

Why and How Our **Missional** **Discipleship** Training Prepared Us to Respond to COVID-19

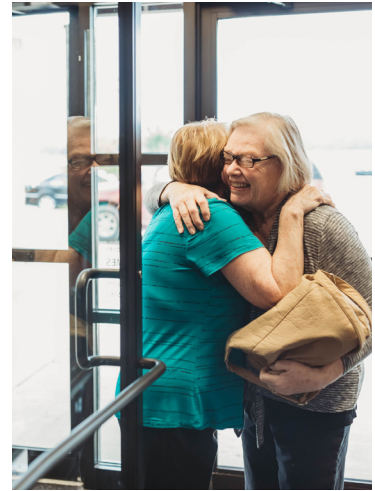
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I attended one of the largest church conferences in North America at the beginning of March this year in Orlando, Florida just as we were all starting to hear about the impact of the coronavirus. As I sat in this 5,000 seat auditorium for three days, with standing room only of pastors, missionaries, and world class leaders of virtually every church tribe and denomination, I heard the same theme repeatedly: the church has been too heavily influenced by the consumer mentality of society and is measuring success based on numbers, and we need to get back to the roots of the multipliable discipleship Jesus modeled.

The church-growth model is rather simple: you acquire or develop excellent leaders, who deliver an excellent product (Sunday services, church programs, personal care), and the result is you attract more people who want to consume those products/services. The better the product, the more customers you acquire, and if success is based on numbers, this is the way to be successful and grow a church. It boils down to how well the leaders can deliver.

Jesus is not counting how many people are attending our churches, however, but how many people are coming to faith and being discipled, and how many homes, neighborhoods, subcultures, and cities are being transformed by the gospel. And pointedly, how disciples of Jesus and churches can multiply this ethos among everyday people. In other words, Jesus isn't looking for superstar pastors who are gifted enough to draw big crowds but everyday people who can lead a few and see this exponentially multiply.



One of the best pictures of what this looks like is Acts 2:42-47.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”



There was something, however, jarring to me as I sat there for those three days. This message of moving from a consumer/delivery model of ministry to a missional discipleship/development model of ministry took hold of me back in 2008 when I was first introduced to a group of leaders connected to a ministry called 3DM. Through my interaction with a growing number of these leaders, I have experienced significant areas of growth personally, in my marriage and family, and in our church. This training wasn't about new ways of doing things. Rather, it was about going back to the roots of New Testament discipleship and the patterns Jesus taught and modeled. And while certainly I still have a long way to go in this, I have been privileged to help train pastors and churches in the same way. Currently, we are in a consistent coaching relationship with about 50 pastors and churches.

There is a growing sentiment within the church across our country that we have measured success in the wrong ways. After all, the word “church” is used twice in the gospels, and the word “disciple” is used 200 times in the gospels. I will never forget when I heard Mike Breen make the following statement, and now I hear it by virtually every influential church leader in America, “If you try to grow the church, you may or may not get disciples, but if you grow disciples, you will always get the church.”

But while this seismic shift has a growing number of advocates across all denominational spectrums within the American church, it is still a rather small prophetic voice against the backdrop of a prevailing and declining church culture that is half asleep and often fixated on external success or simply self-preservation. Eighty percent of churches and denominations in the U.S. are currently at a plateau or in decline.

And so what was so jarring to me during this conference is that for a large segment of the American church this transition of going back to the roots of Jesus is still in the idea stages with only small steps of implementation. What encouraged me the most, however, as I sat there for three days is the fact this message is now mainstream among our most influential church leaders and that a growing number of pastors want to see this shift take place in both existing churches and new church plants.

It is true that the churches who have been making this intentional shift for many years, like our church and a growing number of churches across our nation, still have a long way to go, but it has been clear these last two months that the progress that we have made significantly impacted how we responded to this current COVID-19 crisis. And at the same time, there is an opportunity during this crisis for churches who haven't made as much progress in this regard, to accelerate that progress in several ways.

