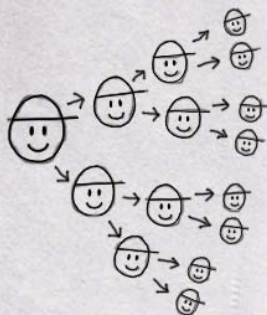


# Disciples who make disciples



Alex Absalom and Greg Neffle  
With a foreword by Mike Breen, Leader of 3DM

# **Disciples Who Make Disciples**

**Alex Absalom**

**and Greg Nettle**

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To the many patient men and women of God who have persevered in discipling me, in spite of being given every reason to give up!

And with special thanks to my dear friend Mick Woodhead, who has loved, coached, challenged and disciplined me, especially during our American adventure!

A.A.

For Geneva Nettle, my grandmother, who disciplined her son, who disciplined his son, who is discipling his children.

G.N.

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"Are you interested in fulfilling the mission of Jesus? If so, then what Greg and Alex have written is an answer to your prayer. This very practical guide will help you move beyond simple decisions for Christ to actually making "Disciples Who Make Disciples" who will accomplish the Jesus Mission."

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Senior Pastor, Mountain Christian Church

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# Foreword

**Mike Breen**

A while back my brother-in-law had a job where he was a Yeoman Warden. The word that we use in England for that is a 'Beefeater'. They are the people in the funny hats, leggings and vestments who hold the weapon that looks like a combination of a spear and ax. Specifically, he was one of the people who guarded the inside of the Tower of London. To be honest, it was a pretty cool job, yeah?

One day he gave me the 'tour behind the tour'. Basically I saw the Tower of London that no one got to see, unless you knew someone who worked there. You can imagine my excitement about something like this. I mean, this is the structure that was built over 1000 years ago and has never been conquered. Its walls have never been breached by an invading army. Moreover, how many people from the annals of history have been imprisoned or executed in the Tower? This kind of stuff just fascinates me!

As we were taking the behind the scenes tour, my brother in law pointed out that a major re-wiring project was under way. There were parts of the Tower that had not been used for quite some time and had old wiring that, over time, had corrupted. But rather than stripping out all of the old wire and starting completely over, they followed the conduit of the old wiring pattern and connected the old to the new.

In that moment, a real light bulb (no pun intended) went on for me.

What we are going through right now in the church is a rediscovering of the conduit of discipleship, a 'part of the building' that, for many of us, may not have been used or visited in a while. But it's in this place that all of the power is found to light up the whole enterprise that is the Church of Jesus Christ.

Many of us have stayed in the part of the building that really focuses on the ABCs: Attendance, Buildings and Cash. Now these can be helpful in starting the conversation of what's happening within the Body of Christ, but they are limited. What we are seeing is a re-wiring where we are tracing back the older

wiring, going back to times in the church where an orientation towards discipleship actually led to mission. We are tracing the conduit back where it has always been.

What Alex and Greg have done in this book is give a fresh expression of what it looks like to have our principle focus on the priority of Jesus. Namely, to be disciples. And the way Greg and Alex go about this is to connect with the old conduit, relearning the skills of modeling, mentoring and apprenticing. Creating a language of discipleship that can be passed on to others.

What you will find here is both practical and applicable scriptural teaching. But Alex and Greg do not so much want you to copy what they've done, as be inspired for your context by the principles they've learned. The information in this short book will most certainly lead to inspiration and the inspiration, coming as it does from the Lord himself, will most certainly lead to the extension of his Kingdom through your innovation.

As they will point out, the purpose of discipleship isn't that you create carbon copies of yourself, but in building a foundation of imitation, you learn to innovate in your own context.

Napkin Discipleship (which you will soon read about!) may be perfect for where you live... or it may inspire you to create something that is fine-tuned for your context.

You will find this read instructive, fun, playful and imaginative.

I hope you enjoy it as much as I have.

Mike Breen

Leader of 3DM - [www.weare3dm.com](http://www.weare3dm.com)

[www.mikebreen.wordpress.com](http://www.mikebreen.wordpress.com)

## Introduction

"The lack of discipleship undermines all else that we seek to do."  
(Alan Hirsch)

"Educated Christians like me expect God's grace to prefer those of greater ability, behavior and education... God mocks my expectations" (Augustine, 354 – 430AD)

Over the past 20 years, RiverTree Church has seen multiple thousands of people commit their lives to Christ and be baptized. This has been a wonderful thing, as people repent of their sins, turn to Jesus and receive forgiveness and new life.

However, in our early years, there was a hidden problem eating away at the foundations of what the church was trying to accomplish.

That problem is framed by what was an unspoken assumption - that (in most cases) once someone is baptized the hard work has now been done, so we can move on to seeing more people make decisions.

While there were some miraculous transformations, and many others who really took their new faith seriously and intentionally sought to grow as disciples, it gradually became apparent that many others had accepted Jesus as Savior but not necessarily as Lord of their life.

We believe this is an inherent weakness of the attractational church - it is exceptional at attracting crowds, but not very adept at making disciples. This has been the driving force for us in moving to become a missional church that is very attractive. The church on mission will naturally make disciples!

And so our epic journey of transition began.

This book continues the story begun in *One Of(1)*, as we share how the RiverTree movement is transitioning from a culture built around making decisions to a church that goes and makes disciples who make disciples. We are very much a work in progress, but we hope that by sharing some of our journey, you will be inspired, encouraged and helped to more effectively obey Jesus' command to go and make disciples!

(1) One Of is a free eBook, available to download at [exponential.org/shop/one-of/](https://exponential.org/shop/one-of/)

# CHAPTER 1: From Decisions To Disciples

"Ultimately, each church will be evaluated by only one thing – its disciples." (Neil Cole)

"Jesus then came into Galilee announcing the good news from God. 'All the preliminaries have been taken care of,' he said, 'and the rule of God is now accessible to everyone. Review your plans for living and base your life on this remarkable new opportunity.'"

(Mark 1:15, translated by Dallas Willard)

The Good News of Jesus is an all-or-nothing affair. It is the ultimate game changer: life is turned upside-down and inside-out by Him, and things will never be the same again.

The outcome of this violent tumult – tasting the fullness of the active rule of God – is utterly amazing to experience and, even more astonishingly, to play a part in expanding. Truly, this is a gift beyond anything we could possibly imagine!

Yet even a basic reading of the Bible reveals that this gift - which we have zero chance of ever earning or repaying – is both totally



free and yet costs us absolutely everything. Sometimes it feels that the New Testament would have been better titled the New Paradox!

Becoming a disciple of Jesus means pouring everything I am and have into embracing this paradox. As I learn to walk it out in community, my goal is to see as many others as possible drawn into the wondrous embrace of God our Father, so that He is more glorified.

As Jesus phrased it, "Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:18-19MSG)

The problem is that, in Christendom, the church invented a definition of Christian that separated such multiplying discipleship from being a follower of Jesus. If people turned up at the church service and obeyed the basic rules (dress nicely, sit still, don't interrupt, put something in the offering), they were allowed to hang around without pulling any weight. To use a

military analogy, they could be a camp follower without becoming a soldier of the Kingdom.

As we noted in the Introduction, RiverTree had often, inadvertently, fallen into this trap. The church had grown a mile wide but in some places was only an inch deep.

In order to rectify this and build on the many good things that God had done over the years, we went back to the basics and relooked at our obedience to the Great Commission. We decided to start by crafting a simple, clear definition of what makes a disciple.

## **What Is A Disciple?**

In the New Testament, the Greek word for disciple is mathetes. That word simply means 'learner' or 'pupil'. This means that every time we see the word disciple in the Bible, we can insert the word 'learner'.

Thus a Christian (a word used only 2 times in the Bible) is defined as someone who is a mathetes (used 268 times in the Bible) – a learner.

Here comes the key question: from whom am I learning?

A disciple of Jesus is someone who is intentionally choosing to learn from Jesus, in every area of life. Simple!

As we taught this to the church, we then drove the point home through what we termed the two core questions of discipleship:

What is Jesus saying to you?

What are you doing in response?

As we worship God, read the Bible, walk the dog, watch TV, interact with our boss, discipline our children or spend money, Jesus wants us to be learning from Him. What is He saying in those specific situations? What will we do in response to that revelation?

Our friend Mike Breen has developed a tremendously helpful tool, the Learning Circle, which unpacks this in a simple and memorable manner, which you can read about in Building A Discipling Culture. It is a tool that we frequently use to disciple

in our Huddles (more on that later!) and as we help people respond to what Jesus is saying.

We keep returning to this simple definition of 'disciple = learner from Jesus'. This bubbles up in every situation – one-on-one, in groups, as we preach, as we talk with our unchurched friends, wherever we go. It is slowly seeping deep down into the water table of RiverTree, so that we now see it springing up in unexpected places and ways.

