[Movemental Disciple Making: Beyond Institutions and Individualism](https://abtslebanon.org/2022/11/24/movemental-disciple-making-beyond-institutions-and-individualism/)

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“*Just get them to come to church and leave the rest up to me*,” explained my pastor.

This was the beginning of my ministry into disciple making many years ago during my college years. Each Sunday, I tried to bring a few new people to church. I was pretty good at this role. For all of us in attendance, the sermon was intended as the primary vehicle for evangelism and spiritual formation.

I don’t recall many of the sermons, though I worked hard at listening and learning. The focus was on information transfer: lecture and reception. In Christ, I matured. A few of my friends ended up following Jesus as a result of coming to church. But most didn’t.

I realize now that this is actually indicative of a wider practice in many Christian traditions: ministry was basically the job of the professional, the Pastor. My role as a church member was to bring people to the expert. In theory, we all believed in the priesthood of all believers and that Church was more than a once-a-week event. But our belief was betrayed by our practice.

At the least, my pastor is to be commended for his focus on developing followers of Christ. This practice is less emphasized in many churches today. Sometimes it seems that we do everything *except* make disciples. Yet among all the ministries that battle for the attention of the church, [Alan Hirsch reminds us](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Forgotten_Ways/9AreDAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22We+are+dealing+with+that+single+most+crucial+factor+that+will+in+the+end+determine+the+quality+of+the+whole%E2%80%94if+we+fail+on+this+point,+then+we+must+fail+in+all+the+others.%22&pg=PT119&printsec=frontcover) why we should prioritize discipling: “We are dealing with that single most crucial factor that will in the end determine the quality of the whole—if we fail on this point, then we must fail in all the others.”

God’s multifaceted mission is ultimately to bring the healing reign of King Jesus to all nations (Rev. 22:2). The scope of God’s holistic mission includes all groups of people everywhere (Rev. 5:9). In Christ, we participate with him in his mission (Jn. 20:21). So without more Christ followers and more Christlikeness, God’s redemptive movement to the nations does not advance.

Paul explained the essence of this movement dynamic in Ephesians 4:1-16. The earthly ministry of Jesus has finished, and he has ascended (vs 8). Yet the movement of God must proceed. So what does Jesus do? He gives innovative leaders (vs 11) to “equip” people (vs 12) for service, so that the “fullness of Christ” (vs 13) continues. Paul echoes this chain of generational growth in other places, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable people who will be qualified to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Jesus mandates us to continue this ministry of discipling “all the nations” (Mt. 28:19).

In fact, disciple making is the explicit lens by which we can view the life and ministry of Jesus. He came to redeem and recreate sinners to be like himself, and they in turn collectively reproduce. Jesus started a movement of disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus.

The New Testament Greek word for disciple, *mathētēs*, is quite simply a beginner who follows someone greater, and it implies a close relationship in the process. As a novice, a disciple doesn’t need to be mature before mimicking the master. In fact, one chief way a disciple of Jesus grows to maturity is essentially by making more disciples of Jesus.

As I was learning this counter-intuitive principle, I started to grow in my desire to be “with” Christ and to help others do the same (Mk. 3:14). Facilitating Bible studies and mentoring people individually seemed to activate my faith and provide the context to see others become followers of Christ as well. One by one, I hoped people would become like Jesus and follow him. But this one-by-one strategy of individuals who would eventually (hopefully) join my church was an exercise in addition, not multiplication (cf. Gen. 1:28; Acts 6:7; 12:24).

Shortly after college I discovered a phenomenon known as *church planting movements*. This disciple-making approach was different from my previous experiences with pastor-centric and one-by-one mentoring models. It was not an institutional or individualistic affair. Movements felt both ancient *and* new, reminding me of the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the letters in the New Testament.

This provoked a more than two-decade search to answer the question: How are disciples multiplied? I am not referring to “best practices” which seem to turn us into technicians or mechanics. Nor am I searching for a simple ministry formula to implement regardless of context. Instead, I have been searching for a missional-theological lens to properly understand 1) the nature of disciple multiplication in the Bible, and 2) how disciples are multiplied in diverse contexts today.

Through visiting and studying several of these movements and [eventually editing a book on the topic](https://missionbooks.org/products/motus-dei) to learn from experienced practitioners and theologians (many of the ideas below are theirs), I have identified five characteristics of Christward movements of disciple making. A brief overview is provided here not because I have arrived at some final understanding, but to offer a way of explaining my journey to discover disciple making in a Church-as-movement paradigm. My hope is that it will provide you with fresh eyes to see this important ministry in new ways.

1. **Ecclesial Network**

Disciples reproduce best in organic systems of leadership and relationships, rather than in the hierarchical structures of institutions. Movements embrace the phenomenon of multi-individual conversions within social networks. But they don’t stop there; they jump to other peoples and cultures.

Movements more naturally rely on disciples’ giftings to create appropriate ways and structures to make more disciples. This requires a greater effort in leadership development, not less. The focus is not *enlarging* churches, but instead, *multiplying* churches. [Movemental ecclesiology](https://abtslebanon.org/2021/04/15/movemental-ecclesiology-recalibrating-church-for-the-next-frontier/) consists mainly of flexible, indigenous microchurches or house church networks.

1. **Christward Vision**

A clear sense of christological vision provides direction to disciple makers. In all authentic movements, it is Jesus who is up front and center, not a brand, politics, or any other pathetic counterfeit. The vision is fixed upon Jesus Himself, working to fulfill His global purpose.

It has been said, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men and women to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.” God is no mere tribal or national deity. He is the majestic King of Kings and Lord of Lords whose glory will fill the earth as waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). He alone is worthy of sacrificial labor and love.

1. **Inclusive Identity**

Members of disciple-making movements feel a shared, collective sense of belonging with others. The boundaries for membership are open and inclusive, not neat and tidy. Churches identify theologically as a missional community of Jesus followers created by the Spirit of God. According to the need, functions adapt from that identity. While institutions may offer support and resources, new local churches are indigenous, autonomous from outside dependency or control.

As followers of a wild Messiah, disciple makers embrace risk and thrive in it. Groups of disciples are open and boldly looking to connect with new groups of people using social-spiritual entrepreneurs like evangelists and people of peace (Lk. 10:5). There is often a preference for working with the marginalized and oppressed in society that leads to grass-roots holistic transformation.

1. **Living Energy**

Disciple-making movements are alive with energy. Communal and frequent engagement with the Bible, accompanied by abundant prayer and fasting, collectively serve as the heartbeat of disciple making. Regular training events with local worship music and arts connect God’s story with the story of that culture. The Holy Spirit uses this to further animate followers of Christ with a passion for him and for connecting people with his rule in their lives and communities.

1. **Obedient-Faith Activity**

Finally, energy must translate into action that propels the disciple-making movement forward, which in turn must sustain energy for more activity. The movement is comprised not of a professional class of Christians but of ordinary disciples who simply obey Jesus as a community. They hear His voice as they read Scripture. They expect that Christ’s Lordship will bring changes in all areas of life: business, education, development, relief, disability ministry, etc. True friendship and sacrificial love make disciples (Jn. 15:12-13).

**Conclusion**

Institutional churches and one-on-one discipling have essential, important roles to play in the life of the Church. But standing alone, they are more likely to play a maintenance role in God’s movement than a catalytic one. The types of disciples multiplied within movements initiate the Kingdom in places where the church once was or has never been. As you read the Bible through the *Network-Vision-Identity-Energy-Activity* lens above, I hope that you gain fresh insights to practice this new-yet-ancient approach to disciple making. The harvest awaits.