This discipleship-focus we have been making with everyday people, and training others to make as well, directly impacted the way we have responded to this crisis.

Below are eight specific ways we responded to this crisis that were directly tied to our missional discipleship training:



1

Revelation AND Response

MATTHEW 7:24-27

We believe that God is constantly speaking to us and revealing himself in multiple ways. This happens foundationally through Scripture but also through other people, circumstances, creation, promptings, conviction, the conscience, dreams, prophecy, prayer, etc. While this pandemic took us all by surprise, it did not take God by surprise. And while he is not the author of suffering, sadness, and sickness, it is the result of The Fall, and he does speak to us in the midst of our brokenness and trials to draw us to him.

Our first question wasn't, "How can we keep ourselves safe during this time of crisis?" Rather, our first question was this: "What is God saying to us during this time of national and global brokenness?" And the second question is the follow up, "And what will we do about it?"

These are the two questions Jesus trained his disciples to ask, and they are the two questions we train everyone within our church to ask as they grow in their relationship with God and respond to any circumstances in life. Being trained to ask these two questions in all circumstances changed the trajectory of my response and our response to COVID-19. What I heard and we heard together was this, "Don't get on the other side of this pandemic without allowing God to change us personally, change our church, and change our city in the ways God wants to change us." This initial and foundational response set the tenor of the way we responded from Day One.

2

Family AND/ ON Mission

ACTS 2:42-47

When we asked this fundamental question from the very beginning about how God wanted to change us by the time we reach the other side of this crisis, we didn't then have to wonder or figure out where he wanted to change us. We are crystal clear in our church what we are ultimately going after in this life and the above passage in Acts 2:42-47 is one of our best barometers.

And at the same time, we know the strongholds in our society and culture that war against laying down our lives to follow Jesus. For example, we know that for us Americans we have an

independent spirit that makes sharing life with others difficult. We know our schedules are so packed and over-committed that we don't have time for community-life with others and also having margin to rest well to clearly hear from God. We know that we are to orient our lives around the same three things Jesus oriented his life around: relationship with the Father, relationship with the family of believers, and relationship with a lost world needing the gospel.

Because of this training and our clear biblical focus, our attention did not simply jump to pastoral care predominantly as a gut reaction to the fear and need. We knew that would be a vital part of it, but our response was measured and holistic based on our discipleship training in Scripture. We said that we have to find a way to gather people together in family and community, and we also have to create space and ways for people to both seek God and seek those in our sphere of relationships who need Jesus. We knew there was a unique opportunity for both family community and missional outreach, and we wanted to respond holistically.



Gathered AND Scattered

ACTS 5:42

In a church growth culture with a focus on creating excellent goods and services for people to consume, there is a dominant focus on the Sunday morning experience. However, we had already been trained that there is equal importance between the gathered setting and the scattered setting. As we have grown in this balance over the years, this has required us to pull a portion of our energy and resource off of the gathered setting and place it on developing the scattered setting. The development of the scattered church cannot just get our leftover energy and resource. This is where people gather together in small to mid-size communities in homes, build relationships, love one another, share resource, and invite people who are open to God to join. We typically call this a “family on mission” lifestyle and it can happen in a variety of group settings outside the four walls of the building.

And so when we asked the fundamental question of how God wanted us changed on the other side, we knew right away that the harder of the two areas of gathered and scattered in our

American culture is the “scattered church.” There are a number of inherent strongholds in our culture that cause this to be so, many of which have already been stated.

This meant that while we needed to make this massive transition in a very short amount of time of getting our “gathered” Sunday services online and accessible for people from home, the bigger challenge would be getting people to connect in the “scattered setting” in a virtual environment as well. Here is where the “inflection point” for us hit hard. For the first time in recent history, due to growing isolation people’s desire for community was at an all-time high, and at the same time their over-commitment and active mobility were at an all-time low. An incredible combination. We knew we could not miss this moment for the cause of the “scattered church.”