The joy of this definition is that anyone can understand it. You do not need to be used to church life or language in order to receive the invitation and respond to it. (See the eBook One Of for more on our view that discipleship begins way before the point of conversion).

### **Discipleship Is Caught**

With our definition of disciple as learner in place, our next step was to help the church understand how this would work in practice.

One of our working assumptions is that discipleship is something that is caught more than it is taught. Jesus' infectious new way of living only spreads when we are up close and personal with those we are called to disciple!

People are impacted by Jesus through life-on-life transfer, as they see how following Him works out in practice. Like Paul, we invite others to "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1NIV). 1 Corinthians 4:16 says, "So I urge you to imitate me", Hebrews 6:12 commands, "Follow the example of those who are going to inherit God's promises because of their faith and endurance", while Philippians 3:17 instructs, "Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example".

This means that they see me in my weaknesses and on my bad days, as well as in my successes and on my good days. This is one of the reasons we love GoCommunities (RiverTree's Missional Communities – more on that in our next eBook!), as they allow discipleship to occur life-on-life, house-by-house.

In our experience, such a way of living is deeply impactful for people at every stage of their spiritual journey. No Christian is ever too mature, no pagan too far gone. The journey of discipleship is our secret evangelistic weapon. It enables us to go into even the darkest of communities and shine for Jesus, as we live out what it means to follow Him.

### **Imitation Over Information**

As we looked at how discipleship occurred at RiverTree, we saw the tendency in some to prioritize content over context, principles over practice, skills over character. This, of course, is the downside of modern evangelicalism: we have become perhaps the best-educated generation of Christians, but many have equated that knowledge with maturity. Knowing more information has become the destination of a truncated understanding of discipleship, rather than seeing teaching as what it should be: fuel for mission that glorifies God by making more disciple-making disciples.

In Matthew 11:29-30, Jesus gives us a word-picture for how He wants to disciple us. Keep in mind, He says this in the context of pointing out that only He can reveal the Father to us.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

One of the things Jesus is imagining is a team of oxen plowing a field – a standard sight until the advent of tractors! A well-trained pair of oxen will know how to plow lovely, long, straight furrows – important because that good order will make the process of planting and harvesting far easier. Yet oxen won't walk like that automatically – they need to be trained to do so! The way a farmer does this is by pairing a young ox with an older experienced animal, so that they walk side-by-side, sharing the same yoke. The yoke is a large piece of lumber that is shaped to go across the shoulders of both animals. It then becomes the tool that is used to unite, steer and direct the oxen.

Jesus is saying that the way He disciples is to invite us to walk alongside Him, sharing the yoke that has been perfectly fitted for our unique shape. That is why being Jesus-discipled is truly rest for our souls – it brings life (not a crushing burden) as we are

united with Christ and steered. Our walk alongside Jesus enables much Kingdom seed to be planted and harvested.

John Wimber writes, "The primary criterion for becoming one of the 12 was a willingness to follow Christ – to walk with Him and to choose to become like Him."

This is the apprenticeship approach. Information clearly forms a strong part of the journey, and there are some who are called to become experts in particular aspects of following Jesus. Such people are a huge blessing to the church! However, knowledge by itself puffs up (1 Corinthians 8:1) – we are meant to be people who put our knowledge into practice.

To be clear, we are NOT saying we are opposed to great teaching - far from it! However, we are arguing that the Biblical concept of discipleship is one that is built around imitation, of person-to-person contagion, which in turn creates multiple opportunities for people to be brought into a greater knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).



Having said all that, we also recognized at RiverTree that some were in danger of driving into the ditch on the other side of the road – where serving others becomes the sole focus of mission and discipleship.

### **Serving Is Not A Synonym For Discipling**

As the people of RiverTree focused their attention more closely upon disciple-making, renewed attention came upon the various service projects that were part of the church culture.

Clearly, as Christians, we are intended to be a blessing to our wider context – to pray for our city and to seek its prosperity. For many this is expressed through acts of service, where we go to support and serve local people and organizations in tangible ways. These are terrific things to do and clearly fully under the scope of Kingdom activity.

However, RiverTree was not seeing the desired number of people become committed disciples as a result of all this expenditure of time, energy and investment. As we reflected, it became apparent that this was because we were going to be 'With' the unchurched, but rarely were we becoming 'One Of'

them. As we looked at the various service projects around RiverTree, we realized that those very projects were actually hindering people from becoming 'One Of' the context where they were serving. For instance, to occasionally visit the elderly in a variety of sheltered housing facilities is obviously a blessing, but does not build a transforming community. To become 'One Of' would entail committing to a specific place through consistently and repeatedly visiting, loving, serving and building sustained, ongoing relationships, which become the basis for Biblical community.

We are 'One Of' when we truly live in and amongst a people group to whom we are called. They stop being 'those' people for whom we do a project, since now they are 'our' people with whom we do life. Consequently we are able, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to incarnate the Kingdom into that specific time and place.

This 'One Of' concept was a vital piece of understanding – and communication to the church – in our transition to building a discipling culture.

## **Discipleship Drives Mission**

To put this idea another way, our problem was that the link between discipleship and mission was often pretty loose. A generous service project is a valuable and a kind thing to do, but we needed to stop kidding ourselves that it was the full expression of mission.

Mission without discipleship at its core does not make disciples, and therefore it isn't mission as Jesus intended!

We are sent out in mission to do one thing: to make disciples.

Disciples are people who are learning from Jesus. As has already been shown, discipleship is primarily caught, since the Biblical model is one of imitation and apprenticeship. For this to happen, people need to be close enough to our lives that they can see what this looks like on an ongoing basis, rather than simply on special occasions when we are on our best behavior!

For a service project to be an entry point into a people group, we need to be personally connected into that context, so that those being impacted can watch our lives over weeks, months

and years. We have to be deeply connected – to be ‘One Of’ – the people we long to see become reproducing disciples.

Our friends Jeff Vanderstelt and Caesar Kalinowski have seen this same issue, as they have developed a disciple-making missional culture at Soma Communities in Tacoma, WA.

They saw their early missional communities caring well for one another and doing great service projects, such as cleaning up a local elementary school. However, they were seeing few, if any, people move into a discipling relationships with Jesus as a result. This is probably something you have experienced in your church context as well.

The reason for this low impact is that we have to be connected deeply to the people group where we are trying to make disciples. So in the scenario at Soma Communities, Jeff and Caesar realized that if you are trying to make disciples of families at an elementary school, you do service projects at the school so that you can build relationships that will display and declare the difference following Jesus makes.

Too often the church says to the lost, 'If you believe first, then we'll start discipling you'. But Jesus did the opposite: He disciplined people into the knowledge of the truth that would set them free.

One of the keys to doing this is to find natural ways to disciple through the everyday situations of life around us.

### **Using Everyday Life As An Opportunity To Disciple**

Our society promotes all sorts of values that are hard to weave together with the New Testament pattern of our new life in Christ! Yet at the same time we are not allowed to run away and hide – in fact, Jesus commissions us as missionaries to go and transform that culture.

Hannah and I (Alex) have three sons (one at elementary school, one at middle school and one at high school – that's a lot of forms to complete each August!). As we raise our boys, we have the expected run-ins and heartaches over setting appropriate boundaries. Inevitably there are times when we've jumped too far, whether in protecting them or allowing them freedom.

Nevertheless, as parents we have a responsibility to equip our children to learn how to read the world around them. If they are to go as disciples who can make disciples, they need to know how to exegete the context around them and see where Jesus is already at work.

For example, how should they respond to the difficult child they sit next to at elementary school? How about when they experience lots of 'cool' swear words in middle school? What should they do about their friend on the soccer team who is coming into high school after an early morning session smoking pot?

TV and media are both a challenge and an opportunity to disciple. On my blog I give an example of how we did this with a clip from Britain's Got Talent, featuring the (as yet) unredeemed apostle Simon Cowell!! (See [alexabsalom.wordpress.com/2012/03/29/britains-got-talent](http://alexabsalom.wordpress.com/2012/03/29/britains-got-talent))

# CHAPTER 2: From Educating To Modeling

## Part A: R.E.I.

"The one indispensable requirement for producing godly, mature Christians is godly, mature Christians." Kevin DeYoung

"Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand." Chinese Proverb

We cannot overstate that one of the most effective ways to be a disciple who makes disciples is simply to model what it means to be a follower of Jesus. In other words, to say to those in our sphere of influence what the Apostle Paul says to us: "Follow my example as I follow the example of Jesus," (1 Corinthians 11:1). Unfortunately, from our experience, the vast majority of Christians are uncomfortable offering this invitation.

