**

Vehicles can be described as the methods, structures and systems that aid a church in implementing their discipleship plan. These vehicles are critical to enabling the discipleship plan to gain traction and to move forward to meaningful impact.

The first vehicle to consider is the structure that the church will use to support the discipleship effort. The Crossing Church has embraced the concept of being a church “of” small groups.[[6]](#footnote-7) The church does not maintain education groups on Sunday mornings and has completed pursued setting up small groups that meet off-campus. The Crossing Church has placed the discipleship ministry within the Lifegroups ministry. This ministry has the responsibility to prepare leaders to lead small groups that meet in disciple’s homes. These groups have the primary duty to create life-giving relational care to those that attend. The primary focus of these groups is to “care” for those that attend. The groups are encouraged to follow a four-meeting cycle. In the first meeting, the group leader works to encourage the members to share their life stories and to share prayer needs they might have. The leader then leads prayer for each person before moving on to the next person. In the next meeting, the group is encouraged to go into the community and to serve the community in a manner that they agree. Some groups go to mission partners that the church has organized to serve, while others identify needs that they see and wish to meet. The third meeting in the cycle is another time to share and pray for each other. The final meeting is a “fun” gathering, where members are encouraged to invite their friends who are not part of a church. These meetings can occur weekly or be every other week. At the end of the four-meeting cycle, the group begins the cycle anew. As relationships develop, the leaders and the mature disciples in the group are encouraged to invite the non-believers and new believers into a discipleship group that is outside of the lifegroup.[[7]](#footnote-8) The disciple/leader is meant to be an influential and trusted person that can answer questions for the “students” and aid them in their journey towards becoming a mature disciple. The church concurs with Dempsey when he asserts “The objective of disciple making is to cooperate with God in creating more disciple makers.”[[8]](#footnote-9)

The marketing vehicle of the church is supported by the teaching pastor team who routinely present the need to become a disciple of Christ from the teaching platform. Printed materials that describe lifegroups to guests also describe the pathway to discipleship as being part of a relational lifegroup.

The curriculum vehicle is a series of studies which have been developed by the pastors of the church. This curriculum aids the disciple/leader as they guide the non-believer towards a saving knowledge of Christ and understanding what they are being saved from. The series of seven studies moves a new believer through topics titles, Saved, Healed, Set Free, Equipped, Empowered, and Serving. These studies were written to give multiple layers of information based upon the study strengths of the student. References to web articles, music, video lessons, and podcasts are provided as well as written content. All of the material references Scripture and aligns to the truths shared there.

The church intentionally refrains from creating events that will overtax the members schedules. The priority of lifegroups is constantly highlighted and the people of the church are encouraged to invest their lives in the groups. Four times a year, there are connection events where members who are not part of a group are encouraged to meet group leaders and pick a group to attend.

The church utilizes church budget to pay for the pastors and support staff that help to support the lifegroups ministry. These pastors and staff spend their time assisting new believers in connecting to groups and in training new group leaders in best practices for group leadership and discipleship leadership. Budget dollars are also utilized to support the mission partners that they lifegroups identify as targets to be served.

The ongoing communication plan is to provide print, video, and podcasts that are provided weekly to the membership that gives training tips, meaningful examples, and direction to the congregation regarding lifegroups and discipleship.

**Verifiers**

Verifiers are the measurement tools that are created to give church leadership visibility to the effectiveness of the discipleship process. These verifiers can also be called metrics. Putnam encourages church leaders to “Constantly assess, correct course, and encourage.”[[9]](#footnote-10) The church utilizes software that allows the group leaders to easily report specific attendance of individuals from the cellphones. The computer maintains information about the overall group attendance and the specific attendance of individuals over time. Church leadership wishes to see that groups grow in numbers of attenders over time, see individual attendance of members grow over time, see that groups engage in serving activities, and see that the number of individuals participating in discipleship groups grows. They also monitor the progress of the developing disciples through the various studies. Another significant measurement is to see if mature disciples report being involved in discipling a new believer on an on-going basis. Putnam recommends moving from attracting and gathering to developing and releasing disciples to ministry.[[10]](#footnote-11)

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented the disciple making plan that is being utilized by The Crossing Church. This plan is guided by the vision and values of the church, which highly values the need to reach the lost by sharing the saving message of the gospel, then intentionally developing relationships with the new believers that lead to the opportunity to join with them on the discipleship journey. Clarity is provided by the views of the church that define the nomenclature and perspectives which is used in the discipleship ministry. This clarity assists the mature disciples and the new believers in understanding the rationale for the process of development that both the mature disciples and the new believers engage. The paper continued by defining the vehicles that propel the ministry forward, each of which require diligence and skill to utilize. These vehicles require unique training and gifting in order to realize the maximum effectiveness in conveying the need for discipleship and providing the discipleship to the new believers. Finally, the paper reviewed the verifiers that are used to monitor the health and growth of the discipleship ministry and the disciples that are involved with the ministry. The desire of The Crossing Church is to be an ever-expanding gathering of disciples who are actively reaching others with the saving knowledge of Christ and working to prepare their place alongside other mature disciples who continue the cycle of evangelism and discipleship as they pursue sanctification in Christ.

**Bibliography**

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington, and Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Rod Dempsey & Dave Earley, *Disciple Making Is . .* (B&H Publishing Group, 2013). Retrieved from https://app.wordsearchbible.com, p. 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington, and Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Rod Dempsey & Dave Earley, *Disciple Making Is . .* (B&H Publishing Group, 2013). Retrieved from https://app.wordsearchbible.com, p. 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid., p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid., p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington, and Robert E. Coleman, *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid., p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)