And so during four long and arduous weeks, our staff went into overdrive primarily to build an entire virtual scattered church infrastructure that could connect people to one another to leverage the moment. Of the 1,000 people who attend one of our locations, before the pandemic, we had about 25% of our adults living out some form of organized scattered church within a missional community, small group, or some kind of other setting. And since the national average is in the single digits within this area, our intentionality over the years has at least seen some fruit.

However, because we were able to leverage the historic time, we helped nearly triple that number of those willing to join a weekly online virtual group. We literally had hundreds and hundreds of people join for the first time. We have never in the history of our church had this high a percentage actively involved in an organized environment of the scattered church. We believe the relationship connections being made in these groups are going to have an ongoing spiritual impact.



4

Fivefold Diversity AND Church-wide Alignment

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

Most of the people in our church body have been trained in the fivefold gifting of apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, teaching, and pastoral. We have had different seasons of emphasis within these fivefold areas. While we always need all of them, we knew immediately that this pandemic was going to be an opportunity for those particularly with pastoral gifts to shine.

Self-awareness of gifting is crucial to empowerment. Not only did we need our church members with pastoral gifts to minister to one another with love and support during difficult days, we needed those with the other gifts to engage right away as well.

We also knew that while pastoral care would be high, we could not afford to be inward-focused only. We needed to use this opportunity to seek out people who may have more spiritual openness than ever by both caring for them and engaging them with the gospel.

With both this care and outreach focus in mind, we decided we needed something we could do as an entire church that would bring us together—a focus that would be aligned in all areas of ministry. This caused us to research and pray over several possible church-wide initiatives and then made the decision to focus on a 10-week series called Alpha. This would be the focus of our Sunday services, sermons, groups, youth ministry, children's ministry, prayer ministry, etc.—all within a virtual setting. Groups would naturally draw people together and create opportunity for care, both inside and outside the church, but because Alpha has an outward orientation, it also created opportunity to invite friends, neighbors, and co-workers into it. It would be a great mix of inward and outward as we seek God together upwardly.

And so in addition to the high percentage of our church connecting to one another in weekly groups, we have had many new people now invited into these groups as well. In fact, as this is being written now, we had two young adults come to faith last night in one of our groups.

5

Development AND Delivery

ACTS 4:13

In the old paradigm of consumer ministry, this crisis would have resulted in our staff and elders providing all the care for the entire congregation. However, we made an intentional effort not to do this. We didn't want the few caring for the masses but the masses empowered to care for one another. We did divide the entire congregation into segments of people initially, but the focus was to make an initial contact with everyone, and then personally invite them to join a group. We wanted everyone to have a personal touch by a leader and then be encouraged to see the benefit of being a part of a virtual community group.

While developing this virtual infrastructure was demanding and costly to our staff, it was only for the four weeks while we were developing it. Now that the vast majority are in groups and leading/caring for one another, the pressure is off the few leaders to do it all.

Our leaders still deliver quality sermons, online experiences, daily devotionals, training for ministries, training for leading groups, environments for prayer, engagement with people in need, etc., but our leaders are creating an empowerment culture where people feel connected to one another and not dependent on simply the few leaders to feel connected.

6

Collaborative AND Directive

JOHN 15:12-16

Our leaders have been trained over the years that Jesus led in primarily four different ways depending on the needs of his followers: L1) Directive style, L2) Coaching/Shepherding style, L3) Collaborative style, and L4) Delegating style. In a crisis and when there is a time of urgency, people need clear direction. As the senior leader when the crisis hit and we were no longer able to meet, I knew our gathered and scattered environment needed to be converted to a virtual reality immediately. We needed to make dozens of decisions swiftly. We did not have weeks or months to pray over stuff and be collaborative.