### **Many Christians Are Afraid**

Why are Christians afraid to invite others to follow their example as they follow the example of Jesus? Four reasons we frequently hear are:

1. "It's okay for the Apostle Paul to say something like that but not for a normal person like me."
2. "I look around and see a lot of others who are further down the path of following Jesus than I am... people should follow them."
3. "It seems kind of arrogant to tell people to follow my example."
4. "I really am not living the kind of life that I would want others to follow."

Good excuses. But not necessarily valid ones. Let's look at each of these in a little more depth...

1. "It's okay for the Apostle Paul to say something like that but not for a normal person like me."

We forget that Paul was a sinner just like us. He had broken relationships, struggles with pride and an undisclosed sin that troubled him his entire life.



These are his words: "This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:15-16)

Rather than thinking that the Apostle Paul is a perfect example in the sinless sense, we should realize that he is a perfect example precisely because he is so much like us - a sinner who is doing his best to follow Jesus!

2. "I look around and see a lot of others who are further down the path of following Jesus than I am... people should follow them."

It's easy for us to look at our Great Aunt Matilda who has been a Christian for eighty years, prays through the night, fasts three days a week and holds the record for Sunday School attendance and think, "How can I live up to that standard?". But the reality

is that God has placed you in neighborhoods and networks of people that only YOU can influence. YOU are uniquely gifted and designed to live in a variety of settings so that YOU can influence others in a way that no other can.

One of the things that we have observed in the attractational model of church is that many people bring their friends to church so that they can follow the example of the 'paid professionals'. The problem is that the real job of the paid professionals is to equip all of us to be disciples who make disciples. We should be followers of Jesus who simply say, 'Come follow my example'.

3. "It seems kind of arrogant to tell people to follow my example."

If we run around demanding that people follow our example then it probably is a matter of a heart filled with pride. However, living like Jesus is very attractive and what people are attracted to is Jesus living in you. Humbly we invite others to follow us (the Jesus who lives in us) so that they, in turn, can say to others,

'Come follow me (the Jesus who lives in me) so that you, in turn, can say to others...'

4. "I really am not living the kind of life that I would want others to follow."

This excuse is problematic and may actually be one that is valid. Some Christians have compartmentalized their life in such a way that they may invite others to come with them to church where they dress in their Sunday best, carry the right Bible and even drop a few dollars in the offering plate. But when they leave the church service they no longer live as a follower of Jesus. They have completed their religious duty. The last thing they would want is for others to see how they actually live in their home, at work or while driving!

The answer? We are committed to living a fully integrated life in which we consistently do our best to follow Jesus. The question? Am I authentically living as a disciple? By authentic we simply mean that in the midst of our struggles and victories, our joys and pains, our sinfulness and godliness, we are genuinely striving

to follow Jesus. If we are living authentically then we are able to invite others into every area of our life.

To be authentic, we personally have used every one of these excuses over the years. And over the years we have found that as long as we are living in authentic relationship with God and others, our lives will shout the invitation to follow my example as I follow the example of Jesus Christ.

### **How Do We Invite Others?**

How do we invite others to follow our example as we follow the example of Jesus?

How do we become disciples who make disciples?

The short answer is through relationships. But we believe it must be relationships that also involve shared experiences and, at some point, the transfer of information.

We call it R.E.I. - Relationships, Experiences, Information.

Let's do a quick exercise. Take one minute to list all of the sermons or lessons or teachings that have changed your life. Just play the theme song from Jeopardy in your head. Go ahead - make your list right now.

How many did you come up with? Three? Five?

I'm a paid professional preacher and I could only come up with four!

Unfortunately, most of what we do as a church is invite our friends and neighbors to come listen to someone impart information for 20-45 minutes at a weekend service. And the truth is that we retain very little of what we hear and even less actually changes our lives.

Now, let's continue with our exercise. Take one more minute and list the relationships that have changed your life. Go ahead - write them down.

How many did you list? Ten? Twelve?

The power of personal relationships to transform our lives is absolutely amazing!

One more minute. This time write down experiences that have altered your life. It could be a missions trip, adopting a child, giving money away, serving those in need, etc. Okay, write.

We would venture to guess that your list of transforming experiences was in double figures.

Our point?

As important as information is, relationships and experiences are far more effective in bringing about life transformation. But in the attractational model of church we spend the vast majority of our resources delivering information!

Which is why we love the missional church. Especially when it is being expressed through GoCommunities. GoCommunities combine all three elements - relationships, experiences and information - in a way that helps us all become disciples who make disciples.

## **Relationships**

When we talk about relationships, we're certainly referring to spending time with our friends and neighbors sharing meals, serving and having fun. But if we want to be disciples who make disciples then our relationships must move to a deeper, more intentional level.

Primarily, we want to get to the place where we're able to ask the two baseline questions of discipleship: What is Jesus saying to you? What are you going to do about it?

As a result of the answers to these two questions we will encourage, hold accountable and pray for one another.

## **Experiences**

As we eat together, celebrate birthdays together, work together and simply do life together, we'll be able to set an example of how a disciple does his best to follow Jesus. The real key comes when we begin to be 'on mission' together.

Being on mission simply means that we find a common neighborhood or network of relationships where we share the words and works of Jesus. It could be in the local school system, your street, an assisted living center, people who love to run - the options are limitless!

As we do this, we are laying the groundwork for forming a GoCommunity together - a community of people who gather around and are defined by their common mission.

## **Information**

At some point, information becomes absolutely vital. If we are only in relationship together then we have become very inwardly focused. If we are only serving together then we are just nice people who do good things! None of this is bad in and of itself, but if we want to be disciples who make disciples we need to be confident and ready to share the content of our faith.

So when asked why we do what we do, we respond by explaining our faith in Jesus. This does not have to be a lengthy Biblical exposition (though it probably will involve sharing from



God's Word). Most importantly it is telling our story. The difference Jesus has made in our life. Why we became disciples of Jesus. How others can become disciples of Jesus.

## **Putting It All Together**

I (Greg) have an avocation. I climb mountains. Over the past several years I have climbed the world's highest freestanding volcano (Kilimanjaro) and what many believe is the world's highest active volcano (Cotopaxi). Serious adventure.

One of my most effective uses of R.E.I. to make disciples involved climbing. I invited eight guys to go on an adventure with me for one year. The adventure would involve meeting with me regularly through the year, learning to care for children at risk and going on a trip to Ecuador where we would climb a mountain - all together. All eight accepted my invitation.

For eight months prior to the trip I huddled with this group of young leaders (more about huddles later). We asked the questions: What is Jesus saying to you? What are you doing about it? We studied Scriptures about God's heart for children. We got in shape together and prepared for the climb together.

Two months before the climb we began getting sponsors for the climb - commitments for each of the 19,000 plus feet we would be ascending. Every penny of the money raised would go to help children at risk through our ministry partners in Ecuador.

Finally, the day arrived. We met at the airport, prayed together and boarded the jet. After arriving in Quito we spent three days visiting schools and Compassion International ministries. I watched as this group of guys played with, loved on and, in the end, sponsored even more children.

And then we climbed. It was arduous, freezing and breathtaking (literally). But what kept us going was that we were disciples who were climbing 'for the children'. In the end we raised more than \$100,000 'for the children'.

After returning to the States we spent the next several months debriefing our experience, how God had changed us and what we had learned throughout our adventure. Relationships, experiences and information all synergized to help us become

better disciples who make disciples. And most of those guys are now leading groups of their own... disciples who make disciples.

## **Part B: Keeping The Bible At The Center**

"It is a great thing, this reading of the Scriptures!" (Chrysostom, 347 – 407AD)

If discipleship is hearing Jesus and obeying Him, and if the primary way Jesus is revealed is through the Bible, then we need to learn how to hear and obey His voice in Scripture.

Therefore, when I read something in the Bible, the key questions are, 'What is Jesus saying to me? And what am I going to do about it?' My goal is not to gather more knowledge (although that is helpful) – my goal is to become more like Jesus, which means I respond to His word to me that I am reading or hearing.

As we disciple others to read the Bible, we need to show them how to be always attentive to this 'So what?' question – what difference is this going to make in my life today?

## **The Bible Is For Everyone**

As a disciple-making community, we want everyone to be impacted by the Bible. For us, everyone means EVERYONE! We do not restrict encountering the Bible to Christians, or interpretation to Christian adults who've been in the church for 15 years!

We can think of multiple times in a GoCommunity where a friend who isn't yet a Christian has really wrestled through how to respond to something in the Bible. While they don't come to the Bible with an a priori assumption that it is authoritative, that doesn't prevent them from allowing it to bring challenge or encouragement. As missionaries, these moments also give us vital insights into what our unchurched neighbors are thinking and feeling.

Of course, they also don't have the clever theological excuses that we seasoned-Christians use to let ourselves off the hook! Their face-value, simple interpretations can often cut straight to the chase.