I was more assertive during these four weeks than perhaps at any other time in our history. We built a gathered and scattered virtual infrastructure with an all church-wide 10 week initiative

in a four week timeframe that under normal circumstances would have taken us at least 6-9 months to plan and prepare.

Now that this is built, my leadership has moved out of the L1 directive phase and back into our more normal L3 collaborative phase. Our staff responded in amazing ways and also had to mimic some of this L1 leadership within their own ministry settings for a time. A portion of our staff had to put in many extra hours during these four weeks, but the response from the congregation to how our leaders led has been overwhelming. The church body could not be more supportive.

Leading this way, and knowing what phase or type of leadership to give, modeled after Jesus, was not simply intuition, it was the way we have been trained in this culture of missional discipleship.



Character AND Competency

MATTHEW 4:19

With all these new groups forming, we knew that we needed to invest, train, and support all the leaders who were willing to lead. With about 100 leaders of groups and discussion breakouts, we have given all of them an opportunity to be in a huddle for investment. As modeled by Jesus, this investment is in the areas of both character and skill to lead.

One of the unique areas of skill to lead was in the area of technology. Virtual groups could not be accomplished without a virtual platform. We spent a few days researching all of the different options and came to the conclusion that we would use Zoom. Staff members, way more competent than me in this arena, came to this recommendation. It was absolutely the right call.

We created several training sessions for all of our leaders in both how to utilize Zoom, how to create breakout rooms for discussion, and how to lead Alpha groups. It was all about how to foster discussion and relationships in the attempt to connect people in community.

Now that most of that technical training is over, these huddles over the next weeks and months will be spent on investing in our leaders and supporting them with prayer, leadership, and

continued spiritual growth.

Investing in leaders through a huddle structure was not something we had to develop, it was something we had been trained to do and were already doing it.



Short-Term AND Long-Term

ACTS 6:1-7

One of the questions we have repeated often in this crisis is “How can we respond to this crisis in specific ways that we can sustain long term?” In other words, let’s not do a lot of things that will just help us now but will intentionally build us into the future.

One clear example of this was getting as many people as possible connected in groups. Another example is training everyday people in technology to have these virtual groups and experiences that can also be utilized long-term.

We don’t know when we will be able to meet again in corporate services, but when we do, we have already decided that some of the virtual online experiences we have now, we will maintain. This means that if we ever have to go back to constraints on meetings, we are already prepared with things in place.

Another example is that we decided to keep our Sunday online services fairly lightweight and low-maintenance. We certainly could put far more time in production of these services, but that will not be sustainable long-term, and so we decided not to do that.

We also knew our staff and leaders could not be taxed long-term with care and connection with the entire congregation, and this is precisely why we developed an infrastructure where people are connected to one another and not dependent on the delivery of the leaders exclusively. This ,too, will be sustainable long-term.

In conclusion, this has been an incredibly difficult season for everyone involved. We are grateful that so many of the things mentioned above, and even much more, are happening in countless churches. We are proud of our city and proud of the way people in our country are caring for one another. We are praying that this pandemic is eradicated as soon as possible and that people who are sick will be healed and that people who are struggling emotionally, financially, relationally, or any other way will experience the healing hand of Jesus as well. And we are praying that many turn to Jesus for the first time.

At the same time, we believe God is changing us and doing things in us that may not have ever happened otherwise. We are grateful for all the training we have received and that God's word is relevant in every situation. We know that pruning according to John 15 is for the purpose of greater fruitfulness. And so while we go through this pruning time as a culture and as a church, we pray and believe God's kingdom is breaking through in ways that will forever change us. And in all of it we give God glory! ■



Chris Norman has been the Team Leader at Grace Gathering for over 23 years. In partnership with other churches, the vision for Grace Gathering is for everyone in Greater Fort Wayne to have multiple opportunities to hear, see, and respond to the gospel.

Grace is one church who meets in multiple locations: just south of downtown, in New Haven, in northwest Fort Wayne, and now, online.

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