Likewise, children can have the most guileless and clear insights. 'So why don't we do this, Daddy?' is always a sweaty-palm moment!

## **How We Teach People To Read The Bible**

Essentially we want to include everyone in the reading and interpreting of the Bible. Too often evangelical churches have a form of clericalism whereby only a very few, highly trained men are allowed to explain it to everyone else. Yet this is not how the early church operated!

We teach people to read the Bible for themselves and to ask the two questions of discipleship: What is Jesus saying to me? What am I going to do in response?

When people meet in community, the same questions apply to the group: What is Jesus saying to us? What are we going to do in response?

In GoCommunities, we ask leaders not to have someone do a detailed 45 minute talk on a portion of the Bible. This is not because in-depth study is wrong (in fact, we intentionally offer

in-depth training events for this very thing), but because 95% of people listen to the teaching and think to themselves, 'I could never do that. This Bible thing is for experts.' This is NOT a healthy model if your goal is to make disciples who make disciples.

Instead, we encourage GoCommunities (RiverTree's Missional Communities – groups of 20-50+ people who are focused on reaching a specific neighborhood or network of relationships) to have someone simply take a few minutes to share something that Jesus has spoken to them about in the past seven days. It might have been triggered by an incident ('I yelled at my kids', or 'I was really aware of God's compassion when I was at Walmart'), which then led to reflection through the lens of the Bible. Alternatively, it could have started in Bible reading, but then the person simply tells how they are trying to live it out.

In response, the group can then talk together about their response to this 'Fresh Bread' from Jesus, and how it could shape and impact their lives. The wonderful thing is that anyone can be part of the conversation – and the life transformation it brings.

After doing that 10 or 15 times, including leading one or two of the conversations, think how equipped people are to in turn show others how to encounter God in the pages of the Bible!

People are hungry for fresh bread. Let them feed on the living word in practical, everyday ways, and their hunger for more will only increase.

Of course, we still value having sermons and teaching from people who are well-trained and gifted – for instance at our weekend Gatherings. However, if we are committed to making disciples rather than consumers, we can't use that as the normative model for being shaped by the Bible, since it relies on other people telling me what to think and do. Instead, in the context of GoCos who are living out the Bible in everyday life, the weekend sermons are fuel to the fire of the life of discipleship in our mission contexts.

# CHAPTER 3: From Programs to Discipleship

## Part A: Napkin Discipleship

“Only a disciple can make a disciple.” A.W. Tozer

“Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Time magazine reported that the average American worker spends more than \$1100 per year on coffee. (Time, Moneyland, January 23, 2012). We’re not surprised since the average cost of a beverage at your local Starbucks is \$3.25. Sooo, since I (Greg) love coffee and Alex (being from Britain) loves tea, let’s make this money well spent!

But a warning before you read on.

WHAT WE ARE ABOUT TO SHARE MUST **NOT** BE INTRODUCED AS A NEW PROGRAM AT YOUR CHURCH! PLEASE.

When Alex began to teach RiverTree about Napkin Discipleship one of the most important things he drilled into us was that this should not be delivered as a new program of discipleship. It had



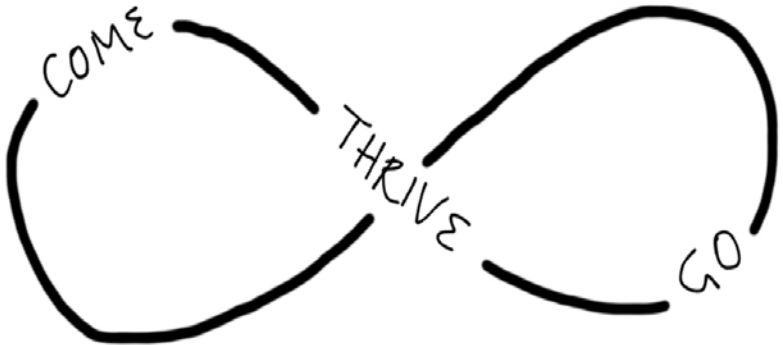
to be woven into the fabric of who we are. Our vocabulary. Our teachings. The center of our huddles. Our very DNA.

So let's get to it.

Napkin Discipleship is designed to be an easily reproducible set of tools to help disciples make disciples. We call it Napkin Discipleship because anyone can draw what we will show you on a napkin at their local coffee shop (you see, we are making that coffee price worthwhile!). The Napkin Discipleship tools you use should be simple, reproducible and effective.

Here is an example.

**Come, Thrive, Go**



At RiverTree, Come, Thrive and Go represent the key elements of Jesus' life that we want to emulate and integrate into our own: Come into the presence of God, Thrive in relationships, Go in mission to the world in Jesus' name. This language has been used for many years now and is deeply engrained.

Everyone at RiverTree knows that as disciples who make disciples, this is who we are called to be and what we are called to do. Hence the three words are part of the infinity sign: we keep on doing them forever, in an ongoing, non-linear manner.

When we gather together we draw this simple diagram on a napkin and we ask people, "On a scale of 1-10, in the area of coming into the presence of God, how are you doing?" We actually ask them to write a number on a napkin.

But we don't stop there. We continue with the two important questions of discipleship: "What is Jesus saying to you in this area of your life and what are you doing in response?"

We ask, "On a scale of 1-10, in the area of thriving in relationships, how are you doing?" "On a scale of 1-10, in the area of going in mission in Jesus' name, how are you doing?"

### **Going Deeper With Come, Thrive, Go**

To probe more deeply we equip disciples with some discussion questions.

For example, in the area of coming into the presence of God:

1. Are you spending time quietly listening to God on a daily basis?
2. Are you praying for the needs of others?
3. Are you reading God's Word on a regular basis?
4. Are you gathering for worship?
5. Are you thanking God for the blessings in your life?

In the area of thriving in relationships, you might ask:

1. Are you sharing a meal with other disciples at least on a weekly basis?
2. Are you praying with others at least on a weekly basis?

3. Are you sharing a meal with other potential disciples at least on a weekly basis?
4. Are you living authentically with others?
5. Are you listening well to others?

In the area of going in mission in Jesus' name:

1. Are you generous with your time and finances?
2. Are you generous with the words of Jesus?
3. Are you serving the 'least of these'?
4. Are you able to explain the Good News about Jesus?
5. Are you revealing Jesus through your life?

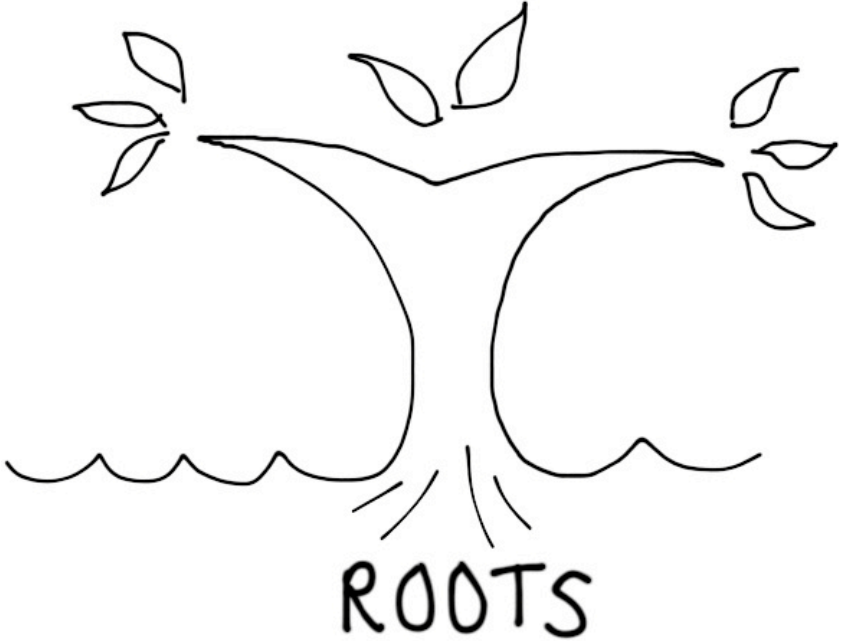
Woven throughout every discussion are the two discipleship questions: What is Jesus saying to you and what are you doing in response?

You get the picture. Simple, reproducible, effective.

## **The Tree Of Life**

Here is another example that flowed out of RiverTree's identity a number of years ago.

# FRUITS



Our church movement name, RiverTree, is taken from Psalm 1:1-3: "Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do."

And from Revelation 22:1-2: "Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations."

In order for us to be disciples who produce fruit and who are used for the healing of the nations, our roots must go down deeply into the River of the Water of Life.

And so, after drawing this simple diagram, we will ask people two questions: "On a scale of 1-10, in the area of producing fruit, how are you doing?" "On a scale of 1-10, in the area of being rooted in Jesus, how are you doing?" And we ask people to write a number in each area on the napkin.

### **Going Deeper With The Tree Of Life**

Once again, to probe further, we might ask a variety of questions that relate to where we are bearing fruit and how well we are rooted.

In the area of producing fruit:

We'll read from the Bible together – for example, Galatians 5:22-23, "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!"

1. Which fruit of the Spirit is most evident in your life?
2. Which fruit of the Spirit is least evident in your life?
3. Are you investing your time in making disciples who make disciples?
4. Are you investing your finances in serving the poor?
5. Are you involved in community transformation?

In the area of being rooted in Jesus:

Colossians 2:6-7 says, "And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him."

Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.”

Some good questions to ask include:

1. Are you keeping the Sabbath weekly?
2. Are you spending time daily talking with God?
3. Are you reading the Bible on a daily basis?
4. Are you gathering with other disciples for encouragement, accountability and prayer at least on a weekly basis?
5. Overall, are you in a time of pruning or of growth?

And of course, woven throughout every discussion are the two discipleship questions: What is Jesus saying to you and what are you doing in response?

The key is to create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable answering honestly. An atmosphere that is non-judgmental but also expects people to move forward on their discipleship continuum is essential.



In the process of asking probing questions we never want to stop with only committing to pray for someone. Too many Christians gather and share their life struggles, pray for one another and never take steps to become more like Jesus.

On the other hand, we never want to take steps to change our lives without first praying for God to transform us. It is God who gives us the power to be transformed!

We have also discovered that people will only be vulnerable if we as leaders share our struggles. This doesn't mean we have to bleed all over the napkin but it does mean that we authentically share both strengths and WEAKNESSES in our lives.

These are not counseling sessions. They are exercises to help us become better disciples.

So two examples of Napkin Discipleship are: Come, Thrive, Go, and the Tree Of Life. A third example is R.E.I. (Relationships, Experience, Information), which we looked at in Chapter 2. A fourth centers around Person of Peace, which we'll unpack in our

next eBook, Planting Missional Life: Missional Communities, Campuses And Churches.

Without overloading you at this point, here's one more Napkin Discipleship tool that has become very helpful to us.

### One Of



FOR



WITH



ONE OF



IN

We share this Napkin Discipleship tool in great detail in our first book, One Of.

We draw this diagram in four distinct stages. Stage one is the smiley face with the halo over it. We explain that this drawing represents God. Beneath the haloed smiley face we write the word 'For'. God is For us. In John 3:16 we read: "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that

everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

This is the message of the Bible. From beginning to end, God is For people.

But people have a hard time believing this truth. Most people view God as the disciplinarian in the sky who is just waiting to smack them.

And so we draw the second stage of the diagram. God is represented by the haloed smiley face and we are represented by the sad face. Beneath this panel of the drawing we right the word 'With'. God is with us.

We explain that we discover in the Bible that not only is God For us but God moves farther and begins to be With us. He leads His people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He meets with Moses in a burning bush. He stays with Daniel in the lion's den.

But this is still not enough.

In stage three we draw God's smiling haloed face but add a baseball cap. We draw another smiling face beside it, also wearing a baseball cap. (Greg always adds an 'O' because he knows God is an Ohio State fan. Alex adds some goofy European football insignia.) Beneath this panel we write the words 'One Of'.

We explain that in the greatest event of all history God became one of us. We read John 1:14: "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son."

We love Eugene Peterson's translation of this same passage in the Message: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

In Jesus, God moves into our neighborhood as one of us and actually likes us! (Matthew 11:19)

And this Good News changes everything.

In stage four we draw God as the haloed smiley face in a baseball cap beside us as a haloed smiley face with a baseball cap because now Jesus lives 'In Us'. 1 John 4:13: "God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us." Beneath this panel we write the word 'In'.

As disciples of Jesus we are commanded to make disciples for Jesus. And as followers of Jesus, learning to be like Him, we must be For people, With people and One Of people, so that Jesus can come to live In them.

### **Going Deeper With One Of**

For friends who have not yet become devoted disciples of Jesus, we focus on questions such as:

1. How do you feel about God being for you?
2. Have you ever experienced a time in your life when you sensed that God was with you? When? What was it like?
3. What does it mean to you to know that Jesus actually likes you?
4. What questions do you have about Jesus?

5. Would you like to have Jesus live in you?

To those who are committed disciples of Jesus, some additional questions come into play:

1. Would people who are far from God, that you interact with, say that you are For them?

2. Would people in your sphere of influence say that you are really With them when you are with them? Do you listen well? Do you care about them?

3. Do you invite people to church or do you do your best to make disciples as you are One Of people?

4. Do people who are far from God like to be around you?

5. Could you effectively share this drawing with someone?

And, of course, woven throughout this discussion are the two discipleship questions: What is Jesus saying to you and what are you doing in response?

## **Introducing Napkin Discipleship In Your Church**

And now a warning before we wrap this up.

WHAT WE HAVE SHARED MUST NOT BE INTRODUCED AS A NEW PROGRAM AT YOUR CHURCH! PLEASE.

Napkin Discipleship is just a tool. A great tool - in fact, we believe it can be life-transforming. But ultimately it cannot replace relationships, experiences and information - it enhances them.

Here are some of the ways we have integrated Napkin Discipleship into the life of the church.

1. We incorporate a Napkin Discipleship diagram into our preaching in our public gatherings as often as we can.

For example, when teaching the Christmas story, we incorporate the 'One Of' Napkin Discipleship drawing. When teaching the opening chapters of Genesis and how God rested at the end of His work, we teach the Tree of Life Napkin Discipleship drawing. Or any time we are teaching about the life of a disciple (which

could be almost every gathering) we use the Come, Thrive, Go Napkin Discipleship tool.

The important thing is that Napkin Discipleship becomes second nature for every disciple.

2. Napkin Discipleship is the centerpiece for our Huddles.

Every time we huddle Elders, staff, leaders, teams, etc., we focus on a Napkin Discipleship tool. More on this in Chapter 4!

3. Informally, as we meet at the local coffee shop, we look for opportunities to draw and share a Napkin Discipleship tool.

This is all about having tools in hand that reflect our values as a church community—they create a common vocabulary of discipleship. They enable us, in varying situations, to confidently help people grow as disciples. For instance, the “One of” diagram is very natural to talk through when a conversation moves in a spiritual direction.

4. On a regular basis we use Napkin Discipleship as individuals.



When I (Greg) begin my day listening to what Jesus is saying to me and determining what I am going to do in response, all of the Napkin Discipleship drawings are tremendous prompts for self-examination.

Please feel free to use any of our Napkin Discipleship tools that might help you be a disciple who makes disciples.

We would also encourage you to look at Mike Breen's LifeShapes discipleship tools, which we find enormously helpful. You can learn about LifeShapes in Mike's book, *Building A Discipling Culture*.

Our prayer is that you will take what works and develop your own Napkin Discipleship tools to equip disciples and enhance your discipleship philosophy and practice.

## **Part B: RiverTree Practices**

“To know Jesus does not simply mean learning the facts of christological dogma. It means learning to know him in the praxis of discipleship.” (Jurgen Moltmann)

We were recently leading a workshop on discipleship with a room full of outstanding church leaders. We asked them to write down their definition of a disciple, and whether or not their church had a clear process for making disciples.

The results were fascinating. The majority of the room took a reasonable stab at answering the definition question (usually focusing on following Jesus). But virtually everyone admitted that their church didn't have a simple, intentional process for making disciples in their context.

We believe that every church needs a clear process for disciple-making. At RiverTree, we have four main tools that we use:

GoCommunities

Napkin Discipleship

RiverTree Practices

## Leadership Huddles

In this section we are going to explain our newest area – the RiverTree Practices.

### **Why Practices?**

We have been hugely enriched by our interactions with leaders of churches who are on a similar journey to our own. As we have spent time together, we have learned from their breakthroughs and areas of expertise.

One of the common themes that we saw in several churches – including Austin Stone in Texas, Community Christian in Chicago and Soma Communities in Tacoma – was the idea of having several core practices. These practices are tangible ways of unpacking the day-to-day realities of the life of discipleship, in particular in the context of a missional community. (If you would like to see the core practices from each of these churches, we have written a simple summary in Appendix 1.)

Out of what we saw in these churches, and our own sense of identity as a church, we have created what we call the RiverTree

Practices. They are currently being integrated into the church and we are looking forward to seeing how they impact our disciple-making effectiveness.

Full disclosure: this really is brand new for us, and so we are simply sharing the next step we believe the Lord is calling us to take. After having worked with various discipleship tools – Huddles, GoCommunities, Napkin Discipleship - for many years now, we know that living with specific life practices, or disciplines, is what God is calling us to press into next.

### **How We Use The Practices**

These are very much practices for the mission field – because if your primary mode of disciple making is disconnected from everyday life, you'll form disciples who are disconnected from everyday life. We are seeking to form disciples out in the world, in the local neighborhoods and the networks of relationships where we are all embedded.

We see our practices as an evolving, rather than a static, list. They reflect what the Lord is doing with us at this time, so in the

future our practices may well change to reflect the unfolding journey on which He has our church.

The RiverTree Practices will also help with our metrics. We'll write more on this later, but for now note that these practices are specific and measurable.

This will provide a better handle for how we are growing as disciples, both individually and as a community (eg "over the past 6 months, 23 people in our GoCommunity followed through on their personal discipleship goal for that time frame").

As we introduce these practices, initially we are focusing on our GoCommunity leaders, and through them our GoCommunities. The goal is for every individual, within the context of their community, to identify one practice where they sense Jesus is calling them to grow. They then set a specific goal that is meaningful to them, along with identifying to whom they are going to be accountable for living it out. We would like this to happen roughly every six months (enough time to see change, but short enough to keep things moving).

## The Practices

We have identified three core words to summarize our practices of discipleship:

**LISTEN** – to God and others as we follow Jesus into the mission field

**EAT** – both spiritual and physical food with others, as a central portion of authentic community

**BLESS** – God, those close to us and those in our mission context

These three words are easy enough for anyone to remember, and over time we hope that even our youngest children will make them part of their lives.

However, we also want to unpack them a little further, so we have put each of Listen, Eat and Bless through the filter of Come, Thrive and Go (which is our most important Napkin Discipleship tool for the RiverTree identity).

This creates a simple table, shown below. In each of the nine boxes there is a question that is designed to provoke a response that leads to specific action.

|        | LISTEN                                    | EAT                              | BLESS                              |
|--------|---|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Come   | What is Jesus saying to me?               | Am I feeding on God's word?      | Do I live thankfully?              |
| Thrive | Am I obeying Jesus?                       | Am I eating weekly in community? | Do I both give and receive?        |
| Go     | Who am I called to love in a special way? | Am I bringing the party?         | Do I reveal God's words and works? |

So someone might be thinking about how they can be more a part of authentic Christian community (ie Thrive). It could be that they need to learn to obey God better – which in our experience takes place best in the context of relationships, who can bring both encouragement and accountability as we listen to what Jesus is saying. Alternatively, they need to more intentionally come together on a weekly basis with others (eg in their GoCommunity) to eat, hang out and simply do life together. Finally, they might need to bless others more freely

with what they have – both resources and spiritual gifts – and likewise receive from others as well.

Alternatively, someone might be drawn to the 'EAT' column, which begins with a challenge to allow Jesus, the bread of life, to nourish them. This occurs directly in our walk with Him, from the Bible, and prophetically as He speaks His 'now' word to us. Another option is the eating-in-community question, or finally they should 'bring the party'! Jesus followers should be the first to celebrate and enjoy life in the best ways possible – let's live more like Good News in our neighborhoods and networks of relationships. We should also be the ones known for rolling up our sleeves and cleaning up afterwards (including when our unchurched friends mess up as they try to party in less wise ways).

Whichever square someone chooses, they then set a specific goal. 'I am going to obey Jesus the first time when He speaks to me, especially in the area of finances where I really struggle.'  
'I'm going to throw the best Christmas party ever for my running club, and clean up afterwards if some of them drink too much.'  
'I'm going to commit to bring the Kingdom of God in greater



power by offering to pray then and there for anyone who tells me they are sick.'

Then, with their target set, everyone needs at least one other person who will hold them accountable – and encourage them along the way!

### **Your Turn**

We encourage you to seek God for some specific practices that will work in your context. Take anything you like of ours and add specifics from your community. Seek the Lord about what He wants to do in and through your church in the next season and set your practices/questions accordingly!

# CHAPTER 4: From Activity-Based to Relationship-Based

## Using Leadership Huddles

“A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody.” (Thomas Paine)

“A brotherly person rejoices on my account when he approves me, but when he disapproves, he is loving me. To such people I will reveal myself.” (Augustine 354 – 430AD)

At RiverTree we are trying to build a culture where leaders release control and choose accountability.

We see release occur as leaders are sent out to start new GoCommunities in the place where God has called them as missionaries. We see it as GoCos work out for themselves the best way to become ‘One Of’ in their mission context – as they come to God, thrive in community and go to the lost. We see control truly given away when we hear reports of lives and communities being transformed that we had no idea RiverTree people were even impacting!

The counter-balance is that leaders who are released to innovate need to be held accountable for the character and impact of their leadership. It is all very well having the vision of Jesus, but if it is not pursued in line with the values of Jesus then it is worthless.

Looking at Jesus, we see someone who knew how to both generously release His disciples and also call them to a high bar of accountability. What is even more interesting is that He always did so in the context of community.

In our highly individualized culture, we see one-on-one discipleship as normative – when actually it is anything but that in the New Testament. For instance, there is not one instance of Jesus speaking one-on-one to any of the 12. Even when He told Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” (a pretty strong rebuke by anyone’s standards!), He did so in the presence of the others.

So bringing these things together, we have adopted the idea of Huddles that has been so successfully pioneered at St Thomas’ Church, Sheffield, UK over the past 15 years.

## **Defining Huddle**

A huddle is a group of up to 12 people who are leaders in mission, who gather together for encouragement and accountability on a regular basis. They seek to address the two core questions of discipleship: What is Jesus saying to me? What am I doing in response?

Key features include:

The Huddle will particularly focus on character and skills issues. It is a place where values and vision, motivations and practices, are processed.

The ideal Huddle size is 6 to 10 people who are at a similar level or stage of leadership development.

A Huddle will meet on a regular basis – maybe weekly for a staff team, every two weeks or, at the outside, every month. Any less often and not enough momentum is built.

The group has a clear leader, who chooses the members and defines the lifespan and focus.

The goal is for leaders on mission to experience discipleship by imitation. This means that the leader has to be living this stuff themselves!

They receive coaching from the Huddle leader – as well as from other members, as relationships of trust are formed. The leadership style is relational not hierarchical, as the Huddle leader shares leadership insights and experience to help members in specific situations.

The feel of the group is relaxed, encouraging and transparent – tears and laughter are common!

Complete authenticity – the group will function best when people are candid and open both about what is going well and what they are struggling with.

Multiplication – it is expected that members of a Huddle will in turn form their own Huddles, usually within a year or so. They will then be a member of one Huddle and a leader of another Huddle.

\*\* This is a vital stage in the creation of your church's leadership pipeline, since over a three to five year period you will end up with many hundreds of people being Huddled and powerfully disciplined!

### **Differences From A Small Group**

Attendance is by invitation only from the leader - you can't just bring a friend along with you next time!

It is not primarily pastoral in nature. This is not the place where you share prayer requests for your neighbor's sickly Aunt Em, etc.

The group does not have a direct mission focus. In other words, while the leaders are being equipped so they can lead more fruitful missional endeavors through their GoCos, the Huddle doesn't go out together to do activities such as service projects or evangelistic outreaches.

You won't be doing in-depth Bible studies together. While the Bible is freely and frequently used, the goal of a Huddle is not study or information exchange.

While you might do social times together, the Huddle is not primarily a social event.

## **Discipling Tools For Huddles**

We find that the Huddle is the best place for people to be introduced to and learn Napkin Discipleship. This is because in the context of real life issues, they come across as weapons in our armory, not a program to complete. So we would encourage you to intentionally utilize whichever discipleship vocabulary your church uses to express your values.

Alongside that, we also have a series of questions that we often use. One is a set of character questions, the other a similar list to do with skills. Both are divided into Come, Thrive and Go questions. You can find them in this book – they are included in the Appendices section.

We use the Huddle questions in a simple manner. To begin, choose in advance which list to use (eg the Character-Go list). Give Huddle members two minutes for Jesus to show them where they are either struggling or seeing breakthrough (pray for the Holy Spirit to come and guide them). Then go around the group having everyone (including you – the leader sets the bar of vulnerability!) briefly share where they landed, along with a clarifying statement. The leader decides where to dive in first of all (often there will be several people with the same or similar presenting issues) and then have those people explain more about what is going on. The key here is good questions, to draw out what Jesus is saying to the person. Your goal as the leader is to ensure that they are listening clearly to Jesus and are responding in obedience and faith.

Obviously this is not the only way to run a Huddle, and you can be highly creative in what stimulus material you use. The reason we use materials such as our lists of questions is that most people struggle to answer the question, 'What is Jesus saying to you?', or at best default to the same areas for their answer. The questions stretch thinking, as well as reflecting important values for RiverTree. (For more Huddle resources, search Alex's blog – [alexabsalom.com](http://alexabsalom.com))

Above all, keep your eye on the purpose: people who are stepping out to lead in mission need a place of encouragement and accountability, where they grow in their ability to hear the voice of the Lord and respond appropriately.



## **CHAPTER 5: From Accumulating To Deploying Disciples - Measuring What Counts**

“The person who scored well on an SAT will not necessarily be the best doctor or the best lawyer or the best businessman. These tests do not measure character, leadership, creativity, perseverance.” (William Julius Wilson)

“Measure what is measurable, and make measurable what is not so.” (Galileo Galilei)

Imagine a football team that was able to recruit great players. A team that was able to complete their roster faster than any other. A team that was able to fill their stadium with raving fans.

The fans loved the state of the art video screens that enabled them to watch every play in high definition. They loved the way they could see the agony and the ecstasy on each player’s face after every exciting hit. They even loved the cool uniforms the players wore that the back office designed.

But when the players started the game... they were penalized for foolish mistakes. They dropped the ball when it was thrown to them. They fumbled when the opposing team attacked. They crumbled when the pressure was on. They rarely moved the ball up the field - let alone scored any points.

Off the field, the players' lives were a mess. There were problems with domestic violence, divorce, and substance abuse.

Eventually, the fans quit coming to the games.

New management was brought in. A new stadium that cost a bazillion dollars was constructed. Bigger screens, brighter lights, better beer! And the fans filled the arena.

Until they became bored once again.

Unfortunately, this story sounds all too familiar to our hometown team in Cleveland! It also sounds far too similar to many churches.

We are able to recruit great staff. We fill our roster with leaders from around the community. We produce a weekend experience that brings in the crowds.

And the crowds love our state of the art video screens that enable them to watch every service in high definition. They love the way they can see the agony and the ecstasy on each worship leader's face after every high note hit. They even love that we dress in the latest of fashion.

But when it's time to start the game... we repeat the same old mistakes in life. We drop the ball when it comes to responsibility. We fumble around when the opposing team attacks. Our faith crumbles when the pressure is on. We rarely make a difference in the community - let alone advance God's Kingdom.

Once the church fans leave the building their lives are a mess. There are problems with domestic violence, divorce, and substance abuse.

Eventually, attendance dwindles.

A new Pastor is hired. He leads us through an awesome building campaign that inspires us to construct a new worship facility. Bigger screens, brighter lights, better...! And new attendees fill the stadium seats.

Until they become bored once again.

We don't want to be part of a church like that. And we know you don't want to be part of a church like that either.

So we MUST change how we define success for the church! We MUST measure what matters to God.

## **The Bible Counts**

For years we have kept track of how many people attend our weekend worship services. For years we have counted how much money is given. In some cases how many hands are raised and in others how many baptisms occur.

But what we would contend is that it is time for us to start measuring how many disciples are making disciples. Not how

many people know the right questions to ask: What is Jesus saying to me and what am I going to do about it? But how many disciples are responding out of life-transforming, family-changing, church-altering, community-renovating, world-shaking obedience.

Counting how many people attend our gatherings is not a bad thing. Keeping track of how many people are baptized can be a good thing. Knowing how much money is being given can be vital.

But when we lift these measures to a place above everything else, we can get our priorities really messed up.

The Bible counts. The followers of Jesus begin with 120 gathered together (Acts 1:15). On the first day of the church 3,000 people were baptized (Acts 2:41)! Soon more than 5,000 people were Christians (Acts 4:4).

The Bible counts. A widow gave 2 small coins (Luke 21:2). A servant is entrusted with 5 bags of silver (Matthew 25:15). A

worshiping woman anoints Jesus with a bottle of perfume worth at least \$50,000 (Mark 14:3-5).

But what else does the Bible measure?

10 lepers were healed (Luke 17:17). Two blind men received their sight (Matthew 20:29-34). A man possessed by a legion of demons was set free (Mark 5:1-13). 5,000 men and their families were fed from five loaves of bread and two fish (Mark 6:38-44).

Jesus had 12 disciples (Matthew 10:1)!

The Bible counts. And so should we. What we measure matters. What matters to us must reflect what matters to God.

### **What RiverTree Measures**

At RiverTree we continue to count how many people attend our weekend gatherings. We continue to report how much money is received. We continue to keep track of the number of people who are baptized.

But we also know how many...

Children we have sponsored through Compassion International  
New churches we have helped launch  
People are being released from addictive behavior through our Celebrate Recovery ministry  
People who have been counseled by our lay counselors  
Bags of food are given away every week from our food pantry  
Backpacks are filled for underprivileged children returning to school  
GoCommunities are living out their faith in their neighborhoods and networks of friends  
People are committed enough to growing that they are part of a Huddle  
Dollars are being given outside the walls of the church building  
Abortions were prevented in our county  
People who are visiting those in prison  
People who are visiting in assisted living centers  
Children who are being adopted

We realized that if we kept obsessing about numbers that reflected what goes on inside the walls of the church building, then we would never effectively impact the community outside

those walls. And we would only make RiverTree disciples, not Jesus disciples (who can make more Jesus disciples).

Our goal is to make disciples who are equipped to make disciples, as they are deployed into their networks of friends and in their neighborhoods, bringing about life and community transformation in Jesus' name. That is what counts!

## **Reprogramming Success**

To be completely authentic, moving what we measure has been a long and sometimes very difficult journey, both at a personal level and as a church.

Allowing God to break our hearts over the things that break His has been painful. Reprogramming what we personally view as success has been challenging. Transitioning the church continues to take time.

Fortunately at RiverTree we have a church culture that expects us to transition as we follow Jesus. If you do not have a similar culture then you need to take more time in your transition. Or,



if you are launching a new church, you can begin measuring all that is close to the heart of God right away.

At RiverTree, as our staff continued to listen to God speak into our lives and as we studied God's Word together, it soon became apparent that we needed to make changes. We had become convicted by our lack of effectiveness at making disciples who are equipped to make disciples. We were deeply saddened by the lack of life transformation we were witnessing. We were disappointed at how little difference we were actually making in the world.

This led to discussions and studies and prayer with our Elders (we are staff led and Elder protected). This would eventually culminate in our leadership making the decision to move from an attractional method of church discipleship to a missional model that is very attractive. Our Elders even recorded it in our 'official' meeting minutes.

Over the next several years, several hundred people quit attending our weekend gatherings (which is why we are glad we recorded our decision in those minutes!). Many Christians

continue to believe that they come to church services 'to be fed' and led in inspirational worship. We actually believe that as well! However, the goal of feeding is to help people mature into disciples who make disciples who make a difference in the world.

When we raised the bar on what was expected and what we would no longer provide, some felt they needed to go to another church where the 'teaching was deeper' (at least that is what we were most often informed).

We began looking at the resources we were investing in our weekend gatherings. Intuitively we believed we were spending about 70% of our time, money and energy providing excellent weekend services and only about 30% intentionally equipping disciples. We then began to move toward spending 70% of our time, money and energy on intentional discipleship and 30% on our weekend gatherings.

This has allowed our staff, leaders and church partners to invest their lives in their neighborhoods and networks of friends!

At a practical level it meant moving from 'excellent' to 'good enough' with much of what we do in our weekend gatherings. We still provide excellent teaching and worship experiences. But we have lowered the bar on our technical 'concert' performance. We have far fewer 'special' songs. We spend less on marketing. We team-teach far more frequently.

We still have a goal of reaching 100,000 people throughout Northern Ohio, but we are committed to doing it without putting up new buildings!

### **Counting Through GoCommunities**

This has led us to begin GoCommunities. Gatherings of 20-50+ people who meet in homes, bars, restaurants, parks etc., and are defined by the mission they share with one another to love a particular network of friends or neighborhood in a special way.

The church has left the building!

In our weekend gatherings we deliver our Napkin Discipleship tools in the context of Biblical teaching. This places a simple,

reproducible tool in the hands of disciples who want to make disciples.

In our weekend gatherings we tell real life stories about life and community transformation that is taking place. We use live interviews, testimonies and videos for easy, effective communication. A note of caution: As you recount stories, you MUST make certain that you are not creating a 'those' people mentality. The truth is that as you move out into the world, 'those' people are now 'our' people. Or as we say at RiverTree, "We are those people."

We absolutely love it when representatives from a GoCommunity stand on the platform in one of our weekend gatherings and share how God is transforming them, as they transform lives and the communities around them.

One GoCommunity recently shared how they were becoming 'One Of' the residents of an assisted living center. They were wrestling with how they could begin an expression of the church right in the midst of the Senior Living Center.

We recently launched our fourth multi-site campus. Unlike our previous launches, this campus is bubbling up out of GoCommunities located in close proximity to one another. They have recently begun their large group gatherings together, but the life and focus remains upon their GoCos and celebrating what God is doing in them. This campus is a growing group of GoCommunities in a particular town, who happen to meet together most Sundays for a weekend Gathering.

Because this multi-site launch has a far more organic beginning, the cost of launching is MUCH lower. There is NO marketing budget. Every invitation has been relational, through the GoCommunities.

At our campuses we continue to have a single-sheet communication that we hand out to everyone who participates. Where we once had the numerical attendance and offering reported we now use the space to recount a story that lifts up the value of disciples who make disciples.

A friend recently forwarded to me their online church newsletter. The front left corner (which people are quickest to read)

contained their church measures. In the metrics box were included numbers not only of attendance, offerings received and baptisms but also number of children sponsored, adoptions that have taken place and GoCommunities that had been launched.

## Vision For A Church That Counts

A friend of ours recently wrote the following vision statement for the new church he is launching:

That the people of Muskego will say with pride: "This is my home church and this is my home town."

That suburban boredom will be redeemed with meaningful engagement in the mission of Jesus.

That every child will have a safe home, an adult they can turn to, and a reason to succeed.

That marriage issues will surface and be supported by friends long before 'divorce' is ever mentioned.

That singles will hold high standards and have ample God honoring partners to choose from.

That no elderly person will be lonely and lacking friends, even to their dying day.

That the church will be a vital, life-giving member in every aspect of society. Education, recreation, economics, politics, and the arts will be filled with the best the church has to offer. That the residents of this city would have hundreds of reasons to stay because we were here. That we would love where we live.

That crime rates go down and graduation rates go up; that unemployment drops while new business increases; that debt loads vanish while savings plans rise; that divorce becomes scarce and thriving families become normal, that delinquency is hard to find and the success of our city's children is all over the news.

That every man, woman, and child would have repeated opportunity to experience Jesus, through his people, even before setting foot in a church building.

That the people of God would commit and contribute themselves fully to the redemptive work of Jesus in this place.

That the work of God here in this city would be multiplied and repeated in cities across the world. (Brian & Melissa Hofmeister – lakepointmuskego.org)

We love it!!!

If we want to make disciples who make disciples, then what we count... counts.



# APPENDICES

## 1. Practices In Some Other Churches

Our practices at RiverTree were greatly informed by what we have learned from other churches, including our friends at Austin Stone, Community Christian and Soma Communities. In order to help you think through what your practices will be, here are some brief summaries of how they express them.

### **Austin Stone, Austin, TX**

Missional community members at the Stone are asked annually to sign a covenant that commits them to 14 marks of discipleship, under the headings of:

Worship Christ

Live in Community

Get Trained

Make Disciples

(To see the full covenant, go to

[austinstone.org/connect/partnership](http://austinstone.org/connect/partnership) and click on the link.)

They recognize that this is the high bar of commitment for

partnership, so is not intended to be something for non-Christians or attenders.

## **Community Christian Church, Chicago, IL**

Community Christian has specific practices that they encourage people to use in their mission context based on Genesis 12 where God told Abraham: **“I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”** They call it a B.L.E.S.S. strategy.

**Begin with Prayer** – We discover our mission and begin to go about our mission with prayer, asking “God, who and how would you like to bless someone today?”

**Listen** – When we take the time to intentionally listen, we learn about the needs of those around us.

**Eat** – We look for opportunities to share a meal because we know that nothing moves a relationship from acquaintance to friendship faster than sharing a meal.

**Serve** - After praying listening, and even eating together, we serve, knowing that in serving we receive much more than we could ever give.

**Story** – When the opportunity arises, we tell our story – the story of how we found our way back to God in Jesus.

For more information please read: Discover Your Mission Now: Simple Missional Practices That Will Change Your World by Dave Ferguson, Jon Ferguson and Tim Sutherland

### **Soma Communities, Tacoma, WA**

Soma have 6 transferable Gospel Rhythms that they see both in Genesis 1-2 and in every culture in the world, which thus form a basis for redemptive mission any and everywhere.

Story-Formed : My story (and identity) fit within God's story

Listen : To God and others around me

Celebrate : Within and outside the church

Bless : Intentionally blessing others

Eat : With others as we invite them into Gospel community

Recreate : Taking time to rest, play, create and restore beauty

## **2. Character Questions For Huddles**

### **COME**

Do I live with an attitude of thanksgiving?

Does my pattern of prayer feel life-giving?

Is the Bible 'fresh bread' to me daily?

Am I coming regularly to God in worship?

When am I closest to Jesus?

Where is the Father transforming me?

Do I sense God's peace in all situations?

Where in my life am I going to the cross?

Are the fruit of the Spirit growing throughout my life?

Which gifts of the Spirit am I seeking to grow in?

Where am I experiencing spiritual battle?

What is Jesus saying to me?

### **THRIVE**

Do I respond wisely to what Jesus is saying to me?

Are all areas of my life accountable?

Do I have life-giving friendships?

When is life fun?

Who am I intentionally investing into?

How do I keep the Sabbath?

Is my work-rest balance appropriate?

Does my spouse feel loved and valued by me?

Are my family relationships healthy?

When is leadership a joy - or a struggle?

Do I eat/ exercise/ sleep properly?

Do people want to follow me?

## **GO**

Who am I called to love in a special way?

Where am I intentionally investing in my People of Peace?

Where does my life look like Good News?

When am I servant-hearted?

When am I happy to share my faith?

How am I a blessing to my mission context?

When do I gather with non-Christians?

How am I demonstrating God's Kingdom?

What is distinctive about my home and household?

Do non-Christians enjoy being with me?

Where am I dying to success?

When am I most generous?

### **3. Skills Questions For Huddles**

#### **COME**

Are people in my GoCo aware of what Jesus is saying to them?

Does my GoCo view the Bible as 'fresh bread'?

What most stirs our group to give thanks?

Do I help people know their identity in Christ?

When does our GoCo pray together with genuine passion and faith?

As a GoCo, when do we most meet with God?

Do I encourage creativity in our worship?

Are the fruit of the Spirit increasingly obvious in our group?

Do I know what God wants to do next in the GoCo?

When am I most stretched leading the GoCo?

How is our spirituality deepening?

Do people feel equipped to follow God in their everyday lives?

#### **THRIVE**

Do people in my GoCo respond wisely to what Jesus is saying to them?

Is there a culture of accountability in my GoCo?

Is there a culture of encouragement in my GoCo?

Does everyone contribute meaningfully to GoCo life?

How well do I help release the gifts of the Spirit in the group?

When does my GoCo show authentic community?

Do we laugh and have fun together?

When do we most value children?

When do we best balance activity and rest?

How effective am I at delegation?

Are relationships healthy with my co-leaders?

Do we have any especially difficult or needy people?

## **GO**

Does my GoCo know who we are called to love in a special way?

When do we 'bring the party' to the lost?

When are we most a blessing to our mission context?

Can everyone in my GoCo share why they are following Jesus?

Where are we seeing the Kingdom come in power?

Are we collecting and sharing stories of God at work in and through the group?

Does my GoCo sacrifice for the next generation?

What should we stop doing in order to grow?

What should we start doing in order to grow?

Do individuals have a sense of God's call and destiny for them?

What plan does our group have to multiply?

Can everyone identify their Person of Peace?

## **CONNECT WITH GREG AND ALEX**



Greg Nettle has served as the visionary leader of the RiverTree movement for more than 20 years. During his leadership, RiverTree has grown from a group of 100 people to more than



3,000. He is an author, speaker and consultant as an agent of change in the global church.

Greg is also President of Stadia, an international church planting organization. He is passionate about caring for children at risk. Greg's most important partner in life is his wife Julie as they lead their children, Tabitha and Elijah, to fall deeply in love with Jesus.

Greg is co-author of the book, "One Of" with Alex Absalom and contributing author of "Unleashed." He blogs regularly at [www.gregnettle.com](http://www.gregnettle.com). and tweets @gregnettle.



Alex Absalom has been a church leader for almost 20 years, both in England and in the United States. He currently serves as Leader of Missional Innovation at RiverTree Church, OH, leading the staff team as the church develops numerous mid-sized Missional Communities and strong disciple-making systems.

Alex loves to help other leaders and churches create disciple-making, mission-focused cultures, which he does in partnership with Stadia Church Planting through Synergy ([www.synergymissional.com](http://www.synergymissional.com)). He co-authored One Of with Greg Nettle and Launching Missional Communities with Mike Breen, and is a speaker and coach. Alex's blog, Missional Made Simple, is at [www.alexabsalom.com](http://www.alexabsalom.com) and he tweets @alexabsalom.

Alex has been married to Hannah since 1994 and they have three very boisterous sons! He loves playing sport, is a passionate fan of Liverpool Football Club and is a connoisseur of good